

Fostering reading interest through digital storytelling for young learners in the early childhood

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ABSTRACT

Children in the digital era are exposed to the advancement of information technology and multimedia that might bring both positive and negative influence toward their development. During early childhood, children are using mostly their senses to explore the world around them, including learning some values from the story books exposed to them. However, parents or family do not give optimal support in the children's learning process. Therefore, it is a challenge for English language teaching (ELT) pre-service teachers in implementing a digital storytelling to engage the children with the learning material and creative ways to optimally utilize technology, but at the same time give a comprehensive support for children to improve their English skills as well as the embedded values within the stories. The present study aims to reveal the opportunities and challenges in fostering a child's reading interest through digital storytelling. All the details were recorded through observations, responses from the children while they were watching the digital story, and a daily journal written by ELT pre-service teacher. From the result, it was found that through their interactions with the stories, children were exposed by the values embedded, furthermore, their reading interest is developing where more optimal support from the parents or caregivers is urgently needed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Young learners nowadays are exposed very much to technological advancement where they can easily get access to online resources, such as movies, games, social media, or others available on the internet. The demand is getting higher, especially in this international mindedness that is represented using English in almost all online media. The exposure of online resources using English that they can access very easily, such as variety of contents found on Youtube channels, movies and songs in English, and others make the urge even more challenging for education practitioners to achieve learner autonomy during the language learning. Technology was also found to provide a variety of authentic and age-related materials enhancing autonomy and language learning [1]. However, young learners still need guidance from the adults around them, especially in discussing some contents on online media that might not be suitable for their age. Studies on how technology plays an important role in facilitating language learning, stimulating creativity, criticality [2], and fostering learners' autonomy in language learning [3] had been widely discussed, but how humans' interactions play an important role in revealing the meaningful values embedded in the digital storytelling still gained a little attention. Thus, it is a challenging task to prepare pre-service teachers who will teach and play their roles as 'in loco parentis' for their young learners in this globalization era. Technology has been a

part of the younger generations nowadays; thus, it is supposed to be used optimally to support not only their cognitive abilities, but also their social-emotional growth, and their character development as well. Value-based digital storytelling indeed helps to foster students' character development [4] that require a careful attention from the adults around the child. As young learners still need more guidance from adults near them, then, it is necessary to accompany them while they are listening to or watching a story. In the present study, digital storytelling conducted or responded to any situation around them. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the challenges and opportunities in fostering a reading interest through digital storytelling for young learners. There are many ways to facilitate self-access language learning using technology to encourage a child's development more holistically [5]. Interactions between parents and their child are crucial, especially during childhood because children will take everything done by their parents into account and what they do also will reflect on what their parents did. Parents give modeling to the child's attitude and behavior. A child will imitate what their parents do [6], it is often said "like father like son, like mother like daughter".

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research method used in the current study is qualitative research method. The participants involved in the study were six pre-service teachers who presented digital storytelling to their learners. To gather data, the instruments used were class observations, focus group discussions (FGD), and reflective journals. To get the details of how the young learners responded naturally to the story being told to them, the classroom setting was designed in such a way so that observations were undertaken before, during, and after the story-telling time was done. Along with the advancement of technology, a digital story was prepared from the beginning to ensure that the message the storyteller was going to convey through the story could be delivered successfully to the children. The indicators where the learner was able to respond according to the questions given to them and express their thoughts, the learner was able to follow the instructions given by the storyteller. There were 15 students involved in the present study. There were nine girls and six boys whose ages ranged between 5-8 years old. They all communicated in Indonesian in daily communication with their family and friends. They learned English as a foreign language and used it only for their school tasks. To keep things documented, journals were written by the pre-service teachers who were also the storytellers, starting from the beginning of the digital storytelling recording process until the evaluation on the implementation of the digital-storytelling in fostering young learners' reading interest.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Challenges in implementing a digital storytelling

There have been studies focusing on digital storytelling which is one of the effective strategies to enhance learning autonomy in the early years of young children [7]. It is also a powerful tool to improve reading interest for young learners through visuals, characters of the story, sequence of events, the main idea and other elements of a story will bring the learners to see the story more alive. Thus, providing learners with multimedia authoring tools is a great advantage for unbinding their imagination when developing stories, but the complexity of digital story construction still presents several challenges to students.

In the current study, digital storytelling is utilized to provide a fun technology-based storytelling to present vocabularies in English in a more interesting way to improve reading interest of 5-7 years old young learners. As teaching young learners in globalization demands a deeper understanding about the characteristics of young children and their needs through activities, such as playing together, reading books together and implementing a digital storytelling to engage the children with life values embedded in the stories, but at the same time give a comprehensive support for children to improve their English skills, such as listening skill, comprehension skill, and vocabulary buildings. During ages 0-5 years old, a child is in the period where they like to explore their surroundings, including the linguistic varieties and semiotic resources that will help them to learn and understand words, such as gestures, facial expressions, voice intonation, even emotion or other communicative functions they earlier expressed by preverbal means [7]. Young children can understand gestures or instructions as another way to convey message from the speaker [8]. They can identify the new words outside their class and make sense of them when the words are relevant to their lives [9]. Based on how young learners can make sense of the world around them that fast, another challenge would be on how digital storytelling can help develop their characters. The application of digital storytelling develops young learners' character including religiosity, honesty, discipline, responsibility, courtesy, self-confidence, and care [4]. During early childhood, having easy access to digital tools can support the unlimited communicative practice that assists language learners in building knowledge and the embedded values within the stories for engaging communicative and social competence [10].

During early childhood, children are using mostly their senses to explore the world around them. They are surrounded by different symbols through words, pictures, video clips, movies, songs, and others that hold their own meanings. Those symbols are found in the media or resources to which children are usually attached, such as television, theatre, Youtube channels, gadgets, or other electronic communication devices [11]. Therefore, adults around them, teachers or parents play an important role to engage their children with the essential values in a more relevant and meaningful way to their children so that they may always remember that life is not about fulfilling their own needs, but it talks about sharing with others. One of the ways is through stories exposed to them. Both traditional and digital storytelling have been shown as effective tools to learner autonomy throughout the learning process [12].

The participants of the current study started their teaching journey from their beliefs that the earlier learners are exposed to English, the more quickly they learn, as they hear and use English to practice their communication skills, it will be easier for them to internalize it and begin to think in English [6]. The more they hear words expressed repeatedly and use them in their daily practice to communicate, the more make sense those words would be for young learners to engage with more complex sentences. Young learners can gain new vocabulary which they can hear repeatedly through stories [7]. Through utilizing technology integrated in the learning process as well as in designing the learning objectives and materials, it is necessary for an instructor to know the learners' prior knowledge and characteristics, so that what the instructor planned for the lesson will be achievable by the learners. Based on the journals written by the pre-service teacher who is also the story-teller, it was found that a teacher's or instructor's role is to guide and support the young learners to analyze each one of the elements of a story, to get more of their attention to see how the story is structured sequentially in such a way to be easily understood by the learners and how the characters come into alive in their imagination. As learners are getting used to hearing more words from the story, unconsciously they gained more vocabulary, new insights and the values embedded in the story as well that will be very beneficial to enhance their story comprehension skill. Thus, the challenge in applying this digital storytelling would be also related to the English proficiency, linguistic repertoire, and communication skills of the instructor while delivering the story. The instructor needs to be able to convey the targeted message that would be understandable by the learners [13]. The fact that young learners are still in the period where they have a short attention span which means they need time to refresh themselves in the middle of the learning process. Based on the observation while the learners watched and listened to the digital storytelling, the young learners seemed very attentive to the story. Unfortunately, no more than 10 minutes, they started to get distracted by their friends or they became not focused. Therefore, an instructor needs to be creative in combining activities during the digital storytelling time to keep the students interested and engaged with the stories told to them. Instructors may also encourage students to express and explore their daily contexts, their needs, and interests through situated learning activities [14]. For example, asking the learners about the characters of the story, then letting them share how they feel about the characters, relating the story with their daily lives, and others.

Anxiety in expressing ideas in a foreign language influence how the students respond to the story being told to them. The lack of vocabulary, grammar, and motivation have been some variables that might hinder the learners to comprehend the story completely and to practice and improve their English skills [15]. Thus, through stories, young learners will get input stored in their linguistic repertoire, feedback, and guidance along with the analytical process bring positive impact to the way the learners start to get connected with the message gain more confidence knowing that they are still learning and making mistakes are ladders to succeed. The digital storytelling increases the learner independence to see the natural process in the teaching and learning of a second or language [16] where learners might fail but moving forward to maximize opportunities to practice their speaking, listening and comprehension skills to be more confident speaker of English.

Another challenge is related to the storytelling done digitally and its technicalities. In most cases, the quality of the recorded storytelling depends much on the recording of the voice of the storyteller. No matter how good and interesting the stories are, the quality of the story-teller's voice in the digital storytelling determines the quality of the information they shared. Therefore, it is a great opportunity for pre-service teachers to improve their skills in operating the digital tools that can be used to enhance the learning process as well as their learner's competence and understanding about life values [16]. There is a need to reveal the embedded values from each story and make it sense in the young learner's life. How to make the characters alive and let the learners interact with the story or the characters are the ways to keep the story 'make sense and real' for young learners. They also need interaction with the instructor as well as their friends or other people, such as their family, school community and church who can give them space to make them engaged with the embedded values within the story [17]. In the middle of 'borderless' world, parents have a big responsibility on how to guide their children to know which information is valuable or not for them and to choose the content on the internet according to their needs, not on their human desires. The next institution as the closest environment for young children after family is school. Providing clear guidance for

children to choose; there are many ways to facilitate self-access language learning using technology [18] and encourage a child's development in a more comprehensible and meaningful way. By considering the needs of young learners that they still need direct guidance, parents at home or teachers in class should have a sufficient understanding that young learners need motivation to learn and mostly they gain it through a direct interaction between them and their parents. The intention of helping the students achieve their learning goals should be the goal of parents or teachers to produce a suitable tool suitable to improve the learning motivation or reading interest [19].

3.2. Opportunities to foster a reading interest of young learners

Providing learners with multimedia authoring tools for unbinding their imagination when developing stories as well as their critical thinking through a deep analysis towards the content of the story are found as opportunities gained through digital storytelling activities. From the observation during the story-telling time, learners were engaged with the story structure, how the sequence of events were folded, the characters and their characteristics, and other elements of the story [20]. Through digital storytelling, learners need to be aware of all information that sound appropriate and convincing, thus there should be a continuous reflection on what they are reading about and learning habits [21]. Parents also need to be ready to scaffold their young children to enhance their interest in reading. Spending time together with their young children should be a priority because that is the time when young children still need direct guidance from parents at home and teachers at school. Stories can be a means to have deep and thorough discussions between parents and their children which might spark ideas to be used in developing speaking and communication skills [22].

Although technology could be the media to engage learners with content knowledge and empower them with the 21st-skills [10], parents still hold a full responsibility to transfer the life planning strategy to their children. Storytelling is one of the earliest forms of knowledge transfer, and parents often use it for teaching their children values and knowledge that might prepare the children to face challenges in the future. Through digital storytelling, students can share stories of success and develop a sense of community. Young learners learn things from their socialization with their friends and surroundings [23]. By using storytelling students can also explore their personal roles and make sense of their lives [24]. Digital storytelling allows the storyteller to enrich the stories and make them more exciting, and interesting by using text, voice, music, animation [25]. The pre-service also roused that "a digital storytelling is an empowering and creative way for kids to tell their stories, and when they are all done, then they can share it with the world" [26]. It is a big opportunity for pre-service teachers as they are preparing themselves to plan their lessons and utilize the more suitable tools that can engage their learners to the core of the learning process, which is to learn the life values from any contents they have learned to bring impact in a wider society.

4. CONCLUSION

In the early childhood, the use of high technology in the learning a new language is very crucial for a comprehensive linguistic development for young learners. When the receptive skills are activated, which is the listening skill, the production process of a digital storytelling and participating in the discussion while the story was exposed to them digitally, the learners can get more engaged with the story elements as well learn about the embedded values within the story being told to them. Implementing a digital story-telling in this era has brought up issues related to whether the digital story-telling is a benefit to foster their reading interests or not. Despite the challenges of a digital story that since the story is recorded digitally, so there will be a limited interaction. As young learners still need the guidance from an instructor, this condition will be a chance for parents or the school teachers to engage the young learners with the content or values that are embedded within the story.

This condition also opens up an opportunity for pre-service teachers to equip themselves better with technical skills on how to operate digital devices, such as video camera, audio-visual presentations, and others. It is also essential for parents or teachers in school to know their learner well in order to utilize an integrated tool to enhance the students' competence as well their life values that can be or parents or instructors in class about their needs and characteristics. By acknowledging their needs and characteristics, instructors can design a more suitable learning tools or media to enhance their linguistic competence as well as foster their learning motivation. It is also important to know that providing multimedia authoring tools which young children are attached with every day, instructors need make sure that scaffolding and guidance from parents and teachers will be a great advantage for the more meaningful learning process for young learners to gain learning autonomy. Therefore, this is a good opportunity for pre-service teachers to prepare themselves, so that they can be more skillful in regard to the technicalities of how to operate digital tools with a high quality product. Other than that, through stories, young learners also will also develop their linguistic

repertoires as they are exposed to colorful pictures, new vocabularies, and through the voice and intonation used by the storyteller.

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