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# Creating an Effective Model for Digital Storytelling in the ESL Writing Class

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## **Creating an effective model for digital storytelling in the ESL writing class**

### **Abstract**

Using technology in the classroom is no longer the exception but the rule in most college classrooms. Now the question is not whether to use technology, but which technology to use. Among recent innovations is digital storytelling, a multimodal tool that can be used across disciplines. This paper reports on a pilot study designed to determine the feasibility and pedagogical value of using digital storytelling in an ESL writing course at an urban community college. The report documents a detailed plan for implementation and some of the challenges this process presents.

**Key words: digital storytelling, multimodal learning, ESL writing pedagogy, instructional technology**

## **Creating an effective model for digital storytelling in the ESL writing class**

The range of technology available to educators these days can be dizzying and overwhelming. Thus, it behooves us to investigate the potential advantages and disadvantages of employing new technologies before jumping on the proverbial bandwagon. New tools and technology-based approaches may be more or less useful in a given context or discipline. One fairly recent innovation in instructional technology is the use of *digital storytelling*, which seems to be gaining in popularity, as demonstrated by the amount of literature already available on the topic. Its popularity may be due in part to easier access to video and movie-making tools, but also because it appears to have substantial potential for teaching and learning.

Though the term “digital storytelling” is generally familiar to educators, many still don’t know what it is or how it works. Simply put, a digital story is a first-person narrative told in concert with digital images and/or video, sometimes accompanied by music. In terms of the story itself, there are several key features that are typically present. First, the stories should have a main idea or address a question that is important to the storyteller, and hopefully to the audience as well. Two other key features are the economical use of words in the written script and appropriate pacing and rhythm in the oral narration (Lambert 2010). Further, creativity is a particularly attractive element of digital storytelling, as the tone can range from humorous to serious to shocking, enhanced by the use of sound and images. The range of topics is limitless: content can be biographical, anecdotal, historical, cultural, etc.

The idea of storytelling in the classroom is of course not new, but the use of technology to convey and enhance a story began in the 1990s and only started to catch on in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The concept of digital storytelling was formally introduced by Joe Lambert, Nina Muller, and Dana Atchley in 1994 with the establishment of the San Francisco Digital Media Center. The

medium was not initially created for classroom use. Rather, the goal was to use digital storytelling to inspire social change. However, UC Berkley was interested in exploring the use of Digital Storytelling as an educational tool, and in 1998 the center was moved to UC Berkley under a new name: the Center for Digital Storytelling ([www.storycenter.org](http://www.storycenter.org)). Now the Center offers training workshops for educators throughout the United States.

Nowadays, the pros and cons of technology in education are a frequent point of discussion. While technology undeniably adds an attractive aspect to some areas of education, many academics worry that the convenience, speed, and instant gratification that technology affords our students is also robbing them of some of the traditional benefits of the academic experience, i.e., reflection and self-discovery. However, Wright and Ryan (2010) suggest that the opportunity for self-reflection is one of the great benefits of digital storytelling. Raimist, Doerr-Stevens, and Jacobs (2010) designed a course on digital storytelling at the University of Minnesota to explore its creative and empowering potential for students. They found that students benefited in different ways--some developed their ability to synthesize information through the multimodal, multi-faceted process; others discovered new things about themselves, redefining their identities. It is the process involved in creating a digital story that takes the usual “instant gratification” of technology out of the equation and leads to deeper engagement on the part of the student.

While digital storytelling could be applied rather seamlessly in a variety of disciplines, one of the more obvious applications is in language and literacy courses. The personal narrative is a writing genre that is relevant at all levels of education, including higher education. At the college level, narrative writing is most often part of the remedial or developmental curriculum,

where students may lack motivation. Helping students find the inspiration to write is an on-going challenge for instructors. This multimodal approach might be the answer. Hung, Hwang, and Huang (2012) showed that digital storytelling projects can improve student motivation and problem-solving abilities. Gunter (2012) also considers the motivational aspects, distinguishing between “extrinsic” and “intrinsic” motivation. External motivators include prizes or extra points, while intrinsic motivation involves the creation of an “authentic artifact” to establish a “personal investment” (Gunter, p.139). The claim is that digital storytelling provides intrinsic motivation and that this is more effective in the long-term.

Fries-Gaither (2010) likewise points out that while the writing process itself can be a bit dull for some students, combining their stories with sound and images may be a more appealing and stimulating task. Furthermore, the digital storytelling process contributes to the development of cognitive strategies including “determining importance, visualizing, inferring, making connections, and synthesizing information” (p.10). It has been suggested that these skills contribute not only to good writing, but also to improved reading ability. Gunter (2012) claims that learning to construct a digital story can actually help students develop better reading skills. The article reports on results of a survey administered to students indicating that many students found reading to be boring. Gunter posited that this was because they couldn’t visualize the story and they were unable to extract the story’s context. However, by learning to create their own stories, students’ ability to visualize what they are reading improves, as does the capacity to understand the connecting layers of a story and relate it to other contexts. In short, they develop critical thinking skills which are essential for reading comprehension.

In addition to critical thinking skills, this strategy has been used to bridge cultural divides, to develop digital literacy, and to teach course content. Several studies (Skinner & Hagood,

2008; Reyes-Torres, Pich, & García, 2012) have reported on the use of digital storytelling for English Language Learners. Reyes-Torres, et al. used digital storytelling in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context to help students learn linguistic routines such as greeting and leave-taking. Students were first shown digital stories designed specifically to demonstrate the targeted linguistic elements. They were given a series of tasks related to the stories and then created their own. Students (in groups of 3) were asked to create a social interaction in which they would use pick-up lines. These were not stories in the traditional sense, but skits created by the students to illustrate and practice a speech act. Thus, the focus was on the use of language in a particular context, rather than on the story itself.

Skinner and Hagood (2008) presented a social perspective of literacy, emphasizing the critical link between cultural literacy, digital literacy and traditional “foundational” literacy (i.e., reading and writing). Particularly in an ESL classroom, cultural diversity can be exploited in a very positive way via digital storytelling. Sharing aspects of one’s culture builds knowledge, promotes cultural/ethnic tolerance, and instills a sense of pride in the storyteller.

Nilsson (2010) presents the case of a learning-disabled boy, who finds his voice through digital storytelling, and highlights the value of digital storytelling as a vehicle for multimodal communication. The paper also suggests that multimodal communication should be embraced as an alternative to traditional notions of literacy. While the latter conclusion may be controversial, the communicative potential of digital storytelling is not.

The storytelling model designed by the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) is typically personal and self-revelatory. And many who have adopted this teaching/learning approach follow that model. Discovering one’s identity and revealing it to others may be considered one of the benefits of the digital story. However, it is also perhaps the most difficult aspect of the

process. And to their credit, the CDS emphasizes the need for sensitivity in the process and presentation of the stories (<http://storycenter.org/ethical-practice/>). Some students may be reluctant to share personal stories with their classmates or teacher. To address this, Botturi, Bramani, and Corbino (2012) took a different approach, allowing students to create fictional stories with personal themes. This way they could benefit from the emotionally freeing experience of “finding their voice” while preserving their safe space. However one approaches this issue, it is important to discuss the project with students before it begins, so they know what to expect.

### **Planning a Digital Storytelling project**

While digital storytelling is an attractive approach to teaching and learning, careful planning is important in order to achieve positive results. As Iannotti (2005) noted, digital storytelling can be overwhelming if it’s not well thought out. Robin and McNeil (2012) suggest the use of an instructional design framework known as ADDIE (analyze, design, develop, implement, and evaluate). For digital storytelling, ADDIE would work something like this:

1. Analyze –
  - a. determine how digital storytelling will fit into the curriculum;
  - b. consider the student population and their particular needs (English language ability, technological skills, etc.);
  - c. create a timeline for project; decide which technology will work best;
  - d. verify access to required technology;
  - e. identify possible support services.
2. Design – plan the logistics for technical and pedagogical implementation.
3. Develop –
  - a. choose a topic and write instructions for students;
  - b. develop a rubric for evaluation.

4. Implement – present assignment to students and execute according to the timeline.
5. Evaluate –
  - a. evaluate projects according to the rubric;
  - b. distribute student feedback surveys.

If a less formal approach is preferred, there are several basic but critical issues which must be weighed before deciding to use this medium. These include access to appropriate technology, students' and instructor's level of technological savvy, and availability of support services. In addition, instructors should warn students about technical considerations such as saving files in the appropriate format, backing them up, and also about the fact that sophisticated features generally create more production challenges. Robin and McNeil (2012), and of course the *Digital Storytelling Cookbook* (Lambert, 2010), offer useful tips on some of the technical aspects.

The software required to produce the videos should be available and accessible to students. A variety of software can be used, including Adobe Premiere Elements, MS MovieMaker, Photostory, and WeVideo. The latter three have free versions. WeVideo is cloud-based, so it doesn't need to be downloaded. The user simply signs up for a free account. Unlike MovieMaker and Adobe Premiere, WeVideo doesn't have a built-in recording feature, but students can record their narrative on their I-phones or similar device and then upload it to WeVideo. Adobe Premiere Elements must be purchased, but it has more features and may produce a higher quality video. For larger classes, the simpler, free options are probably a better choice. Quality videos are possible without many of the fancy features offered by the expensive packages. Furthermore, for pedagogical purposes, there is no real need for professional caliber videos, at least not for English language learning.



## **A Digital Storytelling Pilot**

In 2013, after attending a three-day workshop on Digital Storytelling provided by trainers from the Center for Digital Storytelling, faculty participants implemented this teaching and learning tool in their classes at a community college in New York City. The pilot discussed here, conducted by one of the authors, was intended to assess the technical feasibility and pedagogical appropriateness of digital storytelling in this context, and specifically in the ESL writing class.

### **Research Questions:**

1. Is Digital Storytelling an effective tool within ESL writing curricula?
  - a. Can it be easily integrated into the ESL curriculum?
  - b. Will it engage and motivate students?
  - c. Will it enhance their language learning?
2. Is it technically practical?
  - a. Given the technology requirements, is Digital Storytelling a practical tool?
  - b. Are the technical aspects of Digital Storytelling too challenging for students in general? How much accommodation might they need and what type of accommodation?

### **Participants**

-Nineteen ESL students enrolled in a high intermediate level ESL writing class at a community college in New York City participated in the pilot. Sixteen of these students completed the project.

-Nineteen linguistics students at the same college were assigned to mentor the ESL students.

### **Procedure**

Careful planning by the instructor is critical, especially on the first attempt. Following the preplanning steps according to ADDIE or a similar framework minimizes potential problems. So before implementation, a general plan was laid out, including a determination of how digital

storytelling fits the goals of an ESL writing class, what resources are available for technical support, which software might work best, what the needs of the students might be, and how much time is required from project start to finish. Next, the logistical planning had to be considered. For example, technology in the classroom should be tested to ensure that everything works well. Also, since recording cannot be done in the classroom, arrangements to use a lab or other quiet space needed to be worked out in advance. Finally, the topic, rubric, and evaluation metric were developed. The topic can be developed before the semester starts, but it may be desirable or even advisable in some cases to modify the topic once the student population is known. Planning in advance is important, but the best topics/themes are born with the students in mind. The linguistic and/or cultural background of students and their overall level of competence in English may shape what topic will work best.

To ensure a support system, the pilot was designed as a collaborative project. ESL students were paired up with linguistics students, who acted as mentors for certain parts of the task. To integrate it into the linguistics syllabus, the project doubled as a language observation project. Linguistics students were to assist ESL students with their digital stories, particularly the narration, and write a report on their experience. ESL students would benefit from the help and also get to know someone they may not have met otherwise. More importantly, they would improve their English language skills. Linguistics students would learn about the language and culture of their mentee. Helping them with the narration would expose the linguistics students to some of the challenges of second language learning. Since the linguistics students would not necessarily have more technological expertise than the ESL students, the college's E-Learning Center would be the primary resource for technical support.

## **Materials/Software**

The software chosen for the project was MS Movie Maker, or I-Movie for Mac users. The free version of Movie Maker produces good quality video, and it is relatively easy to use. It has a built-in recording feature and an option to add music. Movie files are quite large, usually 20 to 60 megabytes for a 4-minute video, so students were asked to bring them in on a flash drive rather than email them to the instructor.

## **The Task**

A topic was chosen according to the students' level (high intermediate) and the diverse composition of the class. Students were asked to create a three- to five-minute digital story about one aspect of their culture that they find interesting or fun. In other words, they were to choose something about their culture that they would want others to know about. The idea of sharing their culture was an important component of the assignment, so in addition to building basic skills, students could learn about the world and perhaps understand their fellow students better.

## **Implementation**

The project plan was introduced to the students early in the semester. They were given the topic and asked to write approximately 200-250 words as a first draft. In week three they brought the stories in to share with classmates and get feedback. Also in week three, they were given the instructions (see below) for writing, preparing, and creating the digital story. In addition, they were shown a sample digital story from the [storycentral.org](http://storycentral.org) website to give them a sense of what their finished product might look like.

## **Instructions for ESL Students**

### **Writing the story**

1. Write a story (in week 2-3 of the semester).
2. Story Circle - peer feedback.
3. Revise story based on peer feedback (week 3).
4. Revise the story again based on instructor feedback and look for pictures to enhance the story (week 4).

### **Preparing the storyboard**

5. Practice reading the story at home and see how long it takes. Be sure not to read too fast.
6. Create a storyboard with pictures and text, editing the story/script as needed (week 5).
7. Practice reading your story to your mentor or a friend (if the mentor is not available).

### **Creating the digital story**

8. Find a quiet place to record the narrative.
9. Create the video (week 8 and 9).
10. Add background music (optional).

The linguistics students were also given a set of instructions (see below), outlining their mentoring tasks. They wrote a report of their experience at the end of the project.

### **Instructions for linguistics students:**

1. Meet and interview your mentee (week 3 or 4).
2. Help ELL to tweak the script and choose the right pictures (week 5).
3. Help them prepare the narration for the video (week 7 and 8).
4. Write a report (8-10 pages, double-spaced) of your experience in terms of communication with the mentee. What did you learn about the student's 1<sup>st</sup> language? His/her culture? Were there any other factors that seemed to affect communication between you and your mentee? (first draft due in week 10; final draft due in week 12).

### **Assessment**

The ESL course (ESL62) is a non-credit course and students do not receive letter grades, but a rubric (see Appendix 1) was used as a guideline for what students were expected to produce and also to provide them with some uniform and tangible feedback once the project was completed.

They were rated on a scale of 1-4 in five domains: focus of the story; development; clarity/pace of the narration; choice of images; and grammar and usage.

Linguistics (“Language and Culture”) students were assessed according to a different rubric (see Appendix 2), which focused on their collaborative efforts and their written reports. These projects were graded according to the established A-F letter grading system.

### **Evaluation**

A post-task survey was administered to ESL students at the end of the project to evaluate its effectiveness from their perspective. Students were asked the five questions enumerated below to elicit their feedback on the experience. Overall, the responses were quite positive, with all ESL participants rating their experience as either 4 or 5. Results of survey questions 1 and 3 are illustrated in Figure 1 and 2. Question 2 responses revealed that some mentors were perceived as more helpful than others. In some cases, this was due to scheduling difficulties. And for number 4, most students said they would like to do a digital storytelling project again in another class. Finally, responses to question 5 showed a range of outcomes, including learning how to write a story, learning about other cultures, and learning to make a video.

### **Survey**

1. How would you rate your overall digital storytelling experience on a scale of 1-5, 5 being the best? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Did you find your mentor helpful? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What was the most difficult part of the task? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Do you think you would like to do this type of project again in the future, in another course? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What did you learn from this experience? \_\_\_\_\_

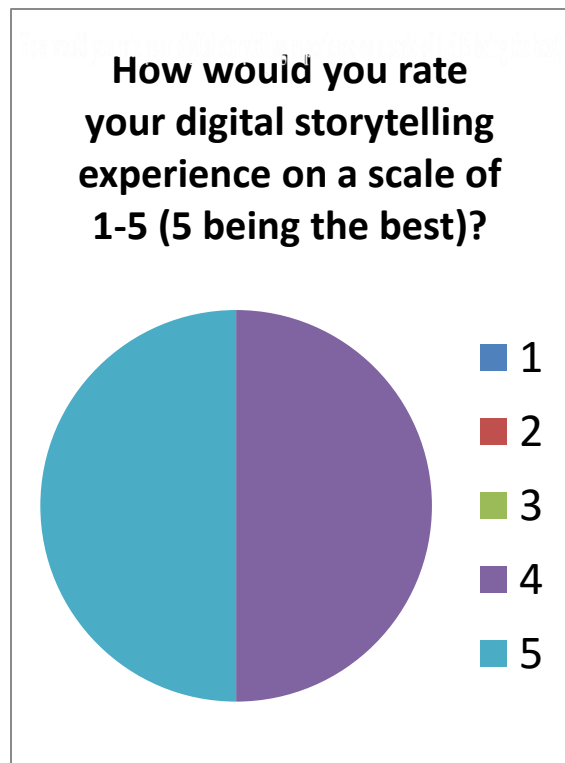


FIGURE 1: Results of Survey Q1

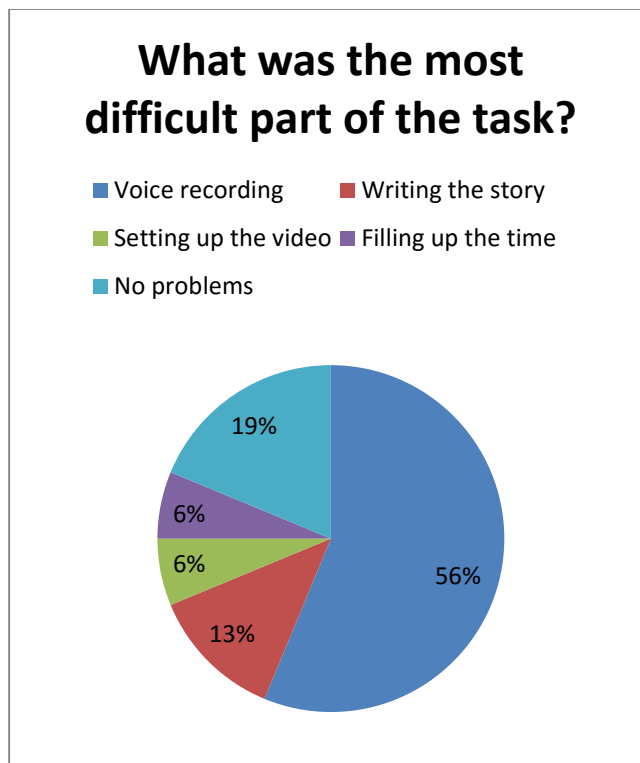


FIGURE 2: Results of Survey Q3

## Discussion

The results overall indicate that the students enjoyed the project and learned from it. There were challenges, however. The greatest of these, from the perspective of the students, was the narration: speaking clearly, audibly, and with the right rhythm and pacing. From the instructor's perspective this particular challenge is an advantage of the project since it forced students to recognize their weaknesses in this area and to push themselves to improve. As a consequence, they gained more confidence in their ability to express themselves orally. This is very important for ESL students as they move on to classes with native English speakers. Another problem area was writing the story. Again, this was meant to be a challenge as it was the primary learning objective of the project. Students wrote multiple drafts in order to convey their story in an organized, coherent way, thus improving their writing skills.

The topic chosen for the pilot worked very well for the test group. Students should be challenged but not unreasonably so. Sharing snippets of their culture both engaged and educated students. The range of cultures in the class spanned Asia, South America, the Caribbean, and Africa. Topics including Bangladeshi food, Ecuadorian Carnaval, Ivory Coast traditional masks, and Haitian voodoo helped stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about world cultures and in some cases also gave them a better understanding of a classmate. For advanced classes, more challenging topics may be assigned, such as a humorous anecdote or a pivotal moment.

While most students didn't complain about the technical challenges, there were some. One issue was the reliability of classroom equipment. Although the college provides smart classrooms, sometimes the equipment did not work as it should, so tech support services had to be called during class time on one occasion, for example. When planning to view videos during class, it is helpful to arrive a little early. However, this may not be possible if classes are scheduled close together. Also, the large movie files can be a bit tricky to transfer. Since they are often too large to send by email, students would have to bring in their flash drive so it could be copied to the instructor's flash drive. The instructor needs to view the videos before showing them to the class, so if there is a problem such as inaudible narration, the student could re-record. Another issue was that some students didn't have computers at home, or they were not tech savvy, so arrangements had to be made with the e-learning lab to accommodate these students. But this is a problem which was anticipated, so it was easy to resolve. Another solution to this is to solicit the help of students in the class who are more adept with technology and willing to help their classmates.

In terms of course integration, the digital stories fit well into the writing curriculum. The digital story process itself can help develop students' writing skills, as storytelling is a common

mode of development in essay writing. In addition, the finished product can be used as a writing prompt. For instance, the ESL students in this study were shown three to four of the videos on a given day and then asked to write about their favorite, explaining what they liked about it and what they learned from it. Follow-up writing tasks can be more or less challenging according to the students' level.

## **Conclusions**

Given the positive response from students and the quality of the finished products, digital storytelling appears to be a viable teaching tool for ESL. It is technically accessible and students enjoy it. In addition, students who participated in this pilot were engaged and seemed to gain confidence in their communicative ability by the end of the project. Through the process of creating a digital story, they learned to organize, build, and relate a story in a coherent way (see sample in Appendix 3). For example, matching images to the narrative allowed them to recognize when the storyline had gone adrift. Also, the topics enhanced students' knowledge of other cultures, which they were able to write about in the post- presentation writing tasks. Thus, digital storytelling helped improve students' writing skills, as well as their oral skills. The question now would be whether student writing outcomes ultimately fared better as a result of digital storytelling. Determining this would require further research, perhaps comparing the writing outcomes of classes that used digital storytelling to classes (at the same level) that did not.

From a practical standpoint, the project was a bit more labor intensive than other pedagogical tools. Technological glitches are inevitable, but they are likely to become more manageable each time the process is repeated. The collaborative approach employed in the pilot was also problematic at times. This was due primarily to conflicting schedules, as many



community college students have jobs and other obligations that limit their availability. Students were encouraged to use Skype as an alternative, but even that was difficult to arrange for some students. Still, for some students collaboration was a positive experience and seemed to enhance the quality of their projects. In general, collaboration between students in different classes would probably be more feasible in a non-commuter college where most students live on campus. Thus in settings such as the one used in the present study, it is better to allow more classroom time for peer and instructor feedback. Another solution might be to do group projects, where four or five students can create one story. These students could support each other. Furthermore, as Iannotti (2005) suggests, having fewer projects to manage would make it more feasible for the instructor to provide substantial feedback to students.

As with the implementation of any new tool, digital storytelling requires a high level of commitment and effort throughout the process. But the potential benefits for teaching and learning make the effort worthwhile. And as with most new tools, once you learn how to navigate it, the process will become less cumbersome, lifting the burden of tool management so you can focus on its pedagogical value.

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## Appendix 1

### Digital Storytelling Rubric for ESL

Student's name: \_\_\_\_\_

CATEGORY	Excellent (4)	Good (3)	Satisfactory (2)	Poor (1)	Score
<b>Focus</b>	There is a clear focus throughout.	The focus is clear during most of the video.	The purpose of the story is clear, but the focus is lost a few times.	It is difficult to figure out the purpose of the video.	
<b>Development of the story</b>	The story is told with exactly the right amount of detail throughout.	The story seems to be missing some important details, OR it includes some unnecessary details.	The story needs more editing. It is noticeably too long or too short in more than one section.	The story needs extensive editing.	
<b>Narration – intonation, pace, and clarity</b>	The pace, intonation, and clarity of the narration fit the story.	Narration is generally engaging, but the pace may be a bit too fast or too slow for the story.	The intonation doesn't suit the story.	The narration is difficult or impossible to understand or hear.	
<b>Images</b>	The images create an atmosphere or tone that matches different parts of the story.	Images create an atmosphere or tone that matches some parts of the story.	An attempt was made to use images to match the story, but it needed more work.	The images were not appropriate for the story.	
<b>Grammar</b>	Grammar and usage were correct and contributed to clarity, style & development.	Grammar and usage were generally correct, and errors did not detract from the story.	Grammar and usage were generally correct, but errors detracted from the story.	Repeated errors in grammar and usage made the story very difficult to follow.	

<b>Total Score:</b>
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## Appendix 2

### Project Rubric for Linguistics

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

CATEGORY	A	B	C	D	F	Grade
<b>Collaborative effort:</b> meeting deadlines, providing input to mentee, and assisting with narration and general guidance in the preparation of the digital story	Worked very well with mentee, kept appointments, etc.	Had some problems but made a good effort to work with the mentee	Some attempt to collaborate.	Minimal effort	No collaboration	
<b>Project Report*:</b> All components are submitted on time. The analysis is thorough and insightful, and demonstrates an understanding of the cultural and linguistic elements of second language learning. The paper is well written and follows the specified format.	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Unsatisfactory or not submitted	

**Combined Score** (equally weighted):

\*Project Report (8-10 pages, typed in 12pt. font and double-spaced) required components:

1. One-page bio of your mentee (use an alias instead of his/her name)
2. One to two page description of mentee's first language
3. Description of the project experience, including a summary of the digital story
4. Discussion of your observations of second language learning, including what you learned about your mentee's language and culture
5. Bibliography (including references for item 2 and any other references consulted for item 4)

**1<sup>st</sup> draft due in week 10; final draft due in week 12**

## Appendix 3

### Sample student story

#### A Taste of Home

My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I was born and raised in Bangladesh. There are many interesting things about Bangladeshi culture, but one of my favorite things is the food. I am used to Bangladeshi food and so when I first arrived in the U.S. I was worried about changing my diet. I didn't like American food and I had a lot of problems. However, shortly after my arrival in New York, I had a wonderful experience. I found my own ethnic food here in America. I was so surprised because I never thought I could eat Bangladeshi food here.

Fortunately, New York is a very diverse city, so I met other people from my country and they told me where I could find some typical Bangladeshi food. Several kinds of food are popular among Bangladeshi people. For example, every Bangladeshi person eats what we call Macha batha Bangali. That means fish and rice Bangali. Some other popular Bangladeshi dishes include fish curry and rice, beef curry and rice, kacehi biryani, chicken biryani, and beef biryani. Also, one of the tastiest dishes is called "small fish fry".

Now I feel a lot better than before because Bangladeshi food makes me happy. I have discovered a lot of Bangladeshi restaurants here in New York. Now I can get my food more easily. I can go to the restaurants and I can eat delicious food. I often go to restaurants with my friends on my cultural holidays and enjoy nice Bangladeshi food, just like at home.