

From Readers to Creators Secondary Students' Perceptions of Creating Digital Stories: Challenges and Potential Benefits

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Abstract This study explores the benefits and challenges of creating digital stories as experienced by Hungarian secondary school students who participated in an international digital-social reading project and who translated their shared reading experience into a digital narrative. In pursuit of finding connections between the digital stories and their creators, a focus group was held to gain data regarding students' lived experiences with creating digital stories. The findings of this qualitative study may dispel some doubts about using digital narratives in the classroom and present the creation process in a way that makes it approachable for teachers and students alike. Some teachers find it difficult to take even small steps towards a more digitised classroom environment, so for those practitioners, deep-diving into this fully realised digital-social reading project and its outcome will prove useful as a resource.

Keywords Young Adult Literature. EFL. Digital story. Students' beliefs about themselves.

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1 Introduction

Providing vivid and meaningful contexts for language learning has been a continuing challenge for foreign language (FL) teachers across contexts. Classroom-based studies document that integrating narratives, particularly carefully chosen children's literature and Young Adult Literature (YAL) have the power to enhance students' cognitive and affective engagement and maintain their language learning motivation (Fazzi 2023; Lee 2013; Lugossy 2024; Sun 2021; 2022).

In this study, we focus on secondary students' multi-layered experiences with YAL, that is, with texts that target readers aged 12-18 and which typically explore themes that young adult readers would find relatable, such as coming-of-age, identity, relationships, and societal expectations (Bland 2013; Harrison, Ehlers 2024). We explore students' emic perspectives on creating digital narratives as a response to their readings in the framework of an international digital social reading project in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context. During the project, the participating students read novels in English and created digital stories based on a chosen book. This study uses the term digital story to refer to short digital productions in which learners share their own stories or create a fictional narrative (Haring, *infra*; Lambert 2013; Kesler et al. 2016; Schuch 2020). In doing so, they also record their voices and add images or act the story out themselves.

In what follows, we overview some of the relevant literature on the role of narratives, mostly YAL in an EFL context. We discuss how engaging with relatable stories, including YAL and digital storytelling, creates an intrinsically motivating context for language learning and how it shapes learners' cognitive, affective, linguistic, and literacy development.

In the second part, we present findings gained from a focus group involving four Hungarian secondary-school students for whom English is a FL, and we explore how creating digital stories in English shaped participants' identities as readers and creators of stories, and as language learners.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Contextualising Narratives in Learning

Focusing on the role of relevant reading materials in children's personality development,

Bettelheim (1976) argued that unlike textbooks, children's literature addresses the unsafe aspects of existence in relatable ways. Much in the same way, literature written for young adults addresses themes that resonate with the unique experiences and challenges

faced by adolescents (Harrison, Ehlers 2024). It deals with topics that open dimensions of experience in meaningful and emotionally relatable ways. Because of this, exposure to YAL promotes self-knowledge and a more discerning understanding of human relationships. It also nurtures interpersonal relationships and social and cultural participation (Vogrinčič et al. 2024).

Findings suggest that social-affective benefits result both from reading and listening to relatable stories, as well as from participants creating stories themselves. Creating verbal and visual narratives as responses to the YAL, as well as other deep impact narratives, added depth to the reading experience by providing additional perspectives on the text, it increased students' willingness to communicate, while it also cultivated a sense of community and connection among participants (Camilleri Grima, Mantellato 2021; King 1993; 2005; King, Nikolov 1992).

While improving young adult readers' emotional and psychological well-being (Mak, Fancourt 2020) and social relationships, YAL offers a relevant context for developing learners' language and literacy skills across languages. Research demonstrates that systematic engagement with texts in a foreign language promotes reading comprehension, supports incidental language learning, and provides opportunities for interaction (Fazzi, Da Lio, Guzzon, *infra*; Krashen 2004; Menegale, *infra*; Vogrinčič et al. 2024).

With their focus on contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural issues experienced by a particular young adult person who often appears as embedded in a group, YAL texts have the power to make target culture more accessible in the EFL context. Reading YAL helps to acquire a dynamic understanding of culture and cultural phenomena, as it provides a complex framework and relatable contexts for facts that remain open for interpretation. In this sense, dealing with YAL may enhance the development of intercultural communication skills by developing awareness and sensitivity to cultural differences. While engaging with YAL texts, students can discover their own identities, including their cultural biases and can construct a sense of agency through topics that relate to the target language culture (Haring, *infra*; Savitz et al. 2021).

2.2 Digital Stories: Impact on Engagement, Language, and Literacy

Digital storytelling refers to the process of creating and sharing personal narratives by using digital technology. It combines multimedia elements including still images, music, sound effects, voiceovers (as narration or dialogue), and print to go beyond the traditional video format to tell a story (Kesler et al. 2016, 42). Lambert (2013) identified

seven key features of digital storytelling, which explain how multi-modal meaning-making takes place. According to Lambert's frame, digital storytelling 1) is self-revelatory, 2) uses personal voice, 3) builds on scenes about a lived experience, 4) employs photos or still images, 5) goes with a soundtrack of music or ambient sound, 6) is short, something under five minutes, 7) builds on self-expression and self-awareness (2013, 37-8). Moreover, digital storytelling often experiments with non-linear narratives or even multiple outcomes inviting the audience to add their reading and participate actively in the meaning-making process.

Recent research reveals that this form of combining traditional storytelling with additional digital sources of meaning can be a powerful and engaging tool for learning in foreign language classrooms (Kesler et al. 2016; Robin 2008; Schuch 2020). First, digital storytelling encourages students' multimodal engagement and opens new channels of scaffolding language. Kesler, Gibson, and Turansky (2016, 43-6) have found that digital storytelling increases students' willingness to respond to historical fiction: according to their study, students' responses became more engaged and in-depth, while the activity system connected to digital storytelling generated collaborative zones of proximal development and opportunities to take on roles that shaped their identities. Studies also document that students' comprehension of literary texts also developed while using digital stories (Kesler et al. 2016). From a slightly different perspective, Tour, Gindidis, and Newton's study (2019) focuses on how experiential digital storytelling affects the teaching and learning of digital literacies as social practices, and they suggest that digital literacies are essential in students' successful participation in digital spaces in a foreign language they are learning.

Tour et al. argue that digital storytelling offers teachers new ways to engage their students "in complex transliteracies practices in which meanings shift and change over time, space, relationships, and resources" (2019, 1). Thus, digital storytelling emerges as a pedagogical technique to create a safe environment in which students can experiment with connecting technology, digital platforms, storytelling, and personal engagement in meaningful interactions. According to Tan et al. (2024), the classroom use of digital storytelling has brought significant changes in traditional teaching methods to facilitate more active student participation. Using a PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis), Tan et al. (2024, 625-9) report that classroom-based research on the impact and challenges of digital storytelling has multiplied recently, including such topics as skills development, fluency development, vocabulary development, translanguaging, collaboration, metacognition strategies, problem-solving, analytical skills development, as well as emotional and behaviour management. To explore and use the

full pedagogical capacity of digital storytelling and make its methodology more broadly available to different educational levels and schools, digital storytelling research should continue to focus on classroom work, also in a longitudinal setting (Tan et al. 2024, 635-6).

3 The Study

3.1 Research Context and Pedagogical Design

The context of our study was the Erasmus+ project called *Lit. Up Your Phone: A Digital Toolkit for ESL/EFL Classroom to Combat Social Inequalities in Times of Covid 19 Crises* (DigLit), which aimed to support teachers in promoting secondary school students' digital literacy and their awareness of social issues while reading for pleasure in EFL. During the project, students from Austria, Italy, and Hungary were involved in a digital social reading project relying on the use of Glose for Education (see Fazzi, Da Lio, Guzzon, *infra*), an e-book reading application which allows users to read e-books, share annotations, and connect with other readers. Students' experiences about the digital social reading project were discussed on an online forum (see Fazzi, Da Lio, Guzzon, *infra*). As a follow-up task, students were also encouraged to create digital stories that reflected their perspectives or experiences related to the stories they chose to read.

During the digital narrative-based project, first contact was made between students and facilitators, the latter being EFL teachers from the schools involved in the DigLit project. The facilitators were not necessarily the English teachers of the students who participated in the project. Zoom-based workshops were organised by the partner university instructors to present students a framework for creating digital stories based on their readings. The fundamentals and building blocks of digital stories were showcased and templates were shared with participants, which served as scaffolding throughout the entirety of the project. By using these templates, key steps, such as brainstorming and storyboarding, were made more accessible for students, and helped them reflect on the production processes of digital narratives in a graphically organised manner.

3.2 Research Question

Having a smaller subset of students who participated in the project, encouraged us to narrow the scope of our research and place our interests on the participants' creative processes in digital storytelling. This would allow for more personal experiences to be recalled and later, understood better. This introspection into what went on

behind the scenes when it came to producing their narratives would also make it possible for us, as researchers and teachers, have a closer look at less apparent phenomena. To explore students' lived experiences with producing digital stories, we asked the following research question:

RQ: What are the students' perceived benefits and challenges while creating digital stories?

3.3 Participants

Altogether ten Hungarian students participated in the project, and four of them volunteered to participate in the focus group interview reported in the present study. All the participants come from the same secondary school, which is the partner school of the University of Pécs, typically attended by high-performing, socioeconomically privileged students who are motivated to pursue their studies in higher education. The school offers six tracks for specialised education, which means a more intensive approach to certain subject areas and increased number of classes. For the specialised English class, the number of English classes per week is five.

The four participants interviewed were tenth-grade girls (age 16) who attended the same class. They had enrolled in the project a year before the interview. All four participants had a B1-B2 level in English, they shared a passion for reading, and except for one aspiring filmmaker among them, they had no previous experience in producing films. To protect their anonymity, participants are referred to by the following pseudonyms: Anna, Dora, Olga, and Maya. The pseudonyms have been assigned randomly by the authors of the study.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

A focus group was applied to collect data about participants' experiences and feelings about creating digital stories as the end-product of the project. Similar to one-on-one interviews or group interviews, focus groups allow for the in-depth exploration of participants' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs, but unlike interviews, they rely on group interaction as a data collection method (Winke 2017), thus allowing participants to build on one another's responses and generate ideas.

The focus group involved the four students who volunteered for the discussion and the facilitator, who was also an English and IT teacher at the school where participants studied, as well as one of the authors of this study. The facilitator was not the participants' English or IT teacher, but he had previously worked with the students in the

framework of the digital social reading project. Familiarity with the place, with one another, and with the facilitator was meant to promote a safe environment and a relaxed atmosphere for the participants, who were also assured that their real identities would not become public in this study.

The focus group lasted for 45 minutes, and it took place in the school library, after the participants' lessons were over for the day. The language used was English not only because students' high language proficiency allowed for this, but also due to participants' choice: they were happy to use English in an out-of-class situation. The focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed.

During the discussion, the facilitator relied on six pre-determined questions, while taking care to ensure the free flow of the discussion by stimulating participants' thinking and sharing of ideas. The questions, which were meant to elicit participants' experiences with creating digital stories, were the following:

- What were some of the challenges in the creative process of making your digital stories?
- How did you integrate the unique qualities of the book you read into your digital narratives?
- In what ways did creating your digital stories deepen your understanding of the book you read?
- What was your source of motivation when creating your digital narratives?
- In what ways did creating your digital narrative contribute to your personal development?
- What was your favourite part of creating your digital narratives and why?

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to get a deeper understanding of participants' underlying ideas and experiences related to creating digital stories. Based on Brown and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis, the focus group transcript was read several times to help us become familiar with the data. Then, codes were generated, and the transcript was coded for themes and patterns that appeared relevant to the research focus (Braun, Clarke 2006; Clarke, Braun 2013). Coding was done manually, working through hard copies of the transcript. Finally, the emerging themes were identified, defined, and discussed.

3.6 Results and Discussion

3.6.1 What Were the Challenges of Creating Digital Stories in the EFL Context?

Time Constraints

A major challenge identified by all four participants was the time-consuming aspect of digital storytelling. The opinions expressed by the participants of this study support existing research in that brainstorming ideas, outlining and coherent narrative, editing, and incorporating feedback at various stages require meticulous attention to detail and take time (Burgess, Green 2009; Harris, McKenzie 2016; Lambert 2013; Robin 2008). In what follows, we focus on some of the most time-consuming aspects of creating digital stories through the emic perspectives of the four participants.

For Anna and Maya, brainstorming for ideas and writing the script were among lengthiest phases of the task. Anna invested time and thought in her digital story from the initial stages of the project: “I spent a long time thinking about the idea for the story. And we had to plan everything even before we started the work. Cos’ I wanted to be sure that the pictures and everything match the story”. While both she and Maya attributed the amount of time needed for brainstorming to their own lack of creativity (see discussion below), existing research also suggests that effective pre-production takes time, and it is mostly related to the complexity of the story told (Lambert 2013).

Besides brainstorming for ideas, Anna mentioned the need for repeated revisions as a laborious aspect related to scriptwriting:

We checked the text to make sure there are no mistakes. And then we read it again, and we could see that not everything was clear. [...] I mean, in our story. So we had to change those parts in the script. To write them again [...] make it more understandable.

Anna’s reflections highlight the time-consuming and meticulous nature of scriptwriting, requiring revisions and feedback loops before finalization (Robin 2008).

It must be noted here that all the participants found the project time-consuming due to their overloaded academic responsibilities and extra-curricular activities. They unanimously agreed to have experienced a sense of relief when they submitted their digital stories to their teachers. Ironically, Maya claimed that the submission stage was her “favourite part of the digital story project”, while Dora believed it was “fun, but stressful” due to time constraints. These results underline the importance of time management when integrating digital stories in the curricula.

Students' Beliefs About Themselves

Three participants (Anna, Dora, Maya) believed that a major difficulty when producing their digital stories related to their own perceived lack of creativity. For example, Maya claimed that coming up with an engaging idea for the digital narrative, structuring it into scenes, and planning the visual elements for the scenes before the recording were the most demanding parts of creating a digital story because “these were the parts where [she] had to get creative, which [she was] not really good at”. Similarly, Dora expressed her initial anxiety about not having “a good idea for the story” to start with, as well as her concerns related to the possible outcome of her work, saying: “In the beginning, I was afraid that I won’t get an idea for the story at all, because I’m not a creative person. And then I was also worried that I can’t find the right pictures and the right music” (Dora). Finally, Anna also found the scripting phase difficult for the same reason: she believed that producing a script demanded creativity as it required students to imagine how the story and the text would all sound in the framework of a short film. As she claimed, she was not convinced she would be up to the task.

All three participants quoted above seemed to blame themselves for not being creative enough and therefore for feeling apprehensive when it comes to writing a script and producing a digital story. Yet, as the interview proceeded, Maya and Dora highlighted the relationship between anxiety on the one hand, and prior learning experiences and unfamiliarity with the task, on the other hand. Maya expressed her preference for predictable tasks, where she “could not go wrong” and therefore could feel safe about “the right solution”. While Dora pointed that her anxiety resulted from the fact that “doing a digital story was totally different [...] not the kind of task we usually get at school” (Dora).

Data suggests that participants’ beliefs about themselves as learners who lack creativity have been influenced by their lack of expertise with certain task types and skills demanded by digital story-making. Despite the variety of texts that students are required to produce in different styles and about various topics, script writing is rarely part of the requirements in Hungarian EFL classes, mostly because this genre does not figure as a writing task in the accredited language proficiency exams taken by Hungarian students. Therefore, teachers, who are held accountable for their students’ results and language exams, usually opt for guided formal and informal letters, and occasional forum comments as writing tasks, which leave little space for the imagination. Classroom-based studies document Hungarian students’ lack of confidence when it comes to tasks that require imaginative engagement, as well as their beliefs that tasks that are not outlined in the curriculum, and therefore not tested, are not worth

the effort (Hetesi 2022; Nikolov 2002). From a more general perspective, Bruner (1996) and Egan (1989) also point out that the dominant models that inform educational programs focus predominantly on the rational functions of the mind and tend to dismiss the value of imagination as a tool for learning. Imaginative and affective learning experiences, such as stories, for instance, tend to constitute the “educational margin or frills” (Egan 1989, 29).

We need to add that despite participants’ lack of belief in their creative powers, their digital stories gave evidence of originality both in terms of verbal and visual narratives. When the interviewer pointed out the controversy between participants’ beliefs about themselves and the successful outcome of their projects, Dora responded: “so... maybe the idea itself was hard”.

Technical Difficulties

Two participants (Anna, Olga) discussed the technical difficulties posed by creating digital stories, showing that while some students of this age may excel in using technology, others may find it overwhelming (Robin 2008). Anna felt her “technical gaps” frustrating: “I was lost at this stage, and it’s a good thing that I wasn’t there alone to do it”). As Anna suggests, not having the necessary technical skills for creating digital stories may easily decrease motivation. Both she and Olga emphasised the role of peer support and scaffolding in creating their digital stories. The latter, resourcefully, asked for her brother’s assistance in video editing, “because he knows all these things, and it was easier like this... I could cut down on time. And he actually taught me how to do it”.

Students’ experiences highlight the role of providing necessary training (Ohler 2008) as well as opportunities for cooperation while creating digital stories. As discussed by Menegale (*infra*), while diverse technologies and communication channels enable individuals to express themselves using different modes, multiliteracy pedagogy, including digital literacy, extends beyond tools, procedures, and micro-knowledge: it encompasses the processes, competencies, and socio-meta-cognitive strategies required to analyse, elaborate, produce, and exchange meaning. Along other studies (Robin 2008), our findings indicate that students need to be technically trained to navigate such complex ways of communicating meaning.

3.6.2 What Were the Benefits Perceived by Participants in Creating Digital Stories?

Digital skills development

All the participants reported various areas in which they improved, among which video editing emerged as a skill that was honed during the project. While for Olga, editing was a first encounter, Anna, Maya, and Dora refined their skills: Maya grew “more familiar with softwares,” and Dora “got to understand how these things work... how you can create and atmosphere in a film” by relying on digital tools. Students’ experiences underscore the importance of software proficiency and digital skills as critical factors influencing project success (Robin 2008).

Given that video editing is low on the priority list of IT curricula in Hungarian secondary schools, undertaking such a project leads students to take control of their education, even if on a smaller scale, and get ahead of often outdated syllabi to attain more applicable knowledge, especially in today’s digitised environment. Students’ experiences underline that digital storytelling can be a meaningful technique for integrating technology into students’ learning experiences. Equipping EFL learners with the ability to utilize technology prepares them for future academic and professional environments where digital literacy is essential. Based on participants’ reflections on the technical challenges they encountered (discussed above), educator support in helping students develop these competences is of key importance for the success of the project (Ohler 2008).

A Deeper Understanding of Literature

Data suggest that creating digital stories contributed to students’ literacy development by promoting a deeper and more nuanced understanding of literature. As shown in the discussion below, all four participants found it important to add their ideas on how incorporating multimedia elements helped them interpret literary texts. Dora claimed that her in-depth understanding of the book was supported by story-based discussions in the planning stage of their digital stories, as well as during the film itself: “because we talked about the story in the video, I could really... sorry, how do you say in English: *jobban fel tudtam fogni* [I could get a better grasp]? [...] Yes... thank you... I could really comprehend it more”. In this quote, the role of constructing meaning in interaction emerges both on the level of content and on the level of discourse. Dora refers to the importance of rephrasing and building on one another’s ideas in making meaning of a narrative,

and in doing this, she is using a Hungarian term and asking for assistance to clearly express her thoughts. This example is interesting not only because it underscores the role of social interaction in creating meaning, but also because it provides evidence that participants found it important to reflect on their creative process in accurate terms. In a later part of the discussion, Dora also adds that she had a better understanding of the plot in the book she was reading because “in the video we... made questions and we answered them”.

Students’ experiences and reflections confirm the existing literature in this area. According to a study by Hirsch and Macleroy (2020), traditional pedagogical approaches may not always address students’ needs, the way multimodal practices do. Horne (2021) explores how digital narratives enhance students’ engagement and comprehension when studying literary texts in a foreign language context and provides evidence that incorporating multimedia elements allows students to express their interpretation of texts. Our study also brings evidence that creating digital stories not only makes literature more accessible, but it also encourages deeper analysis and personal connection to literary texts.

Another way in which creating digital stories opened new dimensions in understanding the book included: recontextualising the story through new locations and creating an atmosphere that resonates with the book. Anna, who has cinematographic affinities went the extra mile in all aspects of her video. She wrote, starred in, and directed her own work, and she reported that she “tried to create the atmosphere with the locations...and with the music”, too. She made efforts to find locations that fit the setting of *We Were Liars* (Lockhart 2014), the book she had read, enhancing authenticity by staying faithful to the source material. Olga “wanted to keep the mysterious vibe of the book”, so she “chose pictures which had this vibe.” Her digital story is a narrated montage, which captures and recreates the peculiar atmosphere of *We Were Liars* through visuals and music which reflect Olga’s understanding and response to the story.

Finally, all participants tried to grasp their chosen characters’ personalities and relate both to their verbal characteristics and to their thoughts, emotions, and aspirations in their digital stories. Assuming the role of a character, in any context, may lead to a deeper, more empathetic understanding of them. Dora said she “tried to talk with a style that was used by the character in the book”. Besides adopting the verbal elements that make up the character, in her digital story version of the character, Dora also had to add nonverbal and paraverbal components based on her imagination. It appears that creating a digital story adds another layer to this process, by asking the creator to put vague characteristics into form. Anna, who acted out the plot herself, indicated a deeper understanding of her book by claiming that while acting, she “could feel all of the emotions and... have

an empathy with the character. Because I acted it out, so I had to really think with her mind". She then added, "we tried to recreate the video thinking from inside and outside."

4 Conclusions

This study highlighted that engagement with narratives can create a meaningful and relatable context for language and literacy development in the case of secondary school students. The four female students involved in the study believed that digital storytelling greatly improved their digital skills and promoted a deeper understanding of literature by adding new perspectives to the book they had read. In this sense, the findings are in harmony with theories and research that support the role of narratives in participants' knowledge construction (Fazzi, Da Lio, Guzzon, *infra*).

The analysis of the data also called attention to the challenges encountered by students while creating digital narratives. Some of the difficulties were of a technical kind, while others can be attributed to the very little time Hungarian students generally have for optional tasks and activities during the school year. Balancing academic tasks with digital storytelling constituted a challenge. This underscores the importance of time management when it comes to integrating digital storytelling in the curricula.

One interesting finding relates to participants' beliefs about themselves, namely their expressed fear not being creative enough when it came to writing digital narratives. As suggested in the discussion, this belief may be linked to Hungarian students' lack of experience with tasks that encourage imaginative engagement and decision making in the classroom context. Yet, the good news is that results also indicated a discrepancy between students' explicit beliefs about themselves and what they can do on the one hand, and the outcomes, on the other hand. The digital stories reflected students' original and imaginative approaches to the task, and so did the accuracy and enthusiasm with which they discussed the processes they employed during the creative process.

This study has potential limitations stemming from the nature of qualitative methodology, where the aim is to work with few participants and provide thick descriptions of their specific contexts and perspectives (Mackey, Gass 2021). Due to the uniqueness of the context and participants' experiences, the findings of the study cannot be generalised. Yet, some of the main findings may be relevant for other contexts. Another limitation concerns the relatively short amount of time (45 minutes) that the participants had at their disposal for recalling and discussing their experiences. The author-facilitator partly attributed the brevity of students' responses in the focus group to

the lack of time to build a rapport that would have allowed students to express their views and beliefs in a more extensive way.

Despite the limitations discussed above, findings suggest the benefits of the systematic and principled integration of narratives in the curriculum, both as reading materials and as starting points for creating digital stories. In this study, reading YAL emerged as a strategy which learners can autonomously apply for developing their language skills, as well as a source of inspiration. Unlike most textbooks, YAL provided opportunities for imaginative engagement and dialogue in and outside the classroom, while digital storytelling emerged as a potential tool in knowledge construction in several interrelated areas.

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