Short Stories via Computers in EFL Classrooms: An Empirical Study for Reading and Writing Skills

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ABSTRACT

The present empirical study scrutinizes the use of short stories via computer technologies in teaching and learning English language. The objective of the study is two-fold: to examine how short stories could be used through computer programs in teaching and learning English and to collect data about students' perceptions of this technique via semi-structured face-to-face interview. In the scope of the present study, three different computer programs (Jing, Screencast, and Instant Messaging) and three short stories (A Dead Woman's Secret by Guy de Maupassant, Eveline by James Joyce, Hills like White Elephants by Ernest Hemingway) were used in order to shed light on the aforementioned objectives. During this approximately three-month long study, 35 ELT students studying at a state university in Turkey carried out a number of pre-reading/writing, while-reading/writing, and post-reading/writing activities and tasks suggested by different scholars in the field. The content analysis of the 12 semi-structured interviews revealed that the implementation of short stories through computers in language classrooms have some very positive effects on learners' language learning process: drawing attention, raising curiosity, cooperation and giving/receiving feedback, improving reading and writing skills, and increasing L2 motivation.

INTRODUCTION

The use of computers and literary texts (referring to short stories in the present study) for improving reading and writing skills in English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) has drawn robust attention in recent years. In the light of this interest, a variety of tasks and activities have been devised in order to incorporate these two tools in second/foreign language (L2) teaching and learning. It is salient through the studies conducted that short stories (Erkaya, 2005; Collie & Slater, 2001; Birlik & Salli-Copur, 2007) and computers (Zhao & Frank, 2003; Lee, 2006; Hult, Kalaja, Lassila, & Lehtisalo, 1990) can each create an encouraging and motivating atmosphere for ESL and EFL learners to better improve their reading and writing skills. However, there has been limited attention to the integration of short stories into computers in teaching reading and writing skills.

The present article introduces some tasks and activities (pre-, while-, and post-reading/writing) designed around the use of three computer programs (Jing, Screencast, and Instant Messaging Programs) with three short stories (A Dead Woman's Secret by Guy de Maupassant, Eveline by James Joyce, *Hills like White Elephants* by Ernest Hemingway) in order to teach reading and writing skills. The article also presents learners' reactions toward this new technique via semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 students.

A SHORT BACKGROUNG TO THE STUDY

Literary Texts for Developing L2 Reading and Writing Skills

Literary texts serve quite effectively to improve learners' reading skills and vocabulary knowledge. For example, a study conducted by Lao and Krashen (2000) at a university in Hong Kong found that students who read literary texts showed more improvement in vocabulary and reading than those who read nonliterary texts. In another study by Tse (1996), students were assigned two novels in addition to four other novels that they decided on as a group. No direct language instruction was done and the class time was devoted to discussions about the books and reading strategies. Students showed positive reactions to this application because they reported an improvement in their confidence and an increase in their enthusiasm about continuing to read in English.

There are also a number of studies that highlight the positive impact of the use of short stories on writing skills. For instance, Murdoch (2002) contends that low-level learners can be asked to write short dialogues or describe one of the characters in the story in order to foster their writing skills. He also asserts that by using short stories, intermediate-level language learners can write some dialogues and act them out, allowing them to augment their writing skills. As for learners with a high language proficiency level, he suggests that they can be assigned more complex writing tasks such as writing a new ending to the story. In a similar vein, literary texts can also be used to teach language learners how to write a text from different perspectives by utilizing different registers in their tasks. For example, in a study by Birlik and Salli-Copur (2007), the learners were asked to write three different letters to (a) an advice column (the agony aunt) of a well-known newspaper, (b) a friend, and (c) a lawyer from the view of a character in the story, who asks for advice after her ex-fiancé is reported missing. With this particular activity, learners had the opportunity to practice different registers by varying the people to whom they wrote the letters, thus enabling learners to enhance their writing competence.

Computers for Developing L2 Reading and Writing Skills

Computers can have an enormous impact on reading skills through the vast array of materials they provide for reading and in the way they present these materials. Using the Internet, learners at any language level can get access to a huge number of authentic reading texts to foster their reading skills. Computer software programs also enable reading texts to be presented via a wide combination of multimedia aids such as sound, graphics, photographs, animation, video, direct links and references to dictionaries or glossaries in order to enable better comprehension (Kledecka-Nadera, 2001). Kledecka-Nadera further states that text manipulation programs provide various activities for language learners, and these activities encourage learners to develop an insight into the target language by helping them become actively involved in reading texts. All of these computer technologies advance learners' reading skills by allowing the target language to come alive to learners who perceive it as a distant abstraction (Warschauer & Healey, 1998).

Computers contribute to writing skills substantially as well because they offer various software programs that can be utilized either asynchronously or synchronously for improving writing skills (Ferris, 2002). For instance, since e-mails provide learners with a stress-free environment in order to practice what they have learned in the classroom, they increase learners'

motivation to write (Warschauer, Turbee, & Roberts, 1996; Warschauer & Healey, 1998; Sullivian & Pratt, 1996). Another major contribution of computers to writing skill development is to address challenges presented by the transcription process, including handwriting or typing, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, formatting, editing, and so forth (Parette & Peterson-Karlan, 2007). In that sense, Dalton and Hannafin (1987) and MacArthur (1988) maintain that electronic writing tools such as word processors, word prediction and word cueing programs, style analyzers, synthesized speech programs, and spell checkers provide both a conventional resource for composing, recording, and printing learners' writing and a vehicle via which writing can be analyzed, reviewed, edited, and improved. Similarly, Warschauer and Healey (1998) add that electronic tools and online dictionaries, both translating ones and monolingual ones, contribute to the writing process immensely. Language learners can also compose very creative texts through the use of visuals, which provide opportunities for learners to construct their own learning experiences pertaining to writing skill. In that aspect, there are several studies which indicate the positive impact of pictures, graphs, maps, and tables on the recall and retention of information (ChanLin, 2000). Bartoletti (2008) contends that learners are able to concentrate on meaning, reorganize and classify similar ideas easily, and make better use of their visual memory through the information represented spatially and visually, and therefore they feel quite motivated to write more often and improve their writing skills.

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

As is obvious in the studies above, short stories and computers have long been used in L2 education. Concerning their use in L2 education, there are numerous studies that shed light on the benefits of those two tools. However, the number of studies that focus on the integration of short stories into computer technologies in L2 education is rather limited. Therefore, the integration of short stories into computer technologies stands as a new research area to be explored. Grounded primarily on the use of qualitative data, the present empirical study tried to fill in this gap in the related literature and cast further light on how literary texts can be integrated into computers in L2 classrooms. The study also investigated learners' perception of this new trend through the use of 12 semi-structured interviews.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted with 35 students studying in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department at a state university in Turkey in 2011-2012. The ELT Department was considered as an appropriate research setting since the teacher-training program pursued in the department included an Advanced Reading and Writing Course, which enabled the application of a variety of reading and writing activities. Of the 35 students who participated in the study, 22 (62.9%) were female and 13 (37.1%) were male. At the time of the study, the students (aged 18-22) had been studying English for more than four years and had passed a very challenging university placement test. Conducted in the computer laboratory of the ELT Department, the study was completed over a period of two and a half months during which the students carried out a number of tasks and activities through the integration of short stories into computers. Of

the 35 students, 12 (seven females and five males) were interviewed in order to shed light on their perceptions related to this novel trend.

Materials

In the present empirical study, three different computer-based programs were used to carry out the activities and tasks designed around three different short stories. The computer programs and the stories used in the study are as follows:

Computer-based Programs

Jing™ is a computer-based program that helps users capture any image or video that they see on their computer monitor. Apart from that, it incorporates a number of features enabling users to add some other elements to what they have captured, such as texts, arrows, highlighting, and frames.

Screencast.com™ is a media hosting solution that enables users to create an account where they can upload and share their recordings or documents with other users, thus facilitating interaction among users.

Screencast.com:

- allows users to save their content as it is, thus preventing compression, loss of quality, and resizing;
- enables users to determine the privacy level of their content;
- allows viewers to comment on each other‘s content;
- returns convenient, small links to users’ content. They are easy to paste or even re-type if someone has to;
- allows users to return embed codes automatically. It enables bloggers or people who want to provide viewers with Jing images or videos right on their site;
- helps users attach files to their content. For example, it enables people to view others’ Jing videos and download an accompanying PDF or ZIP file;
- allows users track the number of times people have viewed their content. Users can even sort by what is most or least popular.
  (cited from http://www.techsmith.com/tutorial-jing-what-is-screencastcom.html)

Instant Messaging programs (MSN, Gmail, and Yahoo) were used in conjunction with Screencast.com to send and receive the links of the recordings that enabled users to access the content shared with them.

The Stories

Three classic short stories chosen by the researcher were used in the study: *A Dead Woman’s Secret* by Guy de Maupassant, *Eveline* by James Joyce, and *Hills like White Elephants* by Ernest Hemingway. The selection of those stories was based on the following three main criteria posited by Nuttall (1996):

- The stories were assumed to attract the participants’ interest and attention as the topics pertain to real-life events and are relevant to the participants’ lives.

- The length of the stories was considered appropriate for the predetermined period of time for each one, preventing the students from a feeling of burden or boredom.
- The stories were deemed to be at an optimum level of language difficulty in terms of linguistic features and the number of unknown words.

Sample Computer Tutorial

Before reading the stories and carrying out the activities ascribed to them, the students received a one-week tutorial to learn how to use the computer-based programs introduced above. In the tutorial, students learned how to:

- download the program to the computers
- use the program to capture images and videos
- add texts, colors, arrows, or highlighting to the pictures
- save the pictures and videos
- create an account in "screencast"
- share the pictures and videos through their "screencast" accounts, and place the links of recordings in an e-mail (Author, Year).

Reading and Writing Activities

After the tutorial, the students read the three short stories and carried out the activities and tasks ascribed to them; however, since it is not possible to present all those tasks and activities in this article, only one of the stories (*A Dead Woman's Secret*) will be focused on in order to illustrate how short stories can be integrated into computers in teaching reading and writing skills. The activities and tasks concerned with the stories were adapted from those suggested by different authors in the field (Wallace, 1992; Lazar, 1993; Collie & Slater, 1987; Cunningsworth, 1984) and were categorized into three main stages: pre-reading/writing, while-reading/writing, and post-reading/writing.

Pre-Reading/Writing Activities

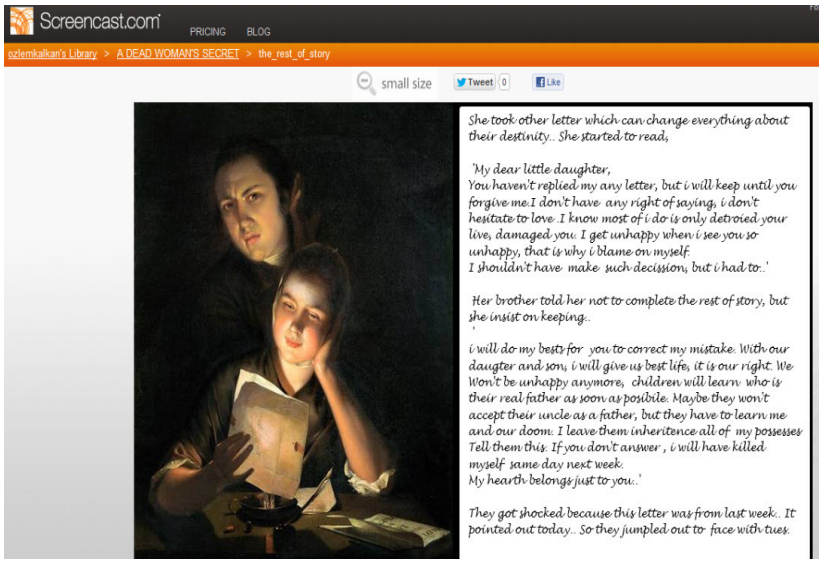
At the beginning of the study, the teacher sent the story to the students' "screencast" accounts via using his own "screencast" account. At the pre-reading stage, the students were given a *brainstorming and predicting* activity in which they were asked to read the title of the story and utter anything related to the title. Later, they searched on the Internet to find a picture related to what they thought about the title of the story. After finding a picture, they were asked to prepare a cover for the story by using *Jing*^{TM} and share it with each other through their "screencast" accounts (see Figure 1 for a sample cover prepared by one of the participants).

Figure 1. A Sample Cover Prepared by One of the Students

While-Reading/Writing Activities

At the while-reading stage, the students read the story on their computer screen until the part specified by the teacher, and then were given two activities. First, they did a *predicting and previewing* activity in which they tried to predict the rest of the story, find an appropriate picture or video related to what thought, capture it via "Jing", and then add text to it via the features of "Jing." Later, they were asked to share their recordings with their friends and make comments on the ones they received (see Figure 2 for a sample image).

Figure 2. A Sample Image for the Rest of the Story

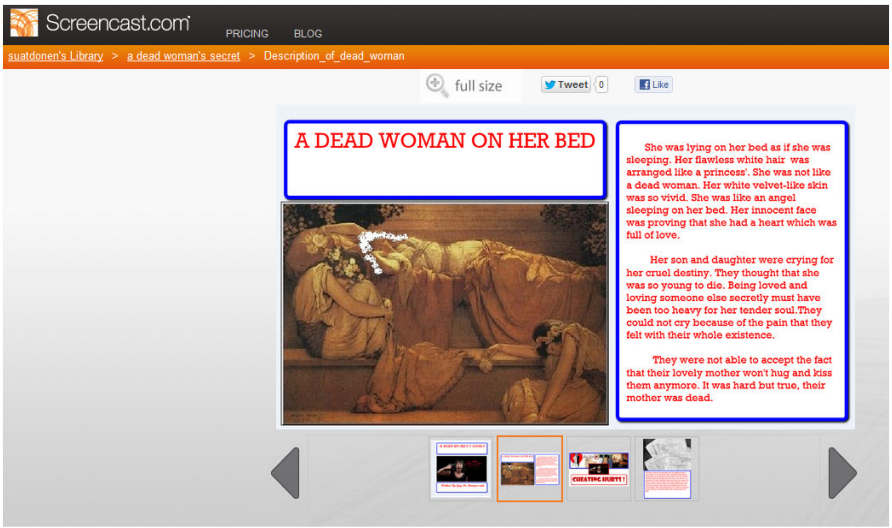


In the second activity, the students read the rest of the story and then talked in groups about the similarities and differences between the real ending of the story and the ending they had written.

Post-Reading/Writing Activities

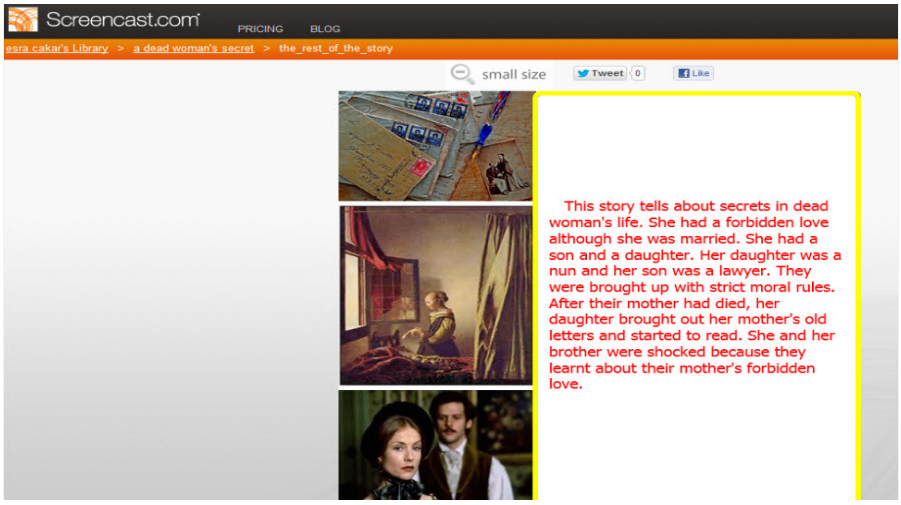
At the post-reading stage, the students carried out two different activities: describing the protagonist and summarizing the story. In the former activity, they were asked to scan the story and find all the expressions used to describe the protagonist, namely the *Dead Woman.* Basing on those expressions, they were required to find an appropriate picture on the Internet, capture it through "Jing", describe the picture by using the expressions scanned in the story, and then share their recordings with each other via their "screencast" account. They were also asked to make comments on each other's contents (see Figure 3 for a sample image prepared by one of the participants).

Figure 3. A Sample Description of the *Dead Woman*



In the latter activity, the students were asked to skim the story and write a summary of it via integrating a picture or video captured by "Jing" into their summaries. Afterwards, the students shared their recordings with each other through their "screencast" accounts and made comments on the contents they received (see Figure 4 for a sample image prepared by one of the participants).

Figure 4. A Sample Summary Prepared by One of the Students



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Previous studies on the integration of literature into computers report a number of benefits to students (Ohler, 2008; Ware & Warschauer, 2005). These benefits are suggested as: increasing L2 motivation of learners (particularly struggling readers and writers), allowing for personal practice and individualized learning, and promoting learner autonomy in the process of L2 teaching and learning (Lee, 2004; Chen, 2005; Chiu, 2008; Elliott, 1990; Lazar, 1993). The analysis of the 12 semi-structured interview yielded similar findings to those stated above. First, all the interviews were transcribed and then analyzed through content analysis. The common points stated by the students were coded in order to cast light on students' opinions related to the integration of short stories into computers in reading and writing skills (see Table 1).

Table 1. Content Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews (N = 12)

Codes		Frequency
1	Drawing Attention	12
2	Raising Curiosity	12
3	Enabling Cooperation	10
4	Giving/Receiving Feedback	9
5	Improving Reading and Writing Skills	12
6	Increasing L2 Motivation	11

Detailed information of those points identified through the content analysis of the 12 semi-structured is presented in the following parts along with the related literature.

Drawing Attention and Raising Curiosity

In response to the question "What do you think about the use of short stories through computers in language learning?" students noted that using short stories through computers in L2 learning attracted their attention and raised their curiosity.

> In fact, this must be something new. I think this will be something very useful because computers attract a great deal of attention. I believe that they can attract even more attention if short stories are incorporated into them. (Interviewee 1)

> I think the integration of short stories in to computers makes the activity more enjoyable and raises more curiosity, and also encourages us to think creatively. Consequently, I consider it very useful. (Interviewee 12)

Cooperation and Receiving/Giving Feedback

When students were asked their opinions on sharing activities with other students and the teacher through their "screencast" account, they had positive reactions to this application. They emphasized the importance of *cooperation* provided through this sharing process since it helped them overcome the problems they had while using the programs and finding appropriate pictures or videos in order to integrate them into their tasks and activities. They also emphasized the importance of *receiving feedback* from their teacher and friends and *giving feedback* to their friends about the recordings they had shared, which allowed interaction among the students. The following quotations explicate the point concerned effectively:

> A network was formed between all of us. I could see and evaluate what my friends had done. Similarly, they could see what I had done and show me my mistakes. This process evoked the feeling of success in me and also helped me overcome my lacks. (Interviewee 5)

> Sharing our recordings with other people was like sharing it with the whole world. I did not have any problems during this sharing process, either. Instead of handing our tasks in traditional paper-based form, we sent them to our teacher in an online environment, and he gave very effective feedbacks to improve our language skills. (Interviewee 9)

In literature related to the use of literary texts and computers in L2 education, there are numerous studies that point out the benefits of these tools in terms of cooperation and feedback (Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Ahmad, Corbett, Rogers, & Sussex, 1985).

Improving Reading and Writing Skills

As for the interview questions that investigated students' opinions related to the contribution of this technique to their reading and writing skills, students reported that this novel technique helped them improve both their reading and writing skills considerably. They pointed out the substantial impact of using short stories via computers on their *creativity* and *desire to write* more effective texts in English. Students noted that since the short stories they read formed authentic contexts for them, they could do more fruitful reading and writing activities. They further maintained that since they had the opportunity to incorporate visuals or videos captured

via "Jing" into their activities and tasks, they were able to produce more creative and visually enhanced texts that would draw their friends' attention to read and make comments on them. The following responses given by the interviewees highlight the significance of these points:

> In the activities, we had the opportunity to integrate visuals into our texts. This made the learning process even more enjoyable. Besides, integrating visuals into language learning enables much more retention; consequently, I liked the way how you integrated computers into our activities. (Interviewee 7)

> This study enabled me to improve my vocabulary knowledge substantially because I read three different stories. It also helped me to make self-evaluations about my studies. Besides, it increased my curiosity to do more reading. (Interviewee 5)

> I learned a lot of vocabulary. The activities that we did also enabled me to improve my creativity. We wrote the end of some stories, answered some questions about the stories etc. by using Jing. They all helped me enhance my creativity and ability to evaluate other people's works. (Interviewee 11)

In line with the responses of the students, there are numerous studies in related literature that suggest similar findings. In the majority of these studies, the substantial impact of using audio and visual aids in L2 learning and teaching is suggested as an outstanding point (Spack, 1985; Alessi & Trollip, 1991). Similarly, the use of short stories and computers can play an important and extensive role in fostering the reading skills (intensive and extensive reading, skimming and scanning, and speed reading) since they can be easily implemented in the area of reading skill due to providing such advantages as contextualized learning, visual aids, sound effects, self-pacing, interactivity, immediate feedback, and so forth (Grellet, 1981; Lao & Krashen, 2000; Lee, 2006). In a study conducted at a university in Hong Kong, Lao and Krashen (2000) present an improvement in learners' reading skill and vocabulary knowledge. There were two groups in the study: a group of students that read literary texts and a second group that read non-literary texts. The comparison between these two groups revealed that the group who read literary texts showed improvement in vocabulary and reading, whereas the second group did not show as much success in reading and vocabulary as the former group did.

Increasing L2 Motivation

In the interviews, students were also asked if there were any changes in their opinions before and after the study. An analysis of the interview question which aimed to highlight the change in the interviewees' emotions and perceptions before and after the study showed a positive change in their opinions. All students participating in the interviews mentioned that they felt rather nervous and anxious at the beginning of the study when they were told that they would carry out language activities and tasks that integrated short stories into computer technologies since it was the first time they would carry out such tasks. However, after receiving a one-week intensive tutorial and doing activities that pursued similar patterns, they felt much more comfortable with the computer-based programs. The following quotations effectively illustrate this point:

> I felt rather nervous because I was not sure whether I could do it and what it would be like. However, once I was introduced the activities and started to do them, I overcame those worries. (Interviewee 10)

> I didn't feel good at the beginning because it was not an application that I was used to. However, after I had practiced, I understood how enjoyable it was since merely reading short stories is not sometimes sufficient enough. I think using activities that encompass utilizing visuals, writing the rest of the story are very effective. (Interviewee 8)

These quotations support the literature findings that shed light on the positive impact of the integration of literary texts into computers. Yeh (2005) describes the way in which PowerPoint and online videos were incorporated into a poetry lesson as well as in students' assignments after the lesson in order to highlight the impact of integrating new technologies into teaching literature in language classrooms. Similarly, Lao and Krashen (2000) note that integrating short stories into computer technologies has positive effects on learners' L2 learning process. They showed the students films of most of the books that the students read, and the students responded positively to this approach.

CONCLUSION

With the rapid developments in the facilities and capabilities of computer technologies, the application of computers in ESL/EFL classrooms has been changing tremendously, and similarly, these developments have been influencing the implementation of other supplementary and integral materials in ESL/EFL classrooms. Particularly, this study points out the benefits of integrating short stories into computer technologies in EFL instruction. As the semi-structured interviews revealed, the implementation of short stories through computers in language classrooms has some very positive effects on L2 learners' reading and writing skills, vocabulary knowledge, creativity, motivation, and so on.

Reading short stories on computer monitors is not exactly the same as reading them via conventional printed texts. It entails some "electronic literacy" skills other than print-based literacy, "the ability to read, write and spell by means of computer" (Kledecka-Nadera, 2001, p. 64). Given the importance of computer skills in locating and communicating information, L2 teachers need to adapt their teaching methods and techniques to assist their students in developing electronic literacy skills such as electronically supported reading, electronically supported writing and electronically supported interaction, particularly in terms of feedback. In this respect, the integration of short stories into computers may help L2 teachers provide students with the opportunity to learn and augment those skills.

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