Analyzing Digital Stories with ESL Students
by Jackie Nenchin

As the Internet and new technologies continue to collide and combine with each other and the world, so, too, do literacies; oral literacy, reading, and writing coexist with videos, graphics, links, and other aspects of the Web, all on computers and the many and varied devices that people use to connect electronically. DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, and Hicks (2010) maintain that the very nature of reading and writing is changing.

Educators are responding to these changes. According to the National Association for Media Literacy Education (2015), "the purpose of media literacy education is to provide people with the habits of inquiry and skills of expression they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators, and active citizens in today's world" (p. 1). As shown in Table 1, the Common Core State Standards (2010) require students to respond to digital materials in a variety of ways, depending on grade levels:

Table 1. Common Core Standards for Literacy

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.7	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.7http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RI/9-10/7/
Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue	Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account

Similarly, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (2015) requires analysis of digital stories in secondary English: Students "analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts are represented in texts, including media texts, through language, structural and/or visual choices" (Texts and Contexts—Grade 10). Everywhere, schools are exploiting digital texts in the literacy development of their students.

At the NYS TESOL Annual Conference in November 2015, I offered a workshop on analyzing digital stories with ESL students. The purpose of this workshop was to explore ways to analyze digital stories, to identify the differences between analyzing a traditional story and a digital story, and to develop a working model for story analysis.

A digital story is a narrative that includes most or all of the following:
- Text
- Slides; audio and video clips
- Background music/sounds
- Photographs, graphics, and other images
- Transitions from one part to another
- Links to connect with resources or social media

A digital story has several distinctive characteristics. First, it requires "readers to participate with the text, some of which is in alphabetic print and much of which is other media" (Hicks,

2013, p. 29). Second, a digital story is not linear, like a print text. Third, visual features play an integral role in conveying meaning and making connections between readers and texts. Finally, certain design principles affect the readability of the text, and it has audio features, such as a soundtrack and the writers' voices.

For the workshop, we focused on the analysis of a digital news story, an emerging genre. Two examples of a digital news story are Branch's (2012) "Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek" (United States) and Henley's (2013) "Firestorm: Bushfire at Dunalley" (Tasmania). Because of time constraints, we were only able to focus on one example, the initial chapters of "Firestorm." Participants read, viewed, and listened to the account, paying special attention to hypermedia aspects. They jotted down observations about the content, the presentation, and their impressions. Together we examined the differences between a traditional news story and a digital news story.

We agreed that the story was a mixture of genres, in particular a recount and an informational text (report). The purpose of a recount is to tell what happened while evaluating the event (Butt, Fahey, Feez, & Spinks, 2013). A typical recount contains the following elements:

- Purpose of text: Orientation—information about who/when/where (the Holmes family, 2012, Dunalley, Tasmania)
- Record of events: Chronological sequence of what occurred (the development of the bushfire and the events that the family experienced)
- Reorientation: Rounding off the sequence of what occurred (the resolution of the crisis with the bushfire)
- Coda: Personal evaluation (the way the family assessed their experiences) (All elements in this bulleted list refer to Henley, 2013.)

The purpose of an informational text is to organize and present information on a topic. Such texts includes a general statement (what it is about—identification and classification) and description (information organized in bundles, e.g., paragraphs). The informational text integrated throughout the story provided scientific and historical information about bushfires and supported the recount.

An analysis of a nonfiction story usually involves identifying the point of view/voice, the audience, purpose, setting, action sequence, and content. In a digital nonfiction story, an analysis also includes evaluating the presentation, visual and audio choices that create or enhance meaning, embedded media, the combination of text fonts (typography and design), and the pacing (rhythm).

At the workshop, participants discussed the benefits and challenges of digital news stories for ELLs. The benefits are that digital stories provide more exposure to paralinguistic features (body language, gestures), promote deep learning through critical thinking and making connections among the hypermedia, and offer inherent scaffolding through visuals and audio-video material. The challenges of reading digital stories include difficult content infused in the story (science and history), the rate of speech in audio-video materials, vocabulary, and the reading level.

In developing some strategies for scaffolding the story, participants helped create an organizer to track the text features, as shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Visual Organizer

Text features	Yes/No	How do these features help you understand the story?
Titles		
Subtitles		
Bold words		
Hyperlinks		
Graphics		
Videos		
Table of contents		

Other strategies included examining genres and pre-teaching and using graphic organizers for vocabulary learning through synonyms, antonyms, the root and affixes, and word classes. As the use of digital stories increases, teachers must develop ways to analyze all aspects of them for their ELLs.

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