

Empowering Cybernetic English Storytelling Activities for High School Students In Indonesia

Erikson Saragih
erikson.saragih@unprimdn.ac.id
English Education Department
Universitas Prima Indonesia

Abstract

Storytelling is one of the most common activities used in teaching English proficiency to language students. It is widely accepted as a teaching technique by many educators because it engages students in learning. This study seeks to examine students' readiness in using technology-aided applications in telling their stories. It also investigates how cybernetic storytelling could encourage them to communicate more in groups. This qualitative study involved 35 secondary school students, selected based on purposive sampling technique, from a multi-ethnic secondary school in Indonesia. After having initial exposure to cybernetic storytelling video production, the students were divided into small groups and required to engage in developing a cybernetic storytelling video for a period of 90 days using the English language. While engaging in the activity, students were expected to communicate orally in face-to-face meetings and in writing using WhatsApp (WA) and Facebook (FB) platforms. Their WA and FB entries were compiled and analyzed thematically besides interview responses which were collected during the group interview. The findings point to how technology aided language learning could be a strong support in enhancing students' English communication skills.

Keywords: Empowering, Cyberneted, Storytelling

1. Introduction

Storytelling has emerged over the last few decades as a powerful teaching and learning activity that engages both teachers and students. There are also numerous studies on how storytelling helps to enhance the learning attitude and motivation of students (Burns & Snow, 1999; Lee, 2012; Meskill, 2005). However, in Indonesian high schools, little attention has been paid to how storytelling, with the help of cyber or online social network, could be used to enhance students' language proficiency and the communication skills inside as well as outside the classroom. Classroom teaching in Indonesia is characterized by the teacher-centered approach, with drills and chalk-and-talk methods being the most common. "Drilling using past-year examination questions, work sheets, and exercise books" (Ambigapathy, 2002, p.16) leaves little room to practice oral communication in class environment.

Since communication terrain has changed dramatically over the last decade, the mode of storytelling has evolved from digital to 'cybernetic storytelling'. The term 'cybernetic' is introduced in this study. The word, 'cyber' can be denoted as computer-generated setting in the Internet environment. Based on WordNet 3.0, Farlex by the Princeton University (2012), the term 'cybernetic' means "to control a function, process, or creation by a computer". As a focus of this research,

cybernetic storytelling means storytelling which does not only use the digital form to tell stories but also has students collaborate via popular networking sites such as Facebook as well as internet-based communication platforms such as WhatsApp.

Storytelling has long been used as one of the learning styles to enhance language learning among students. Mehrnaz (2013) cited a few research studies that combined storytelling and class activities. He emphasized that teachers have been using storytelling to promote communication skills (Barker & Gower, 2010; Pennington et al., 2003; Robin, 2006; Sadik, 2008), encourage critical thinking (Browne & Keeley, 2007; Forneris et al., 2009); obtain good academic achievement (Henning et al., 2005; Shiva & Moosa, 2015) and foster learners' motivation (McDrury & Alterio, 2003). Considering these benefits, teachers are eager to adopt this approach in language teaching (Blas & Paolini, 2013; Dreon et al., 2011; Ohler, 2013).

Storytelling could also inspire students to learn English. Friday (2014) found a great number of benefits for classroom teaching. In his studies, he concluded that (a) stories are distinctively part of everyday experience, in any language. Hence storytelling is a common endeavor to connect between world cultures, regardless of literacy rates. (b) In storytelling, students convey their messages effortlessly, thereby assisting the development of their communication skills. (c) When their friends appreciate the stories that they presented, students' self-esteem and confidence level are boosted. (d) Learners have the liberty to take charge of their learning and make language errors, hence allowing them to discover the language on their own.

Past studies into the benefits of using social network and internet based communication are abundant. Ratcham and Firpo (2011) said that learning can be enhanced, as communication using the platforms is less stressful than in a classroom environment (Ibrahim & Khalid 2014). Besides that, students' writing performance can be improved by using Facebook as a platform for collaborative writing. As for usage of WhatsApp, a study was conducted by Yeboah and Ewur (2014) indicated that the students preferred using the application for communication.

2. The Research Method

This study explores whether cybernetic storytelling is accepted or rejected by students when it is introduced in the classroom. Not many teachers and students have been exposed to cybernetic storytelling although they have experienced using social networking sites for other purposes.

The participants of this study were thirty-five students in a high school in Medan, Indonesia. The students came from multiracial backgrounds. Most of the students communicated with one another in English as the language is widely spoken at school and at home. They were briefed on how to go about preparing the storytelling video in a workshop, as shown in Figure 1.

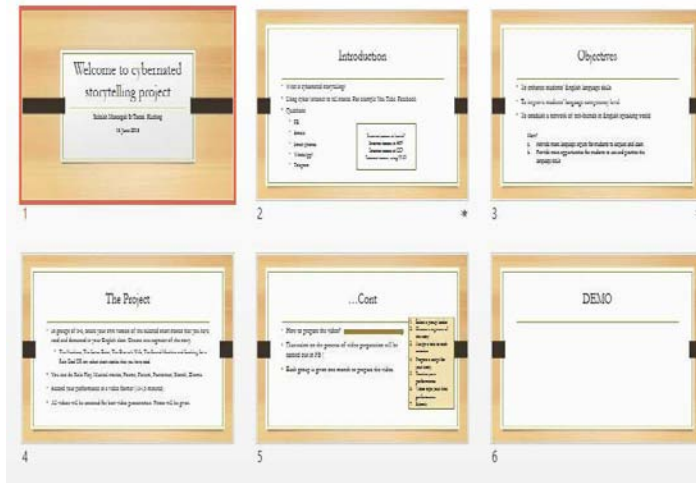


Figure 1. The Process of Cybernatic Storytelling

Finally, the students were briefed on the discussion platforms, WA and FB, which they would be engaged in during the study period. These two platforms were created for closed group only. In WA platform, they would participate in a discussion facilitated by the researcher. That discussion focused on the process they engaged in throughout the activity. FB, on the other hand, featured a discussion among the students about their video project. Students shared pictures of their activities. They would also uploaded preliminary videos to FB for their group members to preview and comment on. Once the group members were satisfied with the video, they uploaded final copies for evaluation. Then, the students were interviewed to determine their perception of the activities. Data from the audio taped interview were transcribed and later coded, as illustrated in Figure 2. The coding is used for each student's responses from the interviews.

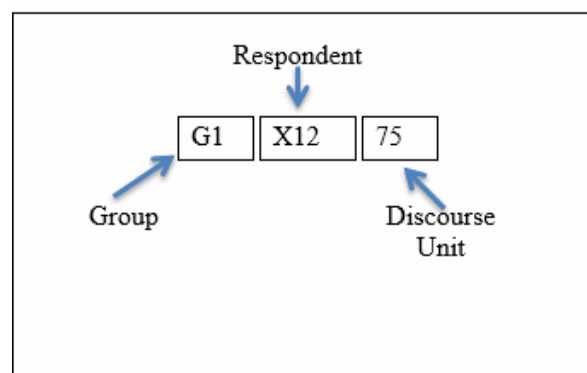


Figure 2: Coding identifier for students

Findings

This study was conducted to determine how much students know about storytelling, to what extent they engaged in it, and how they view it. As the interview responses were extended and detailed, they were organized into several categories so that the results were more comprehensible and relevant to the study. The thematic categories are concept of storytelling, storytelling as class and school activities,

students' views in storytelling activities and students' understanding of cybernetic storytelling. Table 1 lists the themes of the interviewed responses.

Table 1. Themes derived from students' interviews

Themes (semi-structured interviews)

- 4.1 Concept of storytelling
 - 4.2 Storytelling as class and school activities
 - 4.3 Students' views on storytelling activities
 - 4.4 Students' understanding of cybernetic storytelling
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The concept of storytelling

When the students were asked about their understanding of storytelling, all of them were able to describe it well although with some variations. It was not difficult for them to explain what storytelling is all about as most of them have had some experiences with it.

G1:X6: 4 made a comment on what a storytelling is:

...telling stories about er...anything.

Student G2: X22:220 added:

We always tell and listen to stories...about what we eat...aaarr...what movies we watched...and many many more....right. I think that's part of storytelling.

Besides everyday stories that they listened to, students also stated that storytelling is a personal experience as they listened to stories from the elderly and friends. Usually, the stories are narrated by their parents and siblings at home for personal reasons.

G1: X2:2 commented that:

When I was small, my mother always...give me...told me bedtime stories, and I like it very much.

G2: X17:248 added:

Stories before I go to sleep...those are stories that I remember.

They are also used to exchange stories among friends, either in classes or outside classes. This sharing of stories is a common phenomenon in social interaction. One of the responses was given by G2: X16:204:

My friends and I always share stories while waiting for parents to fetch us from school

A further addition was made by G2: X29:206

....we share stories in Facebook a lot.

A comment came from G2: X24:204

I'm not sure if gossip is storytelling but....we do that a lot..hihi.

These findings are parallel to the definition of storytelling by Roney (2008) as the act of sharing stories or a series of events, and as a medium of communication. In fact, the students mentioned that families and friends were the ones who usually involved in the storytelling activities.

Briefly, all students know what storytelling is all about. As the students' excerpts showed, they had the knowledge or understanding of what storytelling is. It was defined as an everyday occurrence which they experienced as they were growing up. It can also be added that storytelling activities can bridge not only the world of the classroom and home but also the classroom and the world beyond. This is because stories provide a common thread that can help unite families and can improve relationship between teachers and their students.

Storytelling as class and school activities

Unlike storytelling outside the classroom, storytelling activities in the classroom are carried out by teachers mostly for learning purposes. In fact, such activities are more focused. Most of the storytelling activities, whether narrated by the teachers or shared by the classmates, are linked to language practice and communication enhancement. This has been mentioned by Fredericks (1997), who argued that storytelling as part of class activity can promote speaking as well as listening skills. This is further illustrated by the tasks mentioned by the students during the interviews, including role play in forms of short sketches, dramas, or stage performances which were all conducted as class and school activities. Below are some illustrations mentioned by the students regarding storytelling activities conducted in class and at the school level.

G1: X1:12 commented:

...as presentation in class...

A further illustration of the activity was made by G1: X1:10

When I was in form one, my teacher made sure...aaa..we have storytelling session..I think every Friday before class began..that was very interesting.

Another excerpt taken from the interview from G2: X17:230

Storytelling and...and plus acting in front of the class. We had that a lot earlier year..and yes, that was exciting. Hmm...Yeah, we practice a lot for the sketch.

More class activities were conducted as mentioned by G2: X13:210

Our English teacher...eerr asked us to prepare short sketch for our class activities based on our short story we learned when we were in form three. We had fun!

Another example of a storytelling activity was conducted by the teacher herself. Even though the example given was not from a language class, it can be seen that teachers who teach other subjects, besides English, found storytelling to

be effective for the students.

As told by G2: X16:238:

My History teacher...mmm would give us mmmm a lot of historical stories class. We thought that it was storytelling with benefits.

While storytelling is popular as a class activity, as gathered from the interviews with the students, these language activities conducted during class hours were only viewed by classmates and the teacher. School activities, however, are mostly events conducted involving a larger audience, for instance, a storytelling competition during 'English Day' or storytelling presentations during 'Teachers' Day'. Specifically on the English Day, the school runs a storytelling competition in which students would go on the stage to present their storytelling individually or in a small group during the morning assembly.

This was mentioned by G2: X26:218 during the interview:

A storytelling competition where a student will tell a story during assembly.

To add, G1: X1:14 also indicated her participation in a storytelling activity:

I remember AA when me in primary school, we had a storytelling competition in school. Haa..of course, my class win..eh won..

Besides competition, the students were also involved in activities conducted in school level. As mentioned by G2: X22:222:

...is giving a summary of a book that we have read part of storytelling? Yes? Then we did that a lot during Minggu membaca (Reading week). We had to present some more..

When engaged in video-making activities in small groups, students practice their English language to improve their competency, increase self-confidence, and develop their personal talents. Other students who observe the storytelling presentations acquire new vocabulary, sentence structures, pronunciation of words, and intonation of voice projections. Students reported that they enjoyed watching their friends' presentations. This was clear in statements obtained during the interviews. A student, G2: X14:228, was delighted to watch her friends' presentations as she could get some clues on how to present well. According to her:

I enjoyed watching my friends...aarr when they are presenting in front. I can learn a lot from the presentations. Like what? How to present, their words...

In summary, when asked about class storytelling, almost all of the students mentioned that they have experienced and learned from it. This substantiates the teachers' recognition of the benefits of storytelling activities to their students.

Students' views on storytelling activities

From the interviews carried out, it was evident that the majority of the students appreciated the fact that they managed to participate in storytelling activities whenever their teachers conducted the activities throughout their school years. When students were asked how they viewed storytelling as a whole, they expressed

their eagerness and enthusiasm about engaging in storytelling activities. They stated that they enjoyed the storytelling activities and felt that they were beneficial to them. In most cases, the students appreciated the fact that they were able to participate in the storytelling activities which helped to boost their self-confidence, improve their attitude toward the language, and enhance their language skills. The students were asked to give their views on what they thought of the storytelling activities that they were involved at school during the interview.

G1: X12:24 had this to say:

We students enjoy acting (storytelling) in front of the class Yes...true...scared at the beginning but...but...I practiced a lot...and..and...after the presentation...ahhh..it felt like aahhhhh...I want to do it again.

Another comment akin to the earlier comment came from X2: X14:226

As for me..kan...I was actually a very shy person when I was in the lower form, but then my Bahasa teacher forced me to participate in the storytelling competition...since then kan...no turning back.

It is clear that students relished participation in class storytelling activities. The next question that was asked was whether the students managed to get benefits from participating in these activities. The first response was from G2: X15:23, who mentioned that she managed to get some benefits from observing her friends' presentation:

You know what? Aaa when I listened to my friends, I also got a lot of things like how to pronounce some words, how to be brave talking in front of other people hihi and many more.

Other students immediately added to the points regarding the gains of the storytelling activities. G1: X12:22 claimed that:

I think.. especially since ..aa..when we tell a story mean we talk in front of others...I mean arr that helps a lot arr my confidence when presenting.

Another addition came from G2: X19:242

I remember when I was in form two, my English teacher had a storytelling writing competition. We sure did improve our English!

G1: X1:18 made another comment on how her involvement in the storytelling activity developed her language skill:

I have this favorite teacher when I was in year 6..He likes to tell stories..which we kinda enjoyed.Aahhh what I want to say is that when he told the stories and there are some words I don't know, we will find the words in the dictionary. I think I learned a lot of new words from his stories.

Students also talked about the effects storytelling had on them personally. The following comment was taken from a WA platform ST3 (Storytelling Group 3):

04/07/2017, 14:20 - Mawar: Hi girls! What's going on this weekend?ðŸ˜ƒ

04/07/2017, 14:26 - Linda: We are going to do the video next week...because one of our friend went to Siantar...so we need to do it next week..ðŸ˜ƒ

04/07/2015, 14:34 - Mawar: That sounds great! Next week should be ok.

04/07/2017, 14:34 - Linda: ðŸ˜ƒ ðŸ˜ƒ ðŸ˜ƒ

04/07/2017, 14:35 - Mawar: While waiting for next week to come,I have a question for you to ponder today.

04/07/2015, 14:36 - Linda: Oh..sure...

04/07/2017, 14:38 - Mawar: What do you think of storytelling activities? Have any you participated in any? And did you get any benefits from it?

4/07/2015, 19:01 - Linda: Hello, Ms. Mawar,I did! It was an awesome experience. I learnt a lot

4/07/2015, 19:02 - Mawar: Great! Like what?

Figure 3. Excerpts from ST3 conversation via WA regarding storytelling as school activities

The analysis of the WA chat (see Figure 3 above) paralleled analysis of the interviews. Students spoke of the benefits of 'English Day' which was organized by the English society of the school. It seemed that the school had a clear plan for polishing the students' English language proficiency and communication skills.

In short, the students appreciated the fact that they were able to participate in the storytelling activities as the activities appeared to help them improve themselves academically and at the same time, boost their self-confidence. The students also indicated that they had enjoyed the activities and found them fun but challenging.

Students' understanding of cybernetic storytelling

The definition of conventional storytelling was clearly understood by the students as discussed above. However, their understanding of the meaning of cybernetic storytelling is still undetermined. When asked during the interview if they could elaborate their understanding, most students were able to do so. G2: X15:78 commented that:

I think ok it's the same ok like storytelling but somebody tell the story in the internet.

G1: X9:16 made a similar comment:

Just like digital storytelling...aarr...but like using internet.

Another comment that is parallel to the earlier comment came from G1: X13:18:

This you know..arr.. kind of storytelling can be seen in FB or You Tube

G1: X3:20 continued the discussion by adding:

I kinda like storytelling using cyber because it is more interesting

From the excerpts shown above, it can be seen that the majority of the students could interpret the meaning of 'cybernetic'. They also acknowledged that they found cybernetic storytelling interesting, and they liked it. Only a few students replied that they were not aware of the term 'cybernetic'. For instance, G2: X10:216 stated that:

I am not sure when it comes to cybernetic...eerr never heard the word before

Another comment was made by G2: X12:223 as follows:

What? Cyber? What is that?

However, when probed further, they could grasp the meaning of the term 'cybernetic' eventually. In short, most of the students were actually in-the-know regarding the term 'cybernetic' as they could relate to what they have experienced or involved in their everyday class activities.

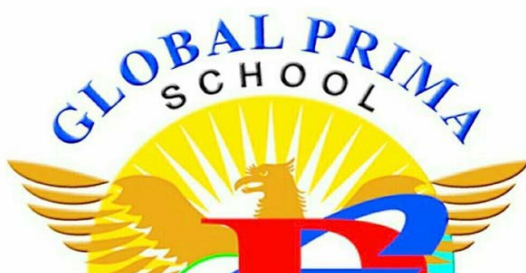




Figure 4: Screen shots of students' videos

3. Discussion

As transpires from the findings of the present study, the students seemed to have a good knowledge of what storytelling is, in terms of conventional/traditional, digital and cyber. Most of them had to a certain extent experienced it or been involved in all types of storytelling activities. Initially, students varied in their descriptions of storytelling i.e., retelling of a story, bedtime story as well as gossip. Although Friday (2014) defined storytelling as many things, i.e., “the story of your day, the story of your life, workplace gossip, and the horrors on the news”, this research found that there were two types of storytelling: one is informal, narrated in leisure mode for non-academic purpose; while the other is formal, a more classroom-based activity for academic purposes.

It was learned that the students who were involved in the cybernetic storytelling task found it to be very interesting. This is parallel to the study conducted in Rice University’s School Literacy and Culture Project, where the respondents also mentioned that they found storytelling interesting and they discovered that involvement in storytelling activities helped improve their English literacy (McCraig, 2013, Roziana et al. 2016). The study also demonstrated that students enjoyed storytelling activities, akin to a study conducted by McCraig (2013). When a storytelling activity is put into the learning context, especially when the activity brings some kind of reward, students are motivated to engage and participate fully. Students enjoyed this non-threatening activity as they had no fear of making mistakes in their speeches among their own group members. Typically, multiple skills were highlighted as factors affecting students’ participation and communication delivery. The factors highlighted are comparable to Robin’s (2008) research, which discussed the 21st century skills important for student development.

Based on the analysis of the interview responses, students proved to be aware of the benefits that they acquired from participating in the storytelling activities. Their understanding of the differences between storytelling at home and

in class was nothing new. However, they were aware that in the classroom the language used was more formal and academic. They understood that the narrative language in storytelling organized by the class should be more structured and formal. This corroborates the findings of Friday (2014), who discovered vast benefits of storytelling for classroom teaching. In most of storytelling activities conducted in class, students expressed the stories as naturally conducted, hence were able to enhance and polish up their language proficiency as well as communication skills. Students in this study felt that they had more freedom to take risks and make mistakes, thus enabling them to explore the language on their own creatively. Similarly, Eisner (2007) and Idrus (2012) found that when their students were allowed to share their stories outside of the traditional form, they tended to develop greater creativity. On top of that all, Mehrnaz (2013) mentioned that “storytelling is an effective means of creative expression, as people can organize their thoughts and make sense of the world through creating a story” (p. 8).

Moreover, when engaging in cybernated storytelling activities, students were found to be more interested and motivated. As 21st century learners, they were more inclined to do activities related to the Internet. Technological gadgets are entertainment to them. When these gadgets were used in an appropriate context of learning, students might find learning fun, thus, the technologies offered useful benefits for the learning process. Similar conclusion was reached by earlier studies, those of Boster et al. (2004), Hibbing and Rankin-Erikson (2003) & Williams (2011), who found comparable related outcome of the advantages of storytelling with the addition of technology and the Internet.

4. Conclusion

It can be deduced that all types of storytelling contributed to numerous benefits to students. As Robin (2008) mentioned storytelling enhances multiple communication skills and engages students as well as teachers in activities pertaining to improving language. Consideration of comprehensible input as mentioned by Krashen (2009) in his SLA theory is relevant in this context. Students’ language ability can be enhanced when language input is comprehensible. Whether input is comprehensible or not depends on the context of the language being used. In this cybernated video storytelling project, language input was relevant and meaningful as it was employed in a specific context.

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