Using storytelling in distance learning: some teachers' beliefs, online tools and experiences within the context of school lockdown

La narración de historias en la enseñanza virtual: percepciones, herramientas digitales y experiencias en la escuela primaria durante el confinamiento

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Abstract

Storytelling is claimed to be an engaging educational tool for young learners. There is abundant literature, which highlights the importance of storytelling as a memorable vehicle in language learning (Cameron, 2001; Kim, 2010) that promotes meaningful language use (Magid, 2013). Teachers' beliefs also play a very important role in education because they determine the methods that lie behind the delivery of lessons. Storytelling is no exception and the extent of its implementation is based on the conviction that it is a powerful learning instrument (Utami, 2016). The COVID pandemic has accelerated the implementation of distance learning in primary education and has tested the effectiveness of telling stories online. The aim of the present study is to explore the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their implementation of digital tools for English as a foreign language teaching and particularly for storytelling in the framework of a school lockdown. The instrument for data collection is an online structured questionnaire that was partially answered by 54 Catalan Primary School teachers and fully completed by 32 educators. The findings seem to indicate that despite lack of training and a number of challenges, both technical and pedagogical, online tools have been extensively used to promote language learning and to read stories to children.

Keywords: Storytelling, language learning, distance education, teachers' beliefs.

Resumen

La narración de historias es una poderosa arma educativa para alumnos de infantil y primaria. Existe abundante literatura en donde se enfatiza la importancia de la narrativa como instrumento significativo tanto en el aprendizaje de lenguas (Cameron, 2001; Kim, 2010) como en su uso (Magid, 2013). La pandemia COVID ha acelerado la implementación de métodos de aprendizaje a distancia en la escuela y ha supuesto asimismo una prueba para comprobar su efectividad en entornos virtuales. El objetivo de este estudio es explorar la relación existente entre las creencias del profesorado y la aplicación de instrumentos digitales en la enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera dentro del contexto del cierre de las escuelas. Como instrumento de investigación se ha utilizado un cuestionario online que ha sido contestado parcialmente por 54 educadores y totalmente por 32. Los resultados parecen indicar que, a pesar de la falta de formación y las dificultades pedagógicas y técnicas inherentes a la enseñanza virtual, se ha generalizado el uso de herramientas online para seguir leyendo historias en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: Narración, enseñanza de lenguas, educación a distancia, creencias del profesorado.

Introducción

There seems to be wide consensus in the educational community that teachers' beliefs have a significant impact in learning processes and that they are behind many teachers' decisions (Alghanmi & Shukri, 2016; King & Nash, 2011; Kuzborska, 2011; Phan, 2004; Yang & Gao, 2013). Although some mismatchings and incongruities have been found (Ralhman et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2013) a large number of studies have argued that they are a major influence on areas of education such as lesson planning, decision making or the implementation of certain methodologies in the classroom (Borg, 2003). Bedir (2010) reinforced this idea by stating that beliefs: '[…] have strong implications for the way they practice teaching.' (p. 52). Beliefs are equally regarded as a critical factor in terms of language teacher education.

The impact of teachers' beliefs on distance learning practices has somehow been overlooked at Primary school level prior to the COVID pandemic. Some studies seemed to show a moderate acceptance of distance learning programmes (Gary, 2002) whereas others such as Jones et al. (2005) indicated that many teachers unwillingly accepted them as an addition to their face-to-face teaching. This reluctance certainly emerges from the adjustments needed to this new type of education in terms of pedagogy, assessment and online management, which may lead to teacher burnout (Caplan & Graham, 2008). Plus, course preparation time for online teaching may have to be increased due to the extra burden of designing materials both suitable for distance learning and intuitive enough to meet the needs of young learners (Smaldino et al., 2008). Notwithstanding, teachers value some aspects of online resources as powerful learning tools. Digital games, for instance, can enhance children's learning, social interaction and critical ability in problem solving tasks (Allsop et al., 2013). Teachers also seem to support the use of online games as a way to increase authentic communicative practices (Ashrafa et al., 2014) and to acquire knowledge and skills in a pleasant manner (Manesis, 2020). Besides, games appear to allow extensive intuitive interaction that is learner-centre and adapted to mixed-ability groups (Yolageldili & Arikan, 2011).

Shattuck & Anderson (2013) investigated teachers' beliefs and particularly their capabilities of facing online teaching. She insisted that professionals needed to be trained in instructional approaches that addressed online teaching to guarantee its success. In this sense, Huang et al. (2020) affirm that teachers play a vital role in 'steering students' learning' in a context of online education and should therefore be trained extensively to be able to implement distance learning. In this sense, these authors argue that a large proportion of teachers in primary school in China, where the study was conducted, appear to have little knowledge of virtual resources and that lack of experience using online tools may have a negative impact on their teaching practice and reinforce negative attitudes towards online education.

Furthermore, this article focuses on one of the methodologies teachers tend to strongly believe in and more extensively use to teach English as a foreign language (EFL) in primary education: storytelling. One of the challenges a primary EFL teacher must face when telling a story is the need to shorten or adjust its content to the pupils' foreign language background and this is why coming to grips with narrative structures is key to successful storytelling. Thus, the aim of the present study is to explore the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their implementation of digital tools for English as a foreign language teaching and particularly for storytelling in the framework of a school lockdown.

Teachers' perception in relation to learning English as a foreign language through stories

It may be a truism to say that every teacher has beliefs on his/her work, on students and particularly on suitable teaching approaches or methodologies. Beliefs have been defined from a wide range of psychological and philosophical viewpoints. Pajares (1992) stated that beliefs usually stem from formative factors such as family or society but also from more objective teaching knowledge that derives from training. Raymond (1997) referred to them as personal judgments formed from experiences whereas Borg (2003) associated teachers' beliefs with personal pedagogical systems, teacher cognition, pedagogical knowledge and even with personal theories. This author pointed out that these aspects are inextricably intertwined and may be used to describe teachers' conception, perception, and knowledge in the stages of teachers' professional development (Borg, 2001). More recently, Chowdhury & Rashid (2014) have insisted that beliefs are based on opinions, knowledge and perceptions that are rooted in the teacher's mental framework and resist to change. In line with this statement, Lan & Lama (2020) claim that: "many definitions suggest that beliefs are propositions that individuals consider being true and which are often tacit, have an active evaluative and affective component, provide a basis for action, and are resistant to change" (p.27)"

However, authors such as Larenas et al. (2015) pinpoint that some beliefs are not static, and result from: 'teachers' own learning experiences, their own classroom practices, their fellow colleagues, their school context and most importantly their own students' (p.183). This suggestion implies that teachers' beliefs might be subject to change as a result of experience. Young teachers' beliefs spring from their theoretical knowledge whether more seasoned educators rely more heavily on their classroom experience (Farrell & Lim, 2005).

In the context of language teacher education, beliefs are equally regarded as a critical factor about how 'language should be learned and taught and that involves different strategies, materials, media and evaluation' (Utami, 2016, p. 135). More specifically, beliefs are associated with certain language skills that may be prioritised to match the educator's language acquisition perceptions or to meet 'contextual factors' such as educational policy,

curriculum mandates or social environment expectations (Utami, 2016). Likewise, uncovering teachers' belief systems may be paramount to tracking down their rooted conceptions about language learning methodologies and techniques and these results should be taken into account before proceeding with successful innovation at schools.

One of the methodologies teachers tend to believe in and extensively use in primary classes is storytelling (Gao Y-L et al., 2020). Storytelling has been regarded as a technique of teaching that tends to transcend time and this might be the reason for its widespread popularity. Dujmovic (2006) defines storytelling as 'the art of narrating a tale, which is one of the oldest of all art forms, reaching back to prehistoric times' (p.75). Serrat (2010) stresses the key role that stories possess to evoke powerful emotions and insights and to build up the child's confidence and encourage social and emotional development. Thus, the characters or the plot of any given story may help develop emotional aspects such as empathy, understanding or mindfulness that are to be found in literature.

Literature provides students with a very special universe in which they are rapidly engaged and where their creativity can be unravelled in order to promote both interaction and construction of knowledge at the same time (Gómez Combariza et al., 2013). Certainly, stories are part of the EFL learner's life and therefore may easily connect with young learners. As Ellis & Brewster (1991) point out: 'Listening to stories develops the child's listening and concentrating skills, something which allows them to understand the overall meaning of a story and to relate it to their personal experience' (p. 2).

In the area of language learning, research on EFL storytelling suggests that it is an effective and motivating resource in the development of language skills both for first and foreign languages, or in Mart's words, 'stories provide an outstanding opportunity for young learners to master the foreign language' (Mart, 2012, p. 105).

Indeed, there has been a plethora of studies over the past thirty years that claim the value of storytelling as a natural way of communication and knowledge for young EFL learners (Ellis & Brewster, 1991; Wright, 2008; Dagarin et al., 2013; among others) since stories can provide a highly motivating and meaningful source of language that facilitates language acquisition (Hendrickson, 1992). Further, storytelling is said to boost motivation because it is a more engaging and more contextualised manner of including the four language skills (Cameron, 2001; Kim, 2010). Stories appear to foster the conception of English as a real means of communication and therefore they may enhance motivation towards language learning (Magid, 2013). Hence, storytelling is arguably a memorable way for learners to retain vocabulary and pronunciation (Wajnryb, 2003).

One of the challenges a primary EFL teacher must face when telling a story is the need to shorten or adjust its content to the pupils' foreign language background. As Koutsompou (2015) states, 'such learning drives away the monotony of traditional language classes. Thus, it gives the teacher an opportunity to open broad context of language use for the

students.' (p. 75) However, this challenge can also be considered to be an opportunity to better meet the class diversity since educators may alter some parts of the story to make sure that young learners enjoy and learn from the story. Another obstacle that derives from those adjustments is to keep identity construction, that is, to make sure that the reader can feel identified with some of the characteristics of the story protagonist (Canals-Botines, 2020) and therefore be engaged in listening to any given tale. All in all, narrative structures are the key foundational elements, which need to be examined to implement appropriate classroom didactics that can maximise the power of storytelling.

Narrative structures mostly used in Primary education in EFL

Stories are composed of narrative structures that typically describe the framework of how a story is told and their main elements are the setting, the plot and the characters. The structures that are frequently read to children tend to resemble the classical Aristotelian structure (Madej, 2008) that is made up of three very different acts, and each of which contains specific information so that the story unfolds in an orderly manner. The first act introduces the protagonist, his life, and his goal. The second act, which tends to be the longest, fills the story with obstacles that the protagonist will overcome in order to solve, in the third act, the latent conflict that prevents the protagonist from achieving his initial goal.

Nevertheless, the classical structure is usually too extensive to be developed into a children's tale. On the one hand, there is not enough time for the complications that the protagonist must face throughout the story to happen. On the other hand, and due to this situation, the story that ends up emerging is insubstantial, containing no suspense or emotion. The example of the film *The Temple of the Loom* (Spielberg, 1984) is clarifying in this regard: Indiana Jones is a young professor who teaches at university and has a calm and routine life. He is asked to search for the lost ark and he gladly agrees and leaves. Indiana reads and interprets a map that shows where the lost ark is located. He reaches the right place, unearths the ark, and returns to his home and university life and that's how the story ends. This may be regarded as an insubstantial plot, which asks for some techniques that add substance to it so that the viewer has a feeling that the story contains some meaning. In other words, a story with a complete beginning, development and a dramatic credible ending is needed (Canals-Botines, 2018). A plausible option may be to modify the classical structure and adapt it to the plot. Some examples of structures that have been successfully used in children's literature are the following: Dramatic Response in a Causal structure, Rereading structure, Descriptive structure, Serpent structure, Change in the Main Character structure, Dramatic Irony structure, Repetition structure and Intimacy Process structure (Canals-Botines, 2020).

Although these narrative structures are created to work in children's books, virtual storytelling has transformed the way stories are used with children. Teachers find themselves implementing virtual synchronous sessions and using online storytelling and, as Kim et al. claim "The integration of new technologies and multimodal resources can support

diverse tasks and projects, further enhancing reflection. One promising technology is digital storytelling" (2021, p. 102). They argue that digital stories are very short products which can include image, sound, text, voiceover and other media. Therefore, storytelling in distance learning has been a teachers' resource in times of COVID-19. As Gürsoy (2021) points out:

> DS is based on the employment of computer-based tools to tell a story. Although it has been described by other definitions such as digital essays, digital documentaries, computer-based narrative, electronic memories, interactive storytelling, it is generally described based on the idea of combining the art of storytelling and a variety of multimedia elements... The fact that DS does not require a special environment for students to acquire 21st-century skills, its low cost and high instructional capacity increase the value of DS (p. 98).

Research methodology

A questionnaire was devised to obtain meaningful data on the teacher's perceptions and experiences on the use of storytelling in their classes and how the class implementation of this teaching resource had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire was taken from an existing survey by Alkaaf (2017) for validity and reliability purposes, but it needed to be adapted and shortened to fit its online format. All teachers had participated in storytelling seminars, since storytelling is a widespread practice endorsed by the EFL Catalan curriculum in primary education. The questionnaire was answered by 54 Primary school EFL teachers from Catalonia but only fully completed by 32 teachers, which will be the data results analysed. It was composed of 22 questions organised in four different sections a: 1) Professional background questions; 2) Before the COVID-19 pandemic; 3) During the COVID-19 lockdown; and 4) After the COVID-19 pandemic.

Technically, the questionnaire consists of two types of questions: multiple choice (19) and open questions (3). Multiple choice questions can be divided into standard (6), those related to time or intensity gradation (2) or frequency (2), and multiple-choice questions where more than one answer is accepted (9). The latter subtype encompasses the questions about types of resources and materials used and the teacher's perceptions on online storytelling under the lockdown context.

The initial section deals with the teacher's professional background and aims at providing a contextual information on the teacher's profile: gender, teaching experience, teaching position either pre-school or primary education and their confidence in their online teaching skills.

The second part refers to the practitioners' teaching experience and training on

storytelling and online teaching prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It includes questions about the teacher's previous training on online learning for young children, about crisis management and about online support for parents and guardians. Some questions regarding the teachers' previous experience on online synchronous lessons and/or use of online storytelling resources can also be found. This section ends with an open question in which the teachers are asked to name the two stories that they most frequently use in their classes and the reason for their choice.

The third subdivision encompasses questions about the teacher's performance during the COVID-19 lockdown. The teachers are questioned again about their implementation of virtual synchronous sessions and their use of online storytelling. This section includes questions about the teachers' use of online tools and their perception of how helpful these resources proved to be. Teachers are also invited to share successful strategies they have applied as well as to point at the main challenges they have faced.

The final part of the questionnaire is drawn up as a reflection and perception stage upon the lockdown experience within the framework of EFL teaching. It focusses on the possible evolution of the teachers' performance during the lockdown in terms of online tools and the two stories they have used most frequently during the COVID-19 quarantine. The final questions help to fully illustrate the teacher's perceptions on using storytelling by asking about the benefits, the challenges, the most important elements of online stories, and finally about the activities they have used to supplement stories.

Results

1. Teachers' Digital Competency

Our present-day society has suffered revolving changes, which have also affected the ways of teaching in the classroom. Thus, Teacher Training studies had to update to offer knowledge to students in relation to innovation, including digital technologies. The New Media Consortium report on higher education (2017) shows the importance of teaching digital competence (TDC) to teacher trainees, which includes the ability to use technologies in educational contexts. The use of digital and online tools in the academic field offers new means of learning (Hadar et al, 2020). As we have grasped during the lockdown, using digital resources to teach has helped pupils socialize in greater heterogeneous groups. Felip Falcó (2016) states that "when learners are allowed to use web 2.0 tools and apps, lessons become more interactive, engaging and motivating and tasks become increasingly relevant and real for students" (p.46).

The results on digital competency of teachers can be inferred from a number of questions from the questionnaire. As an initial standpoint we can observe the results from Question 4

(*How confident are you in your online teaching skills?*). All teachers answering this questionnaire coincide in having quite a lot of confidence on their online teaching skills. Thus, we can assume they are familiar with a number of resources and abilities, but still show a margin of learning in both of them.

Despite their overall good online teaching skills, prior to COVID-19, teachers' training on topics related to online teaching has been rather scarce or low. Indeed, as can be seen in Question 5 (*Prior to COVID-19, did you have any training on some of the following topics?*), only 6 teachers confirm having had training on online learning for young children, 1 on crisis management and 1 on online support for parents and guardians. Most teachers' answers show a lack of training on these three topics and this fact could imply no specific training on online teaching.

As a complement to the previous question, Question 6 (*Prior to COVID-19, did you teach synchronous (live) online lessons?*) demonstrates that only 4 teachers had taught previous synchronous (live) online lessons before the COVID-19 pandemic, and just 3 of them had had previous training on online learning for children.

The situation for the latter question changed during the lockdown. Question 10 (*During the COVID-19 lockdown, have you taught synchronous (live) online lessons?*) proves that the number of teachers using this resource in their classes raised up to 12, three times the previous number. It is, however, noticeable that still a relevant number of teachers did not use this resource during the quarantine.

In order to obtain further detail on the types of resources applied in the classes during the school closure, Question 11 asked the following: *During the COVID-19 lockdown, which tools have you used for online teaching?* The answers indicate a prominent use of video conferencing tools, recorded videos and screencast together with an average use of virtual classroom management systems and online games. On the other end of the scope, we observe a testimonial use of social media. Six teachers state they used other resources for specific types of activities, such as Padlet to work on riddles, interactive worksheets or Lyricstraining to name a few.

As a supplement to the previous answers, Question 12 asked *Which resources have you found helpful for your online teaching?* providing the following options in their answers: webinars, forums, video guidance, online games, resources form mixed ability classes and websites on how to create activities. The answers suggest teachers opted for online games and resources for mixed ability classes were the most significant tools for their online teaching, followed by websites to create activities.

The teachers' initial perception on having proper digital skills is clear in a number of answers to Question 15 (*Can you share any other successful strategy that you are using for online teaching?*). Most of the qualitative answers deal with teachers recording videos for their students, whereas one teacher mentions using very specific tools in the initial cycle,

such as Flipgrid, Genially or Liveworksheets.

In order to complete the questions on digital competency during the COVID-19 lockdown, Question 16 asked the teachers: *What are the top challenges you have faced in your online teaching?* The highest number of answers coincided on three obstacles: 1) monitoring children's progress; 2) lack of training and support; and 3) maintaining students' motivation.

Besides all the information gathered on their perception as teachers during the lockdown, as a final reflection on the digital resources used during the process, Question 17 read: *After the COVID-19 lockdown, which tools would you be willing to keep using?* If we compare the results to those in Question 11 (*During the COVID-19 lockdown, which tools have you used for online teaching?*), we may observe a rough match in the answers. Thus, the most recurrent tools they would like to keep on using include: video recording and screencast software and online games, and also, in a lower number, virtual classroom management systems and video conferencing programs. As in Question 11, social media are the last option in the teachers' choices. We would like to also note that, two teachers have mentioned they would be willing to keep using the additional resources they named in Question 11 (Lyricstraining and Genially). Thus, we could infer that specialised online tools seem to be an option for certain practitioners.

1.1 Teachers' perception in relation to learning through stories

The questions regarding the teachers' perceptions on storytelling intended to explore the participants' use of stories in their EFL classroom at a primary school level. Teachers were firstly asked: Question 6: *How frequently they implemented storytelling*? and half of them (54%) stated that they read stories to their pupils regularly, that is, ranging from every day to once a week and just 5% said that they only used it on a monthly basis. Questionnaire findings therefore confirm that all teachers seem to agree that storytelling was important in their EFL classes.

Next, participants were questioned about storytelling online, that is, using virtual tools to read a story to children before the pandemic (Question 8). A majority of educators (65%) admitted to not having used it, which reinforces the general belief that primary school teachers tend to prefer reading stories to children face to face. This unwillingness to read stories to children may stem from the challenges that virtual stories can pose for young learners (Question 17). More particularly, teachers were inquired about these difficulties concerning 4 main issues:

- Finding a good online story to use in the video session
- Creating the right atmosphere for online storytelling
- Checking that the students were listening during storytelling
- Managing the children's participation and turn taking

All teachers felt that these obstacles played a major role in preventing them from carrying

out online storytelling. Notwithstanding, finding a good online story was considered the most prominent hurdle by 100% of the participating teachers along with managing the children's involvement, which accounted for 90% of the overall responses.

Participants were also asked about the benefits of online storytelling and they gave a lukewarm response (Question 16). Its role as a tool to develop creativity for both students and learners was highlighted as a plus by 80% of the interviewees. Nevertheless, educators did not appear to agree with the value of online storytelling as an instrument to enhance participation or to express emotions since for than 50% of the responses did not endorse that statement.

Another question related to storytelling intended to narrow down the most relevant aspects that needed to be born in mind to select a good online EFL story (Question 18). Content appropriateness, language difficulty and illustrations were always prioritised since 90% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed with those elements. The type of plot (75%), the extension opportunities (72%) or the book cover (50%) were somehow ranked lower in the teacher's priority scale.

The final question delved into the follow-up activities the participants carried out (Question 20). Vocabulary (78%), listening (63%) and retelling activities (56%) tended to be the most frequent support tasks whereas class discussions (34%) seemed to be one of the least popular tasks in their overall responses.

1.2   Narrative structures most frequently used by Primary school teachers

Participants were asked about two stories that they had used in their EFL classrooms. An array of titles was given and they ranged from traditional tales such as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, *Three Little Pigs*, or *The Little Red Riding Hood* to more contemporary stories adapted to EFL learners such as *The very hungry caterpillar* (Carle, 1969), *Brown Bear, Brown Bear what do you see?* (Martin Jr., 1967), *We're going on a bear hunt* (Rosen, 1989), *Handa's surprise* (Brown, 1994) or *The Gruffallo* (Donaldson, 1999). The arguments were extremely diverse, but could be classified into three main areas: motivation/engagement, appropriateness for curriculum and efficacy for EFL teaching.

Among the possible narrative structures, this research will focus on the survey results that highlighted the importance of the following: Dramatic Response in a Causal structure (from negative to positive in its final turning point) and the Descriptive Circular structure since they may be found in the teacher's literary choices.

The Dramatic Response in a Causal structure is the classical Aristotelian structure, but it offers a turning point at the end, which increases the suspense. The reader, or listener, is encouraged to predict an end which does not finally occur, and she enjoys the pleasure of an alternative ending. This happens because the story is short and the rapid movement

can be done with no damage to the discursive text. The base chain for this structure is the following: clarification + first crisis + ending + final turning point. This final turning point from positive to negative can be found in Oscar Wilde's *The Nightingale and the Rose* (1888), in which, at the end the girl refuses the rose from the student, but the goes back to his routine as if nothing (Nightingale's sacrificed death) had ever taken place. As for visual works, *Alma* (Blass, 2009) and *The Summit* (Felipe, 2009) are examples to be analysed in class since they reinforce the model. In the case of a final turning point from negative to positive, the fable from Robert Louis Stevenson *The Touchstone* (1976), when the prince discovers the terrible truth at the end, but he decides to walk away thanks to the positive view of the touchstone could be another example. In terms of visual works to support this final turning point from negative to positive, *Soar* (Tzue, 2015) and *A Cloudy Lesson* (Xue, 2016) may shed some light on the structure.

The very hungry caterpillar belongs to the group of tales with a Causal structure, which ends negatively but has a positive final turning point. In the analysis, the caterpillar has forced itself to eat everything it can in order to grow up and finally accomplishes the objective. At the end, though, it closes itself into a house called a cocoon and stays inside for more than two weeks. Then, a final turning point appears when one night he nibbles a hole in the cocoon, pushes his way out and becomes a beautiful butterfly (Illuminated Films, 2016).

Going back to the participants' responses, *The very hungry caterpillar* appeared to be the most frequently used one since '*it is relevant to teach food vocabulary*' and children find it '*both motivating and visually interesting*'. Particularly, one primary school teacher stated that: '*It helps the children develop creative-thinking, literacy and language skills. It also helps them to act out the story.*' Finally, an educator read it in class '*because we work the life cycles of an insect and is a very good moment to learn the life cycle of a butterfly + food*'.

The Descriptive structure dedicates its attention to describe and inform about an item or a topic. The base chain for this structure is the following: object/subject description+ it ends when enough described. The books, which fit into this structure, lack a plot since they are informative and just contain images, as in picture books. A Descriptive sub-structure called 'Circular' is sometimes used as an option to guide the reader/listener along the specific story with the help of an animal that becomes the protagonist. The repetition of a sentence is also a common element that helps to maintain the rhythm and the evolution of the plot. This is the case, for example, of *Pete The Cat. I Love My White Shoes* (Litwin, 2010). Pete the Cat goes walking down the street with his new brand shoes and, little by little, the reader is introduced to different colours and materials. The author uses a repetitive song all through the story to keep the attention of the children. On the other hand, visual materials are very useful when working with this descriptive structure.

Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you see? belongs to the Descriptive structure,

specifically to the Circular descriptive structure. As already mentioned above, this structure conveys some pieces of information with a repeated sentence after every sequence of events and it ends with the repetition of the first topic. In this specific case, nine animals, together with nine different colours and some onomatopoeias are introduced. Afterwards, the teacher and the pupils close the sequence of images as a conclusive chapter of events. Thus, the repeated sentence at the beginning of each animal presentation helps the rhythm of the story to be smooth enough to continue reading (Darren Robert McTurk, 2016).

In terms of the teachers' answers, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you see?* Was the most popular first and second option in the survey, because '*it is repetitive and surprising. Young kids love these elements in stories*' and also because '*it was useful to practise colours and animals, which are part of the EFL syllabus'*. A participant mentioned another element, which is inherent to storytelling: '*It contains repetition and rhythm that helps young learners start speaking while enjoying themselves*'.

Conclusions

Despite the teachers' overall perception of possessing good online teaching skills, prior to COVID-19, teachers' training on online teaching appears to be rather scarce or low at the most, as previous studies by Jones et al. (2005) or Huang et al. (2020) indicate, and this lack of training may have negatively impacted on their virtual teaching practice. If we focus on the use of online methodology, we can conclude that a limited number of teachers have taught previous synchronous (live) online lessons before the pandemic, and this finding is in line with Shattuck & Anderson's study (2013) on the infrequent utilization of video conferencing in primary education. The reasons range from insufficient knowledge or unwillingness on the teachers' side to the specific learning characteristics of young and very young learners. The lockdown, however, has seen a very significant raise in the number of educators who use it as a way to offer pupils an avenue to connect and get visual support. Apart from this extensive use of video conferencing tools, recorded videos, virtual classroom management systems and online games have also gained prominence. Teachers have particularly opted for online games as a resource to engage young learners since digital educational games may support the gain of language skills while having fun, as Manesis' study (2020) also reflects. Additionally, games appear to be an excellent tool to cope with mixed ability classes because they establish a one to one interaction that can be adjusted by the learners.

In terms of the challenges that teachers have faced when teaching online the most relevant ones were overcoming their lack of training and support; monitoring children's progress to reach their learning goals; and maintaining the students' motivation. All these obstacles have been reported in the literature (Smaldino, 2008; Shattuck & Anderson, 2013; Huang et al., 2020) in various international contexts and they certainly need to be overcome by offering teacher training that give educators instruments to teach digitally. As for the

most recurrent tools they would like to keep on using, these include video recording and screencast software and online games, and also, in a lower number, virtual classroom management systems and video conferencing programs. The preference for games appears to be in accordance with Manesis' research (2020) in which he confirms the positive relation between learning and engaging pupils with digital educational games. Other video conferencing systems appear to be less popular with young learners because their short attention span might limit the length and frequency of those interactions.

With regards to storytelling, questionnaire findings confirm that all teachers agreed that it was very important tool and should therefore be part of the curriculum in distance learning. The reasons could derive from fact that storytelling not only serves to create a more immersive experience, but also encourages an emotional connection that may be lacking in virtual teaching as claimed by Serrat (2010). However, a majority of educators admitted to not having used virtual tools to read a story to children. This unwillingness to read stories to children may stem from the challenges that virtual stories pose: finding a good online story together with managing the children's involvement seemed to be agreed as the main hurdles. The issue of choosing an online story is not minor because some non-verbal devices such as body language or gestures, that are inherent to storytelling, are simply not present at a distance and furthermore not all stories can be read. The concern about the pupils' involvement, particularly in big groups, has been explored in the literature (Papadopoulou & Ioannis, 2010) and they suggest implementing the activities in smaller groups where children can share ideas and communicate verbally while listening to the story. About the benefits of online storytelling, its role as a tool to develop creativity for both students and learners was highlighted as a plus. Indeed, online storytelling can help teachers in building constructivist environments, where students can learn from creative problem-solving based on collaboration and communication amongst peers as Yelland et al. (2008) suggested in their ICT literacy model.

When participants were asked about two stories that they had used in their EFL classrooms. The arguments were extremely diverse but could be classified into three main areas: motivation/engagement, appropriateness for curriculum and efficacy for EFL teaching. As for traditional tales, *The very hungry caterpillar* appeared to be the most frequently used. This story belongs to the group of tales with a Causal structure, which ends negatively but has a positive final turning point. Teachers agreed that it was motivating, visually interesting and rich in vocabulary. Also, they suggested that it helps creative-thinking, literacy and language skills and it introduces CLIL aspects into class didactics. More specifically, the story is said to consolidate the life-cycle of a butterfly and show how to sequence a scientific procedure, as Ioannou-Georgiou and Verdugo (2011) point out in their classroom experience.

Regarding the EFL stories, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you see?* was the most popular first and second option in the survey. This story belongs to the Descriptive structure, specifically to the Circular descriptive structure. It presents some pieces of information

within a repeated linguistic patter after every topic sequence of events. Teachers may have chosen this story since it involves repetitive language, easy EFL vocabulary closely connected to the syllabus that young and very young learners in primary education must cover.

Data availability statement

Raw data were generated at https://www.encuestafacil.com/RespWeb/Cuestionarios.aspx?EID=2642246. Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding authors [MCB, ARA, MPT and NMC] on request.

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