

COMMUNICATIVE METHOD OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN MANDARIN FOR 21ST CENTURY LEARNERS*

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ABSTRACT

Integrating technology as part of the curriculum has been the ongoing trend in many educational settings these past few years. However, to effectively develop meaningful learning in the classroom, systems need to be in place. Thus, in this study, there are twofold aims: to use digital storytelling (DST) as pedagogical tool for Mandarin language teachers to help students practice linguistic skills in a communicative approach and using qualitative instruments like oral survey and written reflections to examine the extent to which students were engaged in authentic learning tasks using digital storytelling.

Keywords: *Mandarin Linguistic routines; Digital storytelling; Communicative Approach*

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It is an acknowledged fact that we now live, work, play and learn in a rapid evolution of different communicative gadgets; so much has changed in how people express themselves in these different media platform. Cell phones of today not only transmit messages and photos, they also record sound videos as well as provide visual contact of people from different countries. In such an environment, we are living in a time of great change. The teaching of a foreign language in Higher Education is no exception, since our students belong to the digital world and are native speakers of digital language. Mark Prensky (2012) describes them as “generation of technological acceleration” that of the Internet and its networks. The capability of digital natives still varies and their abilities to imbibe information still differ from each other. However, one thing common to all of them is their intuitive mastery to manipulate electronic devices and equipment without the need to read instructional manuals. These people think and process information in a totally different way than the previous generations. Thus, there is a greater need to review curricular instructions and assessment tools being used as of today.

Digital Storytelling and Mandarin Language

Teaching in the 21st century emphasizes the integration of technology in several of its curricula, whereby more and more teachers try to engage students by using different media platform in their instructions and assessment. Robin (2006) suggests that, “Teachers

should consider that in today's classroom, the integration of technology in pedagogical content leads to a deeper understanding of the powerful roles that digital media can play in both teaching and learning" (p. 712). In the area of language acquisition, a powerful media tool often used is digital storytelling. Many scholars have long highlighted the importance of using digital storytelling in language teaching and learning. Digital storytelling is described as modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling wherein a wide variety of multimedia (images, audio and text) are incorporated to produce a short video clip or movie. Simply defined, digital storytelling is telling a story in electronic form which requires the addition of text, audio, music and graphics done in a new platform media. It started with people creating their personal narratives. In time, it expanded to another kind of digital storytelling known as staging. Staging is a kind of presentation where one has to find a way how to perform their feelings, actions, incidents, sayings, etc. (Hotmann, et al.) Oftentimes, when communicative method is used in foreign language, staging can be seen.

Several positive effects have been related with the use of digital storytelling in the foreign language classroom. Tsou et al. (2006) found that integrating digital storytelling into the language curriculum is a creative language learning technique that can improve a student's level of learning in reading, writing, speaking and listening. Besides the opportunity to work with all four language skills, digital storytelling also draws the interest of students with diverse learning styles and promotes

group work. As Robin (2008) points out, “students who participate in the creation of digital stories may develop enhanced communication skills by learning to organize their ideas, ask questions, express opinions and construct narratives” (p. 226). All these elements are helpful in achieving a sense of confidence in delivering the target language. In learning Mandarin, which is a highly tonal language and with a history of more than 5000 years, the use of digital storytelling helps learners incorporate cultural perspectives while delivering their messages. One promising instructional support in the use of digital storytelling technology is to provide foreign language learners with the cultural background, literacy skill, and language development needed to access challenging academic text (Rooney, 2010). Digital storytelling in Mandarin enables instructors to teach a topic that can generate interest and attention of students while they work on linguistic routines. While traditional digital stories mainly consist of narration only, the more innovative digital stories integrate series of dialogues to provide examples of different communicative exchanges done in the target language. Therefore, digital storytelling in its many functions is indeed a powerful tool to capture students’ interest and further build their language competence and content knowledge.

Didactic Sequence to Communicative Mandarin Linguistic Routines

To effectively reach educational objectives and learning outcomes, each teacher has planned activities in mind which they implement in the

classroom according to their teaching styles. The sequence of a day's event follows a particular order depending on the approach of the teacher. In a teacher-centered model, it employs the following phases: a) explanation or delivery of the lesson; b) students' individual study of the textbook; c) repetition and review of the content; d) teacher's assessment of students' knowledge (Zabala, 1997). However, for a student-centered model, student participation is of importance as teachers are merely facilitators. Each student needs to take responsibility for their learning. Student-based activities need to be in place which drives many teachers to design and organize their activities in order to reach such learning objective. Thus, the concept of didactic sequence is a common thing to many teachers as this is a by-product of long standing educational practice. However, in the avenue of foreign language teaching and learning, especially in the 21st century, wherein the communicative method has been given more attention, the need to foster a more interactive student audience is crucial to sustain student interest. However, bringing to life situational dialogues that are as close to reality as possible is still a challenge. Many foreign language teachers need to rethink the didactic sequence they are to use for each activity to meet a student-based learning outcome. The particular order of class activities and lesson sequence is crucial elements in a students' learning process, especially if the final outcome does not depend on the content alone but in the totality of class interactions and discussions. Richards and Rodgers (2001) state that "the teacher has therefore the central role of

selecting, adapting, and/or creating the tasks themselves and then forming these into an instructional sequence in keeping with learner needs, interests, and language skill level” (p. 236). In contrast with the normal characteristics of didactic sequence, the communicative method seeks to utilize classroom situations and interactions of teacher and students as springboard of language pedagogy, bearing in mind the four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) while creating its didactic sequence. The didactic sequence developed for this study is delivered to align with the communicative method of Mandarin language teaching, with the teacher being the facilitator and organizer of group activities and the students as implementer of Mandarin language routines. Linguistic routines are valuable tools in helping shape students’ learning experience especially that of a foreign language. Students’ language acquisition is influenced by socio-cultural knowledge as determined by members of a particular community, and they are arranged and interpreted differently for each language. In Mandarin, expressing politeness for older people or people in position is ingrained in the Mandarin word itself and is very much used in daily linguistic routines. Just like in other languages, Mandarin greetings normally start with the basic linguistic elements like saying hello and goodbye which functions as opening and ending interactions. Social bonds and relationships between speakers and listeners are also created in the course of conversation implying social level and cultural values. Learning these essential linguistic routines is the first step to fostering better

understanding of the socio functional aspects of the target language, and in this study, it is the use of Mandarin language in different social contexts.

Participants and Mandarin Linguistic Routines

The participants for this study are tertiary students enrolled in the course “Mandarin as Foreign Language.” A total of 36 students, aged 18-22 with no prior background in Mandarin language joined in the study.

As starters, students were equipped on how to read the Beijing Romanized phonetic system known as Hanyu Pinyin. They were also introduced the four basic tones in Mandarin. Doing this allows each student to read and pronounce Mandarin words without the need to know how to read Chinese characters. With the goal of employing the communicative approach to learning, starting with the linguistic routines, students were given basic vocabulary words on greetings and saying goodbyes, asking them in pairs to write a short dialogue for two different situations.

Situation A: You and your brother are ordering coffee and then you saw your supervisor. How will you introduce your brother to your supervisor?

Situation B: You are walking towards the canteen when you saw your teacher and her daughter. How will you greet your teacher and her daughter?

The situational approach to learning the target language allows students the opportunity to understand socio cultural aspects intertwined in learning Mandarin as a foreign language. Throughout the course of study, students are asked to create a dialogue between two or three people in a specific communicative context. The goal is to assess their language skills in order to detect their previous knowledge and their mistakes. These series of situational scenarios enable the instructor to adapt and tailor the didactic sequence to the students' needs and ability throughout the following lessons. The didactic sequence utilized in the study follows a preparatory stage which contains initial oral production on the part of the student eventually extending to a longer oral production phase. Finally, after working on the targeted situational dialogue sets, students were introduced to their final task where in groups of two or three, they need to create and produce their own digital story using the different linguistic routines discussed in class, bearing in mind that it should contain a simple storyline while each student has to assume a fictional character as a particular role.

Mandarin Language Sessions

To prepare students to use the language in real world context and in relation to the final project that needs to be created, each session allows build-up of linguistic routines which needs to be integrated in their final output. Weekly, students received handouts with phrases and vocabulary words that are used in different communicative contexts.

These different communicative contexts allow students to practice different linguistic elements which they already knew or have newly learned. Periods of pair work were provided to address specific or general language concerns and difficulties. Working in pairs or groups prepares students to plan, negotiate and make decisions together and in the process students' collaborative skills are also developed. Three months of practice sessions on linguistic routines were provided to help students gain awareness of things to improve on or retain in preparation for the digital story that they have to create. Students were asked to present in class for purpose of initial feedback and peer evaluation. De Almeida (2007) has state that, "the use of *peer feedback* aims at helping learners become more critical of their own texts" (p. 5). Another objective of peer review is to provide students with another opinion on their work and to give them the opportunity to revise it according to the feedback they had received.

Table1. *Questionnaire for Peer Review*

Does the story have a clear introduction?
Are the situations/ delivery of sentences in the story culturally appropriate?
Can you understand the development of the plot or flow of story?
Did the story create audience interest?
Does the story have a clear ending?
Individual Student Assessment:
Did the characters use linguistic routines learned in class like simple greetings and simple sentence patterns correctly?

Are the sentences in the story grammatically correct?
Are tones and phonetics delivered correctly?
Please specify errors seen.
Do you have any further suggestions for the group?

With the different Mandarin sessions and peer review sessions, some common mistakes were generally observed and noted below:

Functional mistakes:

Example 1: -“Hi, who is he?”

“Shei shi ta?” 谁是他？

Example 2: -“I am glad to know you.”

“Zhidao ni hen gaoxing.” 知道你很高兴.

Example 3: -“My parents are both fine.”

“wo dou baba mama hao.” 我都爸爸妈妈好

Example 4: -“Do you want to drink coffee?”

“ni he yao kafei?” 你喝要咖啡？

Example 5: -“Let me introduce to you my younger sister.”

“wo jieshao ni wo meimei.” 我介绍你我妹妹.

Example 6: -“What is your nationality?”

“Ni shi shenme ren?” 你是什么人？

Grammar and sentence structure mistakes:

Example 1: -“Do you know where the toilet is?”

“Ni zhidao nar cesuo?” 你知道哪儿厕所？

Example 2: -“I will go to the canteen.”

-“Wo qu zai canting.” 我去在餐厅.

Example 3: -“What are those?”

-“Shenme shi naxie?” 什么是那些？

Example 4: -“Can I come in?”

-“Keyi wo jin lai?” 可以我进来？

Example 5: -“I want to eat at McDonalds.”

-“Wo yao chi Mai Dang Lao.” 我要吃麦当劳.

Example 6: -“I will go to class tom?”

-“wo yao qu shangke mingtian?” 我要去上课明天？

Classroom dynamics involving peer evaluation and discussions of mistakes were also meant to function as a linguistic needs analysis which help students to detect aspects of the Mandarin language and social context on which needs more work. Therefore, evaluation is being done throughout the different sessions before the students create their final script. The normal practice of allowing students to create their script before their oral delivery allows students to ask and discuss difficulties they encounter, thus providing a sense of academic awareness. This very same awareness is a contributing factor in nurturing the language learning process which is crucial to the didactic sequence of a communicative method of Mandarin language learning.

Creating the Digital Story

In order to help students visualize better the project they were expected to carry out, six short episodes of the digital story were shown to them. The story focuses on three friends as the main characters of each story. These three friends are from different countries such as Canada, America and Britain. The first episode introduces how three people of different personalities and nationalities met each other and became good friends. It all started when they took up Mandarin as their foreign language course in Beijing Language University. Episode one features scenes on making new friends and introducing oneself. Episode two to six highlight different real life scenarios such as talking about school life, invitation to a birthday party, shopping for items, ordering food, travelling together and sending off or saying good-bye. These short digital clips use communicative situations that students are likely to encounter in real life; thus, serving as model tool for students to have a clearer picture of linguistic routines that are expected of them for their final project. Three guidelines were then given as structure for the story they have to create. See Table 2. The class was then divided in groups of three whereby each team needs to create a short story including linguistic scenarios learned in class.

Table 2. *Guidelines for the Structure of the Story*

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|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. There is a setting where initial situation and main characters are introduced.B. There is a dilemma , tension or problem that occurs in the situationC. There should be a solution to the problem presented or resolution to the tensionD. Each character should sustain a substantial lines of Mandarin interactions and dialogue throughout the story |
|---|

Upon reaching the final stage, students have created different scenarios and the written text and scripts are ready. It is now time to turn it into a digital story. The students utilized different digital story software. Each student started by choosing pictures related to the story they created and arranged them in the proper order to match its development. This can help bring more life and creativity to the digital story they wanted to create. Then, each group practiced their lines, bearing in mind the intonation and Mandarin tones, the proper word pause and the mood necessary for the character in their story. Then recording time came. Some scenes would require meticulous matching of the recorded voice and image to impact the story. Some had to personally do staging to add more texture to the character in the story. Some added music as a final step before generating the full video.

Digital Storytelling Project Results

Of the twelve groups (three students per group) that created the digital storytelling, nine groups presented well-constructed stories and delivered good Mandarin pronunciation and intonation. Voicing also matched the images selected and transition of story lines was clearly executed bringing originality to the final outcome. The three other groups had problems with the correct use of the language patterns and had more frequency of incorrect tones and pronunciation. Some of their chosen images did not match their voice recording which added to inconsistency in the story created. However, despite the end result, efforts to pronounce correctly were evident.

On Oral Skills Improvement

Oral skills can be divided into productive skills whereby the use of the language in speech is assessed. These include fluency and clarity in speech, accuracy and variety of use. How the speaker's intonation or tones aid in communication are factors to consider. The second skill to note is the interactive and receptive oral dimension. To what extent can a speaker sustain, understand and demonstrate ability to interact in a conversation. This includes how well a speaker can express his/her opinions and sustain a conversation. In this project, oral skills are shown in communicative form using digital storytelling. Rhythm and pacing are also

components to note in the final project. With reference to the student's final project outcome, as well as the survey analysis I made, I believe that digital storytelling lends itself easily to practicing more of improving oral skills in Mandarin. Along the same line it can be argued that digital storytelling presents a new and innovative way on how students can express themselves orally using technology which imbibe more interest for a 21st century learners, and becomes a more suitable tool for some learners. The agreement that digital storytelling is a good tool to practice oral skills doesn't include respondents mentioning that recording takes too much time and they prefer a role play in the classroom, for this would note more on the use of digital media as part of the communicative aspects of foreign language learning.

On written skills enhancement

Communication can be done either verbally or non-verbally as long as good command of expression has been executed. We often describe a communicator as someone who can understand and express ideas and information creatively in a variety of modes. One mode of expression is done through script writing. The flow of ideas and situational dialogues created by students enhance a variety of skills. Before the final project of recording, students were asked to create a number of scripts and scenarios to interact with other students using Mandarin. In effective learning of a foreign language,

the process of moving to deeper level of understanding through exploration, questioning and connecting can develop cultural awareness and creative thinking. Command of grammar and vocabulary specific to a topic or situation in the context of language use is essential in acquiring a foreign language. Effective choice of vocabulary words and grammar structures are also observed to effectively use the language to suit the context. Conceptual and factual ideas delivered by students all contribute to developing a more diverse and dynamic scripts that produce an organic and more culturally-oriented script. The need to organize ideas and information in a logical structure using cohesive words is crucial in delivering clarity of messages and situations. All these steps are undertaken by students through the different Mandarin sessions they had in the course of the semester. With reference to the different drafts of scripts created by students from the different sessions, I see that the students are active agents whereby learning through interaction and dialoguing became central to their learning process, enhancing their skills to effectively write their thoughts in the target language, and that is in Mandarin language.

On the use of digital storytelling in Mandarin

Through observation and oral interviews, aspects of the classroom environment and activities are revealed. Looking at students who happily work with their digital project needlessly

speaks of the element of motivation that is in the student. Motivated by which specific factor is part of the analysis that I made. In the oral interview I conducted, some students responded feeling excited to use the digital storytelling tools that they have newly downloaded. Some responded to eagerness to see themselves in the outcome of the video. These findings revealed that students enjoyed the use of digital cameras, video shooting themselves, searching for web resources, exploring on different technological apps like Powtoon, Photo Story and the like. Manipulating, exploring, and experimenting with a lot of different digital tools in order to create their final project as to how they envision it did alter the traditional classroom environment. Just seeing how motivated many students were in demonstrating their newly learned language skills and the stories they crafted using digital images and photos helped convince me that indeed the use of digital storytelling is an authentic task that constructs meaning, translating one's thinking to experience and allowing a more interdisciplinary project-based assessment.

On students creative thinking

The student-produced stories suggest that students were encouraged to think more deeply about the meaning of the topic or storyline and personalize characters in order to incorporate cultural dimensions of the language in the stories, allowing different points of view and unconventional characters to be revealed in the process of executing the language. Students created their own concepts which

Table 3. *Sample of linguistic scenarios created by students*

Three classmates in Mandarin namely Stephanie, Patricia and Angela had a slight disagreement while they were shopping for a birthday gift. It was only resolved when they asked the birthday celebrant's opinion on what she likes and it also turned out that they remember the wrong date of the celebrant's birthday.

Two boys were introduced to Chelsea, a half Chinese, half Canadian girl. These two boys like this same girl and were trying to win the girls' heart by showing off and acting out in front of the girl. In the end, it turn out that the girl has a boyfriend already and he happens to be the brother .of the one who introduced Chelsea to the two boys

Being a new student in the campus, Jocelyn had to ask around where the student canteen is located, she also ask helped in locating the library and getting herself an ID, as well as how to get the books she needs for her class. While she was searching for these new places, she met a lot of comedy errors that landed her in the principals' office.

Marlon invited Marina and Jed to have dinner and watch Beijing Opera Saturday night. After the show, they all went out together to have beer and they talked about what makes Beijing opera unique to watch, however, the conversation of Jed and Marlon went intense since they were already drunk. Good thing Marina is there to the rescue.

Sehpong asked the help of his dormmate Turdy to accompany him to the doctor because he has a bad cough, continuous headache and is feeling cold. Sehpong was confronted on whether to take Chinese medicine or western medicine while in the doctor's clinic.

On students' reflections

All the groups were also required to hand in a written reflection on their experience in doing this DST project. It is significant that all them made mention of enjoying the process of creating the project using DST and majority of the answers made mention that knowing they will eventually record their works using DST encouraged them to practice more on their oral delivery skills, particularly their

pronunciation and intonation. Some expressed that the project gave them a sense of “ownership” for their learning; some also mentioned that it “empowers” them and put them “in charge” of their progress. A student mentioned that “recording our voices allowed us to listen to ourselves and to discover our major pronunciation problems, therefore allowing us the opportunity to redo our lines, and in the process acknowledging our errors.” However, there were four students who made mention that using DST and incorporating the target language was too time-consuming and they prefer doing the communication as role-play in class. Overall, students were aware that in order to create the video they had to do a lot of editing which might require revising written production in order to correct a mistake. They also admitted to looking for some new words in the internet which they feel they needed to use in their scripts. Many groups mentioned how this project gave them the opportunity to get to know their classmates better while discussing their thoughts and ideas as a group which they found as something positive.

Analyses of Survey data

When all the data from oral and written survey have been gathered, I analyzed the data by searching for patterns and looking further into the meaning behind words and sentences given. Analysis of a data is to a large extent about organizing the text material, searching for patterns and looking for the meaning behind the words

(Kvale, 1997). I also used theme-based analysis to structure the data gathered in the survey and look further for the meaning. I established three themes after carefully reading through students' original comments as they appeared in the surveys.

Table 4. *Results of theme-based analysis*

Theme	Meaning
Motivation	What drives them to do the DST project
Knowledge	How respondents interpret their learning
DST as foreign language learning tool	Positive and negative impressions using DST

Given the three themes I created, further categories are needed to properly analyze responses given related to motivation. Based on the respondents' answers, I see that five categories can be created based on students' response that is associated with the theme of motivation. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) point to motivation as something that cannot be observed directly, but is linked to a feeling or an experience towards specific tasks and situations (p. 11). Below is a table of student statements and how I categorize them.

Table 4.1. *Meaning categorization for the theme “motivation”*

Sample statements	Motivation Category
I feel more confident after I finish the DST project because I see that I can speak in Mandarin.	Self accomplishment
I need to do good in this final project because my written test is not that high	Receiving good grades
I feel happy working with my group because it didn’t feel like we are working for our final project, everyone is cooperative	Peer inspiration
I am inspired to learn more about different tools in the market related to digital storytelling	Working with DST
I feel happy that I can see myself speaking the language in the video because I heard before that it is difficult to learn to speak Mandarin	Self confidence

Table 4.2 shows student responses wherein I place them under the theme of knowledge. Students build their knowledge by interpreting and finding meaning in things and lessons presented to them. Whether it is related to skill building, new word learning, content analysis or context understanding, all these seemingly new things are

categories of knowledge that I deduced from students' responses in the survey. Below is the table on how I categorize each of them.

Table 4.2. *Meaning categorization for the theme “knowledge”*

Sample statements	Knowledge category
For me, I learn a lot of new words with this project because we have a complicated scene	Learning new information
I discover that the grammar of my classmate is wrong and I was able to say the correct lines, I feel happy I am the only one who got it correctly	Able to differentiate right from wrong Transfer of learning
I learn that I have to be careful with my tones so that I don't keep on repeating my sentence	Developing oral skills
I am able to use up a lot of the words we learn in class which I can use every now and then	Remembering details

A portion in the survey relates to the impact of DST in foreign language learning. It aims to see the impact of DST in improving the four skills of language learning (oral skills, reading skills, listening skills and writing skills) as well as engaging 21st century students in ICT. Below are sample statements extracted from the survey that

relates to the use of digital storytelling as a Mandarin language learning tool.

Sample statements	DST as foreign language tool
For me, the most important learning I had is that I was able to practice speaking in Mandarin a lot of times. I can hear what is wrong with my tone because it is recorded.	Oral skills
Good thing that I can pause and take time to practice my lines before my classmates had me act it out and record it and place it in the video, better than if I perform in class on the spot	Oral skills
I feel that my talent for writing was unleashed because we had the best plot, however, I feel that I need to look at my notes so many times to help me put the mandarin sentences together, tiring but we finish good	Written skills
I was able to practice my digital skills when I edit our story. DST is a good way to develop my creativity and love for technology. I really enjoyed our final project.	Digital skills
I have to read my lines over and over because we have to memorize it or else it won't look good. I don't like memorizing a lot but I like the process of choosing photos and putting it in the digital story file.	Reading skills Digital skills

Conclusion

It is clear that we now cater to the 21st century students or the “digital natives.” As educators, we need to use tools and approaches that have relevance to them. Learning a foreign language such as Mandarin, by using a communicative method and incorporating a media platform like that of digital storytelling (DST), does capitalize on the potentials of students of today by enhancing their language skills and allowing them to exercise their creative ability and higher order thinking skills. Many benefits are seen based on student reflection as they take pride in their finished projects especially when their efforts are projected on screens or uploaded on websites for their peers to watch. Furthermore, the communicative method of digital storytelling in Mandarin does provide a more meaningful vehicle for assessment, which helps improve the four-skill areas of language competency and serves as synergy that motivates different student learning styles. The educational value of this paper is to encourage other scholars to the use of DST in a communicative approach to generate interest and further engage our digital generation of students.

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