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FROM PICTURE TO STORY: USING CREATIVE WRITING TASKS TO ENHANCE MOTIVATION AND LEARNING IN EFL CLASSES

Abstract

'A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words'. Pictures can stimulate and increase the interest and imagination of students so you can easily encourage a creative storyteller in them by providing them an inspiring picture on which to base their story. Picture Storytelling has long been recognized as a very useful method of language learning as it enhances students' language skills through creative writing. The aim of this paper is to explore the possibilities of how picture storytelling can effectively be used to foster students' motivation, creativity and learning in EFL (English as a foreign language) classes. This paper presents a pilot study focused on 88 EFL first-, third- and fourth-year students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Sarajevo, implementing picture storytelling tasks into our EFL classes in order to increase students' motivation and creativity as well as to develop their basic English language skills. At the end of semester, a questionnaire was given to all student participants in this project in order to evaluate their attitudes towards using picture storytelling tasks in our EFL context and whether they see such creative writing as a tool with positive effect on their motivation and developing their EFL language skills. The results of the questionnaire reveal that students had an overall positive attitude towards using picture storytelling tasks as an appropriate medium both for sparking their imagination while engaged in creative writing tasks and for practicing their English language skills.

Key words: EFL teaching and learning, picture storytelling, creative writing tasks, motivation, language skills

Introduction

The benefits of using pictures in foreign language teaching have long been recognized. Even back in 1646, it was the author Comenius who proposed a 'visual method' of learning Latin, claiming that 'pictures are what most easily impress themselves on the child's mind' (see Hawkins 1987: 103). Today, we all live in a media infused world, in which we obtain most of the information by visual inputs, through different technological devices. Through this preoccupation with the new technologies, electronic images have become pervasive in the every-day environment of both foreign language teachers and learners. Although new technologies have opened new possibilities to integrate multimedia visual aids in the language classroom, many teachers and students still rely heavily on traditional materials such as coursebooks and paper worksheets. Nowadays, it is almost impossible to imagine a modern coursebook for learning a foreign language without illustrations.

Generally, it is assumed that the process of learning a target language (TL) word can be supported by associating it with an image which illustrates its meaning. However, visual clues in a foreign language coursebook can be used in various ways. Allford (2000) claims that 'foreign language teaching materials tend to use pictorial images in contrived ways in order to

elicit target language (TL) knowledge' and that 'an excessive use of 'convergent' tasks may cause learners to scan illustrations merely for clues to linguistic puzzles', while on the other hand, 'divergent' tasks may encourage imaginative interpretations of illustrations and offer insights into TL society and culture.' (Allford 2000: 45). Furthermore, Allford (2000) points out that 'all visual images, in coursebooks as elsewhere, rather than conveying single, unequivocal meanings, need to be interpreted' (Allford 2000: 46), so he proposes using illustrations 'for 'divergent' activities where students are given scope to use their imaginations and generate TL statements of their own' (Allford 2000: 48).

Thus, the visual aids in the language classroom can be a useful tool to increase students' motivation, attract their attention to the topic presented in the class, enhance and facilitate comprehension of grammar and language, and support memorizing the new vocabulary and structures. Pictures are likely to stimulate the interest and imagination of students and also encourage their creativity which makes them suitable for assigning writing tasks in a foreign language classroom. 'A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words' says an old English proverb, but students could use thousands and thousands of words more, as their reaction to a picture is almost immediate and their imagination is sparked from the very beginning, whereas their reaction to a written story would usually take much longer. Thus, creative writing can be seen as a powerful tool with positive effects on developing students' language skills in a foreign language. Furthermore, it has recently become an independent academic discipline, especially at the universities in the USA, where students may enrol to particular creative writing courses such as fiction, poetry, screenwriting or playwriting in order to further develop and enhance their writing skills and earn either bachelor or master's degree (Hyland 2002: 229).

The present study represents a small-scale action research and focuses on how pictures and digital photos can effectively be used for creative writing and fostering students' motivation, creativity and learning in EFL (English as a foreign language) classes at the university. The curricula for general EFL courses at the tertiary level heavily rely on grammar and vocabulary based instruction, especially at the first year of studies when students, who do not study English language and literature per se, attend an EFL general course, in which they are supposed to receive general English language instruction where the majority of linguistic content (grammar, structures, etc.) have already been taught at the elementary and secondary level. This inevitably leads to a lot of content repetition and consequently to students' lack of motivation for learning English. Therefore, introducing picture storytelling tasks in EFL general courses at the university level seem to be an appropriate medium for a more student-centered approach and engaging students in creative writing tasks while practicing their English language skills at the same time.

The use of visual prompts in EFL learning

Most of the language teachers would agree that the use of visuals can enhance both teaching and learning in the foreign language classroom. Brinton (2000) suggests that teachers should 'use media to unvolve students more integrally in the learning process and to facilitate language learning by making it a more authentic, meaningful process' (Brinton 2000: 473). Bamford (2003) claims that 'visual literacy is what is seen with the eye and what is 'seen' with the mind' (Bamford 2003: 1) and also points out that 'it is now crucial for obtaining information, constructing knowledge and building successful educational outcomes' (Bamford 2003: 2).

Furthermore, Hattwig, Bussert, Medaille and Burgess (2012) emphasize that 'visual literacy competences are essential for 21st century learners and must be supported accross the higher education curriculum' (Hattwig, Bussert, Medaille & Burgess 2012: 61).

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has provided a definition of visual literacy within the framework of the *Visual Literacy Standards for Higher Education* (October 2011):

> Visual literacy is a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy skills equip a learner to understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials. A visually literate individual is both a critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to a body of shared knowledge and culture (http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy).

Thus, visual literacy plays an important role in defining the learning outcomes in higher education and these guidelines for student visual literacy skill development defined by ACRL may be of great help for academic professionals in teaching and assessing visual literacy.

Mannan (2005) points out that using visual aids in the language classroom may 'help the teacher to clarify, establish, correlate and coordinate accurate concepts, interpretations and appreciations, and enable him to make learning more concrete, effective, interesting, inspirational, meaningful and vivid' (Mannan 2005: 108). Visual aids are regarded as powerful retention aids, which serve to increase understanding (Wolfe, 2011). There are many types of visual aids: pictures, posters, photos, illustrations, icons, symbols, sketches, figures, presentations, mind maps, etc. In this paper, we will refer to pictures and photos as visual tools used in an EFL teaching and learning context.

There are many possible applications of visual tools in an ELT classroom. Using visual materials in the language teaching will surely have a positive influence on students' motivation. Canning-Wilson (2001) confirms that visual and audio-visual tools motivate students' interest, and according to Ramirez (2012), this may enhance the classroom atmosphere and lead to a greater student participation. Visual aids may bring variation in class (Macwan, 2015) and thus facilitate and enhance foreign language learning. They can be used for a wide range of activities in EFL classes, from speaking and writing, to enhancing students' vocabulary and grammar competence. Macwan (2015) claims that visual aids may support speaking activities as learners will share their feelings and inspirations and thus develop their speaking skills. Baralt, Pennestri & Selvandin (2011) suggest that using visual aids in foreign language instruction may foster students' essay writing skills and promote their lexical creativity. Using visuals may also enhance students' imagination and creativity, as the same picture or photo can be interpreted in many different ways.

The study
Participants and context

This small-scale pilot action research was carried out with the target group of 88 first-, third- and fourth-year EFL students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Sarajevo, at the Department of Class Teaching and the Department of Preschool Education. These students attended the EFL General Course which is offered in the Curriculum as an obligatory course in

the first year and as an elective course in the senior years (2 lessons x 45 minutes). All of these were mixed-level groups of EFL students, ranging from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) scale for languages.

The project 'From Pictures to Stories' lasted for four weeks in the winter semester of the academic 2016/2017 year. It was organized as an in-class project, which was based on group-work activities and cooperative learning. Throughout the project, students were engaged in meaningful learning activities based on creating their own stories as a response to pictures/ digital images provided as prompts for eliciting their creative writing and even more engaged EFL learning.

Procedure

During the project, the students were divided into groups of 4 or 5 and assigned the task of making their own story as a group, based on picture prompts they were given in class. There were two types of picture prompts used in this project. One of them was a set of pictures arranged randomly but containing the elements of a story and the students were supposed to rearrange the pictures in a certain order (with more than one possible option for the sequence) and write their story based on that. Each group of students (4-5) was given a set of picture prompts with the task to make a consensus within the group and put the pictures in order, and then work as a group to make a story for that, feeling free to add any kind of dramatic elements or embellishments to the story in order to make it more interesting and appealing to the rest of their class.

The other type of picture prompts used in this project were several digital photos taken from the Internet resource entitled '35 Powerful Photos That Tell a Story' (https://www.noupe.com/inspiration/photography/35-powerful-photos-that-each-tells-a story.html) which provides inspirational documentary and photojournalism photos that are really powerful, touching and emotional in a way that they do not only represent a state of affairs, but also tell a story. Although this site also displayed a caption for each photo provided by its author, the students in this project were given only photos without captions in order to minimize the risk of jeopardizing their own imagination and creativity while making an interpretation of the photos.

Finally, the students presented their creative stories to the classmates and they were also given rubrics to evaluate each other's performance while presenting their group work. The categories for evaluation were: 'interesting plot', 'appealing story', 'coherence', 'correct grammar', 'adequate vocabulary', and 'collaboration with peers'. Each of these categories was evaluated following the pre-arranged criteria for the assessment of their story presentations, ranging from 1 (negative response) to 4 (positive response). We also organized in-class discussions about their perceptions and experiences of using picture prompts for creative storytelling and writing in our EFL classes and its impact on student motivation and EFL learning at the university level.

At the end of the project, the students were given a questionnaire to provide their feedback on the whole project with the main focus on their perceptions and opinions on using picture prompts for creative writing tasks in order to support their EFL skills and provide a motivating and low-anxiety context for their EFL learning.

<u>The instrument</u>

The instrument used in this small-scale action research was a post-project questionnaire mainly focusing on student perceptions of the usefulness of picture storytelling tasks to foster their motivation, creativity and active engagement in EFL classes and provide opportunities to enhance their EFL learning. It was divided into two parts: (1) questions about the picture storytelling method and tasks used to provide a meaningful, interesting and motivating context for EFL learning (20 items), and (2) personal comments (3 open-ended questions), to elicit the students' personal impressions on what they found as the most useful part of the picture storytelling tasks, to report any possible difficulties they might have experienced while doing the picture storytelling tasks, and to acknowledge if the project 'From Pictures to Stories' helped them improve their English knowledge and skills.

As far as the first part of the questionnaire is concerned, the items were answered according to the five-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). All of the 88 students involved in the project completed the questionnaire. Percentages were calculated on the basis of the total number of all responses in each of these categories. On the other hand, the second part of the questionnaire which elicited the students' personal comments demanded a qualitative analysis of the collected data.

<u>Results and discussion</u>

The data collected via the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods based on frequences and percentages of the students' answers in the first part of the questionnaire, combined with the descriptive and qualitative analysis of the students' personal comments in the second part of the questionnaire. Overall, the questionnaire results have shown that the students generally provided a very positive feedback towards the implementation of the the project 'From Pictures to Stories' in our EFL classes and they recognized the effectiveness and numerous benefits of using picture prompts for storytelling and creative writing in our EFL teaching and learning context at the university level.

The results of the analysis of the first part of the questionnaire reveal that the students mostly responded with *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree* to all questionnaire items. The highest rated items, in a hierarchical order, were as follows:

1) 'Overall, I think that Picture Storytelling is a very useful method of learning in our EFL classes.'
(Item no. 20 – **75%** *strongly agree*)

2) 'Picture Storytelling is a good way for expressing your creativity and inventiveness.'
(Item no. 3 – **73.86%** *strongly agree*)

3) 'Picture Storytelling tasks provide a lot of opportunities to practice basic English skills in general.'
(Item no. 7 – **65.90%** *strongly agree*)

4) 'I was able to learn from my classmates while doing Picture Storytelling tasks.'
(Item no. 18 – **64.77%** *strongly agree*)
'Picture Storytelling tasks provided a lot of opportunities to learn and practice English language.'
(Item no. 19 – **64.77%** *strongly agree*)

The highest rated item in this study was the item no. 20 in the questionnaire *('Overall, I think that Picture Storytelling is a very useful method of learning in our EFL classes')*, which clearly shows that the students have recognized the value of using picture prompts to create stories (Picture Storytelling) in order to promote EFL learning in our context. Furthermore, the second rated item (Item no. 3 – *'Picture Storytelling is a good way for expressing your creativity and inventiveness'*) is also a strong confirmation that the students really recognized the benefits of this motivating way of prompting and encouraging their original expressive power and creativity while completing the writing tasks. The third rated item (Item no. 7 – *'Picture Storytelling tasks provide a lot of opportunities to practice basic English skills in general.'*) clearly shows that the students recognized the potential and benefits of using Picture Storytelling tasks in our EFL teaching/learning context as they found it useful for the English language learning and practicing basic English language skills. The fourth rated items (Item no. 18 – *'I was able to learn from my classmates while doing Picture Storytelling tasks.'* and Item no. 19 – *'Picture Storytelling tasks provided a lot of opportunities to learn and practice English language.'*) show that the students generally acknowledge the critical attributes of Picture Storytelling tasks which make them suitable both for cooperative learning in the EFL context and practicing English language usage with other classmates. Their answers also reflect their motivation and willingness to work effectively with their classmates in an encouraging learning environment. Furthermore, the remaining results of this pilot study indicate that the students show a positive attitude towards the other critical aspects of using Picture Storytelling tasks, such as motivation, critical thinking, greater participation and interest from most of the students, positive interaction and collaboration among students, opportunities for practicing writing and speaking, strengthening and building up their vocabulary and grammar knowledge in English, etc.

As it was mentioned earlier, the second part of the questionnaire included 3 open-ended questions to elicit the students' comments related to their impressions of the project 'From Pictures to Stories', and the benefits for their learning of English. The questions were:

(1) What was the most useful part of the Picture Storytelling tasks for you?
(2) Did you have any difficulties while doing the Picture Storytelling tasks? If so, provide a brief explanation.
(3) Did the Picture Storytelling tasks help you improve your English knowledge and skills? If so, provide a brief explanation.

Here are some students' comments from this part:

'The most useful part of the Picture Storytelling tasks is working in groups. I like to work in a group and help my colleagues.'

'The most useful part was the given opportunity to express one's creativity.'

'The most useful part is that we practiced speaking and writing.'

'I liked the group work and learning new words.'

'The most useful part was team work, as we negotiated issues within our group, learned and wrote the new words, etc. I could say that I was more actively engaged during the class.'

'I had a great opportunity to improve my vocabulary.'

'I learned to express my opinion and to hear and respect the opinion of my colleagues.'

'It was really fun and definitely an interesting way of learning and improving my English knowledge.'

'I didn't have any difficulties because there were only good students in my group and we helped each other while doing the tasks.'
'I had some difficulties with grammar, writing and spelling.'
'These tasks helped me to communicate in English better and speak better in public.'
'Picture Storytelling tasks helped me to improve my English knowledge and skills.'
'We were talking about stories and we wrote our ideas. So many skills are improved.'
'These tasks let me express myself in a productive way, I was able to think more and talk more in English.'
'The team work has created more interest for the English language learning. I improved my pronunciation.'

Generally, these comments were all very positive and they reflect the students' willingness to use this motivating way of EFL learning and to work effectively with their classmates in a cooperative environment. Furthermore, they acknowledged that Picture Storytelling tasks offer numerous opportunities for creativity and practicing basic English skills.

Conclusions

Overall, the results of the evaluation questionnaire not only showed the positive response of all students in the target group towards using picture prompts to make creative stories, i.e. Picture Storytelling tasks in the EFL classes, but also confirmed that their motivation and interest in learning is increased when they are engaged in meaningful tasks with the authentic material, and given opportunities to express their creativity and productiveness in group work. Visual aids are a great tool in a foreign language classroom to create a relaxed atmosphere in which students feel safe and comfortable to talk and initiate disscussion with their classmates. The majority of students nowadays are either visual learners per se, or they have adopted a visual learning style due to their continuous exposure to visual stimuli via media in their everyday lives. Using picture prompts for creative writing in EFL classes also develops students' thinking skills and fosters cooperative learning. Students are expected to construct their own knowledge and share a common goal with the others in the group while recognizing the importance of mutual help, which then results with a greater feeling of belonging to a learning community and the increase in knowledge. At the same time, the teacher gets a new role, as she/he is no longer a presenter of information but a facilitator to assist and direct her/his students when needed.

Although this was a small-scale study conducted over a short period of time and with a relatively small sample of 88 participants, the obtained results can still confirm the initial assumptions on the usefulness of implementing Picture Storytelling tasks to provide more opportunities for students' creativity in EFL classes, foster social interaction between students and encourage interest in EFL learning at the university level. Visual aids have a great potential for creating a dynamic, flexible and motivating learning environment for university-level EFL students.

Generally, visual aids can really be a powerful teaching and learning tool in a modern EFL classroom as visual literacy is assumed to be an essential competence for 21st century learners. Creative writing prompted by visual clues may develop students' language skills on all language levels and even lead them to an independent language use as it allows them to

practice critical thinking and consciously apply their previously acquired knowledge into practice. Being highly motivational and useful for both students and teachers, visual aids are not to be underestimated or neglected in EFL teaching and learning at the university level, however simple and easy-going they might seem to be.

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OD SLIKE DO PRIČE: UPOTREBA ZADATAKA KREATIVNOG PISANJA U SVRHU JAČANJA MOTIVACIJE I UČENJA U NASTAVI ENGLESKOG KAO STRANOG JEZIKA

Sažetak

"Slika vrijedi hiljadu riječi". Slike mogu stimulisati i povećati interesovanje i maštu kod studenata, pa možete lako podstaći kreativnog pripovjedača u njima ako im ponudite inspirativnu sliku na kojoj će bazirati svoju priču. Pričanje priča na osnovu slike je odavno prepoznato kao veoma korisna metoda u učenju jezika, jer unaprijeđuje studentove jezičke vještine kroz kreativno pisanje. Cilj ovog rada je da istraži mogućnosti o tome kako pričanje priča na osnovu slika može biti efikasno upotrijebljeno za podsticanje studentske motivacije, kreativnosti i učenja u nastavi engleskog kao stranog jezika. Ovaj rad predstavlja pilot studiju koja se fokusira na 88 studenata prve, treće i četvrte godine Pedagoškog fakulteta u Sarajevu, uz implementaciju zadataka pričanja priča na osnovu slika na našim časovima engleskog kao strang jezika, kako bi povećali motivaciju i kreativnost kod studenata, kao i razvili njihove osnovne jezičke vještine u engleskom jeziku. Na kraju semestra, svim studentima učesnicima u ovom projektu je podijeljen upitnik kako bi procijenili njihove stavove o upotrebi zadataka pričanja priča na osnovu slika u našem kontekstu učenja engleskog kao stranog jezika, te da li oni vide takvo kreativno pisanje kao instrument koji ima pozitivan efekat na njihovu motivaciju i razvoj jezičkih vještina u engleskom jeziku. Rezultati upitnika pokazuju da su studenti generalno iskazali pozitivan stav ka upotrebi zadataka pričanja priča na osnovu slika kao odgovarajućeg medija i za podsticanje njihove mašte dok su uključeni u zadatke kreativnog pisanja i za uvježbavanje jezičkih vještina iz engleskog jezika.

Ključne riječi: podučavanje i učenje engleskog kao stranog jezika, pričanje priča na osnovu slika, zadaci kreativnog pisanja, motivacija, jezičke vještine