

Chapter 48

Engagement in Emergency Remote Education: The Use of Digital Storytelling With Student–Teachers of English

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ABSTRACT

Digital storytelling (DST) has been effective for student engagement in second language (L2) education. Yet, its impact on engagement has commonly been examined in the classroom through synchronous DST tools and platforms. This study enquires whether DST can be equally engaging in the context of emergency remote education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants of the study are 42 student-teachers of English who developed an asynchronous online DST project. Data were collected through a DST questionnaire and were analysed using quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods. DST was found to generate mainly cognitive engagement through self-reflection processes and behavioural engagement in the form of effort and time invested in the speaking and writing parts of the project. Emotional engagement was less frequent and emerged through positive emotions. Insufficient technology skills, the wrong timing and duration of the project, negative emotion arousal, and the absence of teacher and peer feedback and support appeared as potentially disengaging factors.

INTRODUCTION

Online distance education, i.e., any course or activity within a course done online with no requirements for face-to-face sessions or on-campus activity (Mayadas et al., 2015), has become commonplace among teachers and students, especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic. In the field of L2 education, the training of teachers in online language pedagogy within teacher education programs has been almost inexistent (Compton, 2009; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2020). On the other hand, some L2 students, especially low proficiency learners, have been reported unready for

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Engagement in Emergency Remote Education

online distance learning (Kuama & Intharaksa, 2016), and certain learners have also shown a preference for face-to-face language lessons (e.g., Altunay, 2019). These problems have been exacerbated with the pandemic, which has rapidly forced both teachers and students into emergency remote education (ERE), preventing them from developing the knowledge and skills that are necessary to use new technologies and platforms effectively (Gacs et al., 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020; Russell, 2020). Therefore, they have found themselves lacking the competences required for online language pedagogy (teachers), and successful online language learning (students), so that the former did not have the pedagogical knowledge and skills to carefully plan and design engaging activities and projects in advance, with “dedicated structure and supports” in virtual environments (Russell, 2020, p. 339); and the latter did not know how to fully exert their agency therein in terms of self-discipline, self-motivation to learn online, self-regulation of their language learning process, and, in general, greater responsibility for their own learning (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Ramsin & Mayall, 2019; Russell, 2020). In this respect, what many teachers and learners have ended up doing has not been typical online teaching and learning respectively, but “online triage” (see Gacs et al., 2020, p. 381). Thus, certain scholars have distinguished online distance education from emergency remote teaching or education (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Gacs et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Karataş & Tuncer, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020; Russell, 2020).

In addition, with the sudden transition to this kind of online education, many students did not have sufficient time to adjust to the absence of immediate teacher and peer feedback and support they commonly find in face-to-face lessons. Neither did they have time to get accustomed to the delayed responses from the interlocutor and the absence of negotiation of meaning that are typical of asynchronous online learning beyond the use of email (see Gacs et al., 2020; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2020). This may produce impatience and other negative emotions (Russell, 2020), leading to disengagement from the learning process. With this context in mind, obtaining empirically-based information on how student engagement can be generated and sustained becomes imperative for L2 teachers in particular, so that they can make informed decisions on their online practices, and therefore implement an “effective, high-leverage language pedagogy” (Al-Hoorie et al., 2020, p. 3). To this end, research on approaches, models, and tools that have commonly been used in digital spaces and have been shown to increase L2 learners’ motivation and engagement therein is necessary to find out whether they can be equally effective in online education of the emergency remote kind. This study aims to address this issue by enquiring whether DST in asynchronous emergency remote learning can be engaging for student-teachers of English in terms of generating positive behaviours, thoughts, and emotions, even in the face of negativity, great social distance, and isolation caused by the pandemic.

Therefore, the chapter offers a discussion of engagement in L2 education. DST is then described as a technology-enhanced learning approach that can generate student motivation and engagement in online distance environments. The findings of DST and engagement studies in L2 education are discussed, and their classroom-based and synchronous character is highlighted to signal the dearth of research on the impact of DST upon L2 learners’ engagement in online distance and ERE. A methods section describing the participants, the data collection procedures and instruments, and the analyses conducted follows. Results are then discussed in light of illustrative examples from the data and the relevant literature. The chapter concludes by indicating directions for further research, pedagogical implications, and the limitations of the study.

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