

Peter J. Mitchell

Storyline and Motivation

An Action Research Case Study



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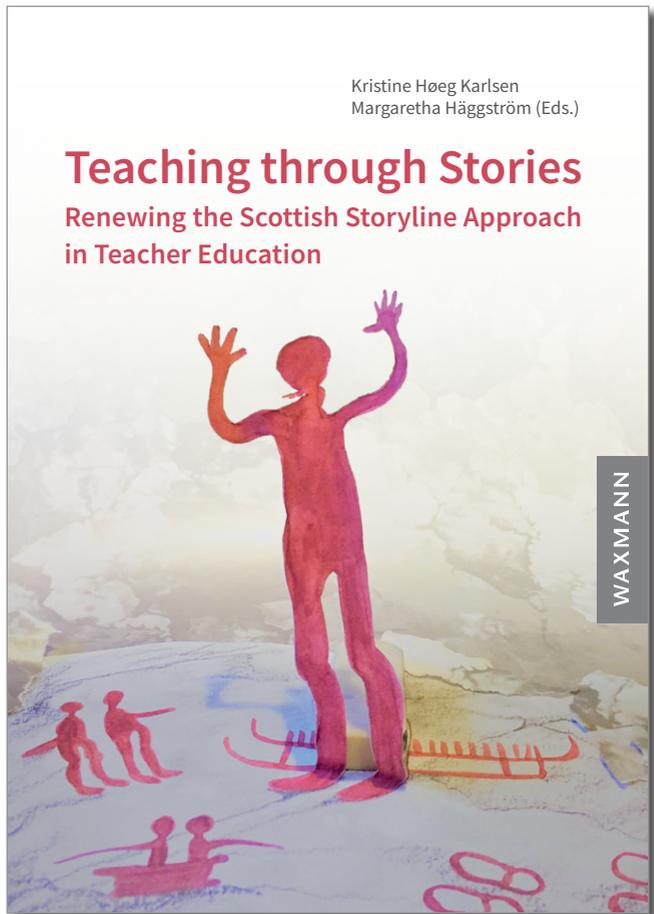
Kristine Høeg Karlsen,
Margaretha Häggström (Eds.)

Teaching through Stories

Renewing the Scottish
Storyline Approach
in Teacher Education

2020, 444 pages, pb, with numerous
coloured illustrations,
€ 49,90, ISBN 978-3-8309-3986-3

E-Book: Open Access
doi.org/10.31244/9783830989868



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Chapter 11

Storyline and Motivation

An Action Research Case Study

Peter J. Mitchell

Abstract. Condensed from an action research case study carried out by the author, the chapter seeks to explore the impact of the Storyline method on learner motivation. Using a case study of a group of university students majoring in foreign languages, empirical data were obtained on participants' satisfaction with teaching, motivation to learn English in class, and satisfaction with their progress in English during teaching and learning via the Storyline method. The findings show that the learners experienced an increase in both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Moreover, they developed into autonomous learners; by taking control of their learning, an atmosphere of collaboration emerged that allowed the participants to progress in their learning with minimal teacher intervention. The author concludes that Storyline has a positive impact on learners' motivation and that Storyline ought to be included in the curriculum for trainee teachers and employed on a greater scale in the classroom.

Keywords: Motivation; action research; case study; language learning

Introduction

This chapter is condensed from an action research case study carried out by the author and focuses on the aspect of learner motivation when working with the Storyline method in the university foreign language classroom. Motivation is a key factor in language learning and is recognised as promoting effective acquisition (Dörnyei, 1998, 2001; Rivers, 2007). The chapter aims to explore the link between Storyline and learner motivation and, thereby, to answer the question of what impact Storyline has on learner motivation. The chapter also seeks to recommend action research case studies as a methodology particularly appropriate to teachers researching their own professional practice. Although motivation in learning has been investigated by a great number of researchers working in a multitude of contexts, the issue of learner motivation in Storyline remains under-researched. This chapter examines Storyline in the light of existing research on learner motivation, through the lens of an action research case study on language teaching at a university.

Storyline and motivation

Creswell (1997) links motivation in Storyline to its being learner-oriented and oriented to developing learner autonomy. Both of these are viewed as a prerequisite to modern

language education by a wide range of authors (Bell, 1995; Cameron, 2001; Rivers, 2007). Furthermore, motivation and autonomy are viewed as having a mutual relationship (Ushioda, 2007, 2011). Deci & Flaste (1995, p. 2) propose that learners are autonomous when they are ‘fully willing to do what they are doing, and they embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment.’ Learner autonomy may be described thus:

[T]he product of an interactive process in which the teacher gradually enlarges the scope of her learners’ autonomy by gradually allowing them more control of the process and content of their learning (Little, 2007, p. 26).

This fits what Kocher (1999, p. 17) calls ‘structured freedom.’ It could be argued that this ‘structured freedom’ makes Storyline even closer to real life, in that in our own lives we exercise our own decisions, but within certain contexts which we do not and cannot control; circumstances beyond our control can impact upon the outcomes of our decisions. This is summed up by Lewis & Vialleton (2011, p. 218):

In language learning, many aspects of the situation are beyond the immediate control of learner or teacher. The inability to control them does not make either less autonomous (...) Autonomy, both in learning and in life, is just as much about how one reflects on and deals with what one cannot control, as about the – rather strange – desire to control whatever one can.

In Storyline, learners do retain much more autonomy than many other methods allow. The role of the teacher is similar to that in other learner-oriented approaches in that he/she serves as a facilitator rather than instructor/provider of knowledge (Dörnyei, 2001). This requires the learners to think more and rely on their own resources, enabling them to become independent learners who ‘learn how to learn’ and who are capable of solving problems.

Deci & Ryan (1985, p. 3) state that, ‘The study of motivation is the exploration of the energisation and direction of behaviour.’ Motivation may be extrinsic or intrinsic (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2007; Schunk, Pintrich & Meece, 2008). Intrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, whereas extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 55). Students’ ownership of their learning in Storyline has been noted by many Storyline researchers to impact positively upon students’ intrinsic motivation (Ehlers et al., 2006; Creswell, 2007; Hofmann, 2007; Mitchell-Barrett, 2010). By creating their own characters learners are able to internalise feelings and emotions, and in doing so ‘feel a strong sense of ownership’ (Harkness, 2007, p. 20). Indeed, ‘the learners, the creators, become those people’ (Bell, 2000, p. 4). In taking on such roles, their feelings of involvement and ownership might be expected to result in an increase in their motivation (Ehlers et al., 2006; Kocher, 2007; Mitchell-Barrett, 2010; Ahlquist, 2011). Creswell (2007, p. 91) writes that ‘a good story draws us into its spell as we predict what is coming, and we anticipate its unfolding with joy and excitement’. He continues by noting that Storyline’s *Principle of Anticipation* ensures that learning never stops because the learners feel part of the process and do not stop thinking about the story,

which ‘provides an atmosphere that is conducive to motivated, active learning’ (ibid.). In studies on Storyline in the secondary and young adult classrooms, indeed, increased learner engagement reflecting enhanced motivation is a common theme (see, for example, Larsson, 2003; Hugosson, 2005; Ahlquist, 2011). Krenicky-Albert (2004, p. 32) emphasises:

...whereas many methodologies result in one single product, Storyline is stronger product-oriented with respect to nearly all activities of the learning process, from the design of place and people... to the preparation of a final event.

Since Storyline involves the creation of many ‘products’ the principle of ownership of these products is enhanced, which results in higher motivation for all the learners involved. Although it is true that levels of motivation may vary between individuals doing the same task and also for an individual over time (Schunk et al., 2008), in Storyline motivation which arises from engagement in one task may carry the learner into the next (Van den Branden, 2006; Ahlquist, 2011).

In Storyline, it is the learners themselves, rather than the teacher, who want to set high standards when presenting their products in class; they want to impress the audience with good and correct products so they feel ‘*intrinsically motivated* to work hard’ (Kocher, 2007, p. 122) (italics in original). Storyline also encourages mutual respect and learners ‘feel a very real and positive partnership with the teacher who plays a significant role as the director and designer of the story’ (Bell, 2006, p. 58). This could have a positive impact on foreign language classrooms where the teaching and learning process has been hampered by teacher-centred methods or issues of hierarchy. In discussing Storyline and motivation, Ahlquist (2011, p. 50) writes:

What contributes to increased motivation seems to be the opportunity to work more independently, both individually and in groups, use skills other than reading and writing, and to be involved... [Although research has shown] some older learners to be resistant to practical work, many responded positively, one reason perhaps being that such work has a function in the Storyline.

When activities are meaningful, motivation is enhanced (Bell, 2000; Ehlers et al., 2006; Kocher, 2007). Storyline’s emphasis on authentic communication and fluency, as opposed to artificial dialogues and accuracy, has a positive impact on motivation. When students communicate with each other and realise that they are understood, they are ‘motivated to participate in communication’ (Kocher, 2007, p. 123). Greater motivation ought in turn to have a positive impact on learning, and a method such as Storyline might be expected to result in greater fluency and better communication skills. The need to investigate this rigorously led to the action research case study described in this chapter.

Research design

Action research can be viewed as a self-reflective cycle, which can be summarised as: 1) plan, 2) act, 3) observe, and 4) reflect, leading back to a new cycle (Kemmis, 1997). This

self-reflective cycle is aimed at solving a given problem. The main purpose of action research is ‘to improve practice – either one’s own practice or the effectiveness of an institution’ (Koshy, 2010, p. 9).

Many action researchers favour case study research since case studies concentrate on what is unique (Wallace, 1998). Action research frequently uses case studies, which are a powerful means of capturing real data which can serve as a basis for action (Koshy, 2010). The case study is a research strategy with an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context (Yin, 2013). Case studies can allow us to penetrate situations in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis (Cohen et al., 2011). The benefits of carrying out case studies are that they enable us to explore the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of events, being both exploratory and descriptive (Yin, 2013).

In undertaking this study I had to be mindful of the fact that I was in a dual role as both teacher and researcher. Though teacher-researchers can use their close proximity to the research as an advantage (Hammersley, 1993), an insider researcher such as a ‘practitioner-researcher’ essentially ‘inhabits the hyphen’ (Drake & Heath, 2011, p. 25) and must safeguard against losing sense of sight of oneself in the context of perceptions by other actors (Humphrey, 2007, p. 23). Similarly to Mitchell-Barrett (2010, p. 75), it was important for me that the participants ‘felt comfortable during the research process and that they had a positive experience’, so it was an advantage that the research was conducted during their normal lesson times, in a setting which they found familiar.

Although difficulties may arise in practitioner research if there are conflicts between roles as a researcher and as a practitioner (Gorman, 2007), the purpose behind the research was to find the most effective way to teach my students and help them to learn, while ensuring they were motivated. Furthermore, being both a teacher and a researcher may be seen as advantageous in that, in practitioner research, ‘it is through a merging of these functions that the person develops their unique and applicable perspective on their research project’ (Drake & Heath, 2011, p. 32).

As a practitioner-researcher, examining first and foremost my own practice and that of my students, my research for the purposes of this study was limited in scope, focused on a group of my students. The study was conducted over a four-week period, thereby covering the whole of the teaching of one topic in the curriculum. The key issue for investigation was learner motivation during teaching and learning using The Storyline Approach. The research took place at my own timetabled classes, twice a week, with the given group at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Tomsk State University. The group was made up of seven 4th year students, all male, aged between 20–21 years, of mixed ability in terms of English according to the Common European Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale (Council of Europe, 2011). In cases where the wider population is 30 or fewer, such as in a group of students, it is recommended to include the whole of the wider population as the sample (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), thus ensuring that the sample better represents the features of the wider population (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 145). I therefore anticipated that all the members of the given group would form the study sample, although of course I recognised the possibility that some of the students from the group may be excluded from the study on the basis of poor attendance, for example

due to illness, or due to a lack of desire to participate in the study. As it turned out, all seven students elected to participate in the study. Attendance was 100%, which is not unusual in my professional practice.

Institutional ethics approval was obtained in advance. Prior to the study commencing, I informed the group of intended participants about the nature of the research – the trying out of a new method in order to examine its appropriateness and research its effect on the teaching and learning process. I ensured that all students were aware that they could elect not to participate in the study without any consequences and, furthermore, if they chose to participate, they could withdraw from the study at any time prior to the end of data collection without prejudice to their studies. Each student completed a participant consent form; as it turned out, all the students elected to participate in the study and none chose to withdraw.

Prior to the study's commencement, I asked the students to complete pre-study questionnaires rating their perceived ability in language skills and providing information on what they like and do not like about their English classes. The information provided by the students enabled me to identify which problematic areas in teaching and learning could be tackled using Storyline, which allowed me to refine the approach used over the given period. During the study I employed participant observation, keeping a teacher's diary to record what happened during classes in terms of student reception and participation, which also enabled refinement of the approach. The students kept journals throughout the study, making entries after each class on what they liked and did not like, and their thoughts on language skills. At the end of each week I collected the journals and read the students' entries over the weekend. Upon completion of the study I asked the students to complete post-study questionnaires rating their perceived ability in language skills and providing information on what they liked and did not like about their English classes taught using The Storyline Approach. I also conducted interviews and a focus group with the students to obtain richer data on issues such as motivation of students and their personal perception of Storyline and their progress in English during the study. In the course of the study, therefore, data was obtained regarding the impact of Storyline on learners' satisfaction and motivation.

The empirical data consisted of pre- and post-study questionnaires, student journals, the teacher's diary, interviews and the focus group. To gain understanding of the data obtained in the course of the study, interpretive analysis was employed in the manner proposed in Hatch (2002, p. 181), making use of the various data collection methods used. Firstly, the data were read in order to get a sense of the whole. Impressions previously recorded during the study in the teacher's diary were reviewed, along with data from the questionnaire responses and the student journals. The data were then coded where interpretations were supported or challenged, prior to being clarified with the participants at the interview stage. The data from the interviews were then reread and coded before being clarified again in the focus group. Finally, excerpts supporting the interpretations were identified and referred to in the write-up. Interpretation should be linked to research purposes and therefore the data are presented according to research question for convenience (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 552).

It is coding that ‘leads you from the data to the idea’ (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 137). This research being a study of student response, the codes were ‘positive response’, ‘negative response’. Subcodes, in turn, were more specific observations related to the codes (Saldaña, 2013, p. 12). For example, a subcode might be ‘enjoyment’ by a learner of an activity, which would be coded as a positive response. The interviews and focus group provided opportunities to consult the participants, termed ‘member checking’, as recommended by Efron & Ravid (2013, p. 71), in order to check the trustworthiness of my interpretations (Ezzy, 2002; Saldaña, 2013).

Findings

Questionnaires

The questionnaires generated data representing changes in the students’ satisfaction and motivation over the course of the Storyline topic. All seven participants completed the pre- and post-Storyline questionnaires, which allowed an analysis to be made of each student’s response to Storyline. The first three questions in the questionnaires concerned participants’ satisfaction with teaching, motivation to learn English in class, and satisfaction with their progress in English. This enabled a comparison to be made of the participants’ perception of the previous teaching approach and Storyline as an approach in foreign language teaching. The findings from the students’ answers to the questions are set out below.

In the pre-Storyline questionnaire, four of the students neither agreed nor disagreed that they were motivated to study English in class, and three agreed that they were motivated. In the post-Storyline questionnaire two students agreed that they were motivated to study English in class, and five students stated that they strongly agreed that they were motivated. This represents an increase in motivation for all the participants.

The above data suggest a positive student response to Storyline as a foreign language teaching method. A comparison of the answers relating to the questions on student satisfaction and motivation asked in the pre- and post-Storyline questionnaires (calculated as a group mean) is provided in Figure 1.

Teacher’s Diary

The teacher’s diary supports to a great extent, and so helps to confirm, what the participants wrote in their questionnaires and student journals, and what subsequently emerged during the interviews and focus group. The data from the teacher’s diary on the student response to Storyline as a foreign language teaching method are presented chronologically, as a narrative, in order to provide an overview of how the student response developed over the course of the study.

The Storyline itself began with a mixture of interest and apprehension on the part of the group; the interest being due to the new format of learning, and the apprehension for the same reason. The students quickly adjusted to the new approach, although art work received a mixed response. The key questions generated a lively discussion in

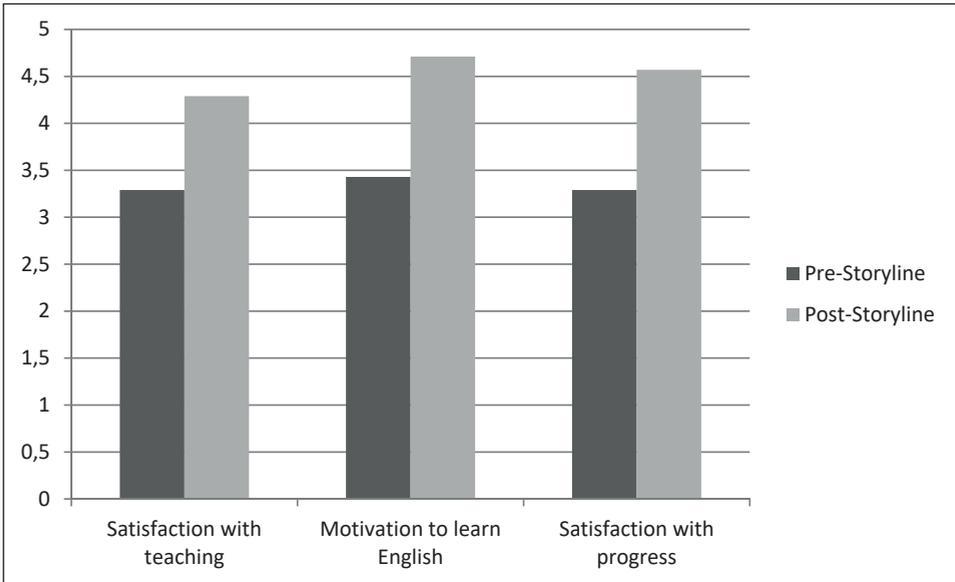


Fig. 1: A comparison of students' satisfaction and motivation pre- and post-Storyline (five-point Likert scale)

English, in which all the students participated although in the first classes two learners, both extremely proficient, spoke more than the others and another two learners, both less proficient, began to involve themselves actively only after my encouragement.

Towards the end of the Storyline, conversation in class began to turn towards the students' opinion of the new teaching approach. The seventh – penultimate – class seemed to be almost a disappointment for the students as they realised that we were approaching the end of the Storyline topic. Four learners asked almost simultaneously if we could 'do another Storyline'. Upon asking the group if they would like to do so, all the students answered in the affirmative. In discussing what they had learned, the participants spoke at length on vocabulary and speaking skills. When I listed new knowledge and practised skills, such as grammar and writing skills, the students almost seemed surprised, as they realised that they had learned many new things without even noticing. This feeling was summed up by Learner 1 who said, *'It was fun and we didn't think that it was learning.'* The discussion on what the students had enjoyed and not enjoyed was heavily slanted towards the positive rather than the negative, possibly because they were still caught up in the enthusiasm of the latest classes. When given the opportunity to reflect – in their journals, interviews and the focus group – they were able to do so more deliberately. The students all seemed to be looking forward to the final Storyline class: the celebration or 'leaving party'.

The eighth and final class provided another opportunity for the students to reflect on what they had learned and share their thoughts with each other. All the participants spoke positively about their learning experience and enthusiastically demonstrated their newly gained knowledge. Several times during the class, the students stated that they would like to use Storyline again in the teaching and learning process and vari-

ously told me and our guest that Storyline was fun, interesting and effective, and *'better than our other classes'*. The time seemed to pass very quickly and involved so much speaking by the participants that at the class's conclusion half the snacks and the cake were untouched and were, therefore, divided up among the students and taken home for later consumption. The teacher's diary, therefore, indicates a positive student response to Storyline as a foreign language teaching approach.

Student Journals

The student journals provided the perspectives of the other participants in the study, and therefore provided relevant data to help answer all of the research questions. Each student made an entry in his journal after each Storyline class, without exception, which boded well for the study. As it turned out, though, some students were more forthcoming than others in terms of what they wrote and the detail of their thoughts. Indeed, some students commented on some aspects of what they had done, but not on others. Overall, however, the journal entries support my own observations in the teacher's diary regarding the students' responses to Storyline, yet also reveal what was not necessarily visible to me: the students' own thoughts and feelings on what they were doing.

Writing on their feelings about classes, common words used repeatedly are *'fun'*, *'interesting'*, *'useful'* and *'effective'*. Learner 1, for example, wrote the following about the first class: *'The class was fun and interesting. I liked it.'* Many students wrote that they liked learning English using Storyline, such as Learner 2 after the fifth class: *'It's good to learn English in such way!'* which is supported also by Learner 7 writing after the sixth class: *'I didn't know I could learn English in the fun way.'* There is also evidence of intrinsic motivation: *'Before Storyline I studied hard... but Storyline is good because now learning English is more interesting and fun way to study'* (Learner 7 after the eighth class). Overall, therefore, the student journals indicate a positive student response to Storyline as a foreign language teaching method.

Interviews

The interviews, which took place shortly after the Storyline topic, provided an additional opportunity to understand the students' perspectives. Equally importantly, they were useful for checking and confirming that I correctly understood the participants' responses to Storyline.

There was a consensus among the students that they felt ambivalent about the teaching and learning process prior to Storyline, with no particularly strong feelings either way, characterised by such comments as *'OK'* (Learners 1 and 4) and *'not bad'* (Learner 5). When discussing the teaching and learning process during Storyline, however, the students were much more positive. All the learners described Storyline as *'interesting'*. Learner 2 related how it was *'very interesting to think about what we'll do in the next class.'* Learner 3 said it was a *'completely new'* way of learning for him and *'I thought it was cool'*. All the participants reported increased motivation. When asked why they

thought they had become more motivated, the students' answers were similar. Learner 1 noted that he felt *'more involved in the learning process'*. Learners 5 and 6 said that they felt close to their characters and the story they invented. Learner 4 spoke about how he learned real-life things that he could use immediately, in terms of both language and information.

Speaking about which teaching method they preferred, all the participants chose Storyline. Learner 1 said that this was because he thought Storyline was *'interesting and innovative'*. Learner 2 stated that Storyline was *'more interesting'* than previous classes, which was true for the other students as well. Learner 7 said that Storyline was *'brand new'* after classes that were too routine. Learner 7, when I asked him about his level of satisfaction – in the questionnaires he reported the same level of satisfaction – replied that he was happy with the teaching and learning process both before and during Storyline, as he felt he had progressed well in both, but added that he found Storyline more interesting and motivating. When asked if they would prefer to continue using Storyline or not, all the participants answered in the affirmative. To sum up, the interviews show a positive student response to Storyline.

Focus Group

The focus group provided yet another opportunity to confirm previous findings and explore the students' perspectives on Storyline. After discussing the findings from the pre- and post-Storyline questionnaires the participants were unanimous in their preference for Storyline as opposed to the methods earlier employed in the teaching and learning process. The students all agreed that the previous teaching methods were too routine and not particularly interesting. Common opinions were that Storyline as an approach to teaching was much more interesting and flexible, allowing students to be creative and be more involved in their learning, while using their imagination. They had looked forward to each class and were motivated to work harder.

Towards the end of the focus group, I asked the participants whether or not they would like to continue working with Storyline in the future. The group was unanimous in answering affirmatively. Finally, I asked the participants if they would like to add anything else, at which point the students reiterated their desire to continue working with Storyline in future classes. On this positive note, the focus group session concluded. The focus group thereby confirmed the positive student response to Storyline as a foreign language teaching method.

Discussion

The findings show an increase in learner motivation, which all the students agreed had improved thanks to Storyline. As discussed previously, motivation may be divided into two basic types: *'intrinsic motivation'*, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and *'extrinsic motivation'*, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome' (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 55) (italics in original). As for intrinsic motivation, *'fun'*, *'interesting'*, *'useful'* and *'effective'* were

common responses for many of the students; what Rivers (2007, p. 1) calls a ‘fresh and lively approach... basic to effective language experiences’. Motivation in Storyline is also said to come from increased student ownership of learning, due to opportunities for student creativity and control of the learning process (Creswell, 1997; Kocher, 2007). In language learning, greater attention is now being paid to the relationship between autonomy and motivation (Benson, 2006). Intrinsic motivation may be positively impacted upon through a ‘sense of personal autonomy’ (Deci & Flaste, 1995, p. 30). This sense of personal autonomy was reflected in student responses to Storyline, such as Learner 1’s interview comments that he felt *‘more involved in the learning process’*. Additionally, several of the students reported that they enjoyed *‘creating’*, be it stories, characters or solutions to problems. It is interesting to note the comments contrasting Storyline and the previous teaching approach by Learner 7, written in his journal after the eighth class: *‘Before Storyline I studied hard... but Storyline is good because now learning English is more interesting and fun way to study’*. Comments such as these suggest that while the opportunity for employment provides a stimulus for extrinsic motivation, irrespective of teaching method, Storyline as an approach had a positive impact on students’ intrinsic motivation.

Gardner (1985) conceives motivation in language learning as subsuming three components, namely, motivational intensity (effort), desire to learn the language (want/will) and an attitude towards the act of learning the language (task-enjoyment). Student motivation was closely connected to the participants’ sense of ownership. Learner ownership is fundamental to Storyline and mandates the students themselves taking responsibility for their learning, which is aided through the use of imagination and taking on another’s role (Hofmann, 2007). This was accomplished and enjoyed by the students. Kocher (2007) notes, too, that in Storyline students are motivated to work hard and set high standards for themselves in order to impress the audience with their skills. The increased effort was accompanied by reflective learning coming from the learners’ own initiative, which is an important tenet of Storyline (Falkenberg, 2007, p. 52) and had an impact on learner motivation. The students described Storyline as interesting and related that they looked forward to each class and wondered what would happen as part of the topic; this resulted in greater efforts regarding preparation and higher motivation, indicating that they displayed the task-enjoyment described in Dörnyei (1998). Moreover, motivation arising from engagement in a task carried the students into the next (Van den Branden, 2006; Ahlquist, 2011). No less important for student motivation was their perception that they were engaged in meaningful activity (Creswell, 1997; Kocher, 2007), learning useful things, as identified by Hofmann (2007) and Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011).

The students adjusted to Storyline very well, as seen from their responses and continued engagement throughout the Storyline topic. There emerged intrinsic motivation, from the way tasks were presented (Dörnyei, 2001), in addition to the already-existing extrinsic motivation of studying hard in order to graduate. They developed into autonomous learners; by taking control of their learning, within the framework provided by me as the teacher, an atmosphere of collaboration emerged that allowed the participants to progress in their learning with minimal teacher intervention. As described by

Bell (2006), the partnership between teacher and learners was very real and positive. Issues of hierarchy arose only in limited cases when it was necessary for me to intervene in order to, for example, ensure the timely completion of tasks and the moving forward of learning. Otherwise, divergences in learner interaction and teacher expectation, as per Seedhouse (1997), did not occur. Not only did the roles of the students change, but also my role as teacher changed. As mentioned earlier in the discussion of Storyline as a method, Bell (2000, p. 3) talks about the ‘paradox... that the teacher has planned for almost every activity in which the learners will engage but the students feel that they have ownership of the story’. This did not, however, lead to teacher domination, a specific concern of Legenhausen (1998), but created an atmosphere of ‘structured freedom’ Kocher (1999, p. 17). Indeed, teachers must respect and accept the learners’ decisions (Bell, 2006). It might be said that the students gained ownership of their learning, whereas I ‘retained ownership’ of the teaching. Instead of being a figure of control, my role became that of facilitator of the educational process, as described in Kocher (2007). This role is aptly defined in Harmer (2007, p. 108), who writes that a facilitator is:

[O]ne who is democratic rather than autocratic, and one who fosters learner autonomy through the use of groupwork and pairwork and by acting as more of a resource than a transmitter of knowledge.

The role of the teacher as an organiser of the educational process and facilitator of learning, as envisaged in Storyline (Creswell, 1997; Harkness, 2007), led to a true sense of collaboration as we worked together for the purposes of a common goal – to advance the students’ progress in English. Indeed, throughout the Storyline topic the students and I worked in an atmosphere of mutual liking and respect (Rivers, 2007) that proved particularly conducive to the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. I observed that my intervention as regards issues of classroom management (students not working or not paying attention) was required no more often than previously. The students themselves seemed to appreciate my role as an adviser (*‘you helped us to teach ourselves’* – Learner 4, interview) and I noticed that they asked more questions in order to find out information. Dörnyei (1998) discusses the importance of learner autonomy to motivation. In the course of the Storyline topic I acquired greater understanding of how much the students themselves could achieve when given ownership of their learning and came to appreciate how powerful this was as a motivator in foreign language learning (Ehlers et al., 2006; Kocher, 2007; Ahlquist, 2011). Chan (2013) notes the important role of the teacher in promoting interactional authenticity in the foreign language classroom, which cannot be achieved via a textbook. The students favourably contrasted the changing role of the teacher before and during Storyline (*‘Before, the textbook guided us. In Storyline, the teacher guides us to be more flexible’* – Learner 1, focus group).

The students’ clear preference for Storyline as opposed to the previous teaching methods was due to various factors such as increased satisfaction with the teaching during Storyline, greater motivation to learn English using Storyline, and higher satisfaction with progress in the course of Storyline. Satisfaction with the teaching and learning process itself seems to be closely connected with student autonomy and own-

ership of learning (Deci & Flaste, 1995; Dörnyei, 1998; Ushioda, 2007, 2011) and also with the students' perception of what they are learning as being useful and meaningful (Lettschert, 2006; Hofmann, 2007; Ahlquist, 2011). The study's finding of enhanced learner motivation supports the findings of doctoral research by Mitchell-Barrett (2010) and Ahlquist (2011), and demonstrates Storyline's capacity to motivate language learners at the tertiary level of education.

Conclusions

Motivation, as stated previously, is a key factor in language learning and is recognised as promoting effective acquisition (Dörnyei, 1998, 2001; Rivers, 2007). The creating of characters, Storyline's defining feature (Harkness, 2007), allowed the students to internalise their feelings and emotions, resulting in a deeper and more meaningful learning experience as the students became the characters that they had created (Bell, 2000). It was this involvement of students in their learning, combined with giving them ownership of the learning process in terms of creating and developing the Storyline, that raised motivation and improved the effectiveness of learning (Kocher, 2007). Student creativity and ownership of learning is fundamental to Storyline (Bell, 2000). Hofmann (2007, p. 74), discussing this, writes:

It has been suggested this potential comes from the coupling of imagination and multiple perspectives with the 'facts': from inviting the [learners] to study the phenomena at hand from the perspectives of their characters, to take their own perspective on these phenomena, and even 'step inside' and 'live through' them.

The importance of Storyline's *Principle of Ownership* (Creswell, 1997) is highlighted by the student comments on motivation, for example, that their motivation was due to increased ownership of their learning in terms of creativity and control of the learning process. Hofmann (2007) asserts that learner ownership of learning is enhanced through engagement in meaningful activities. The participants found that the structure of their learning was useful and meaningful, as provided for in Storyline's *Principle of Story* (Creswell, 1997; Kocher, 2007). There was evidence throughout the Storyline of reflective learning, sparked by the learners' own curiosity (Falkenberg, 2007, p. 52). The key questions employed in each Storyline episode (Creswell, 1997; Harkness, 2007) generated lively discussion among the students, which was important for language skills, and also made effective use of Storyline's *Principle of Structure before Activity*, which enabled future learning to be focused on what the students needed to cover. The research tasks, watching of the documentary film and reading of the short story – all connected to Storyline's *Principle of Context* – were found to be useful in allowing the students to build on their pre-existing concepts as per the *Principle of Structure before Activity*, before expanding upon their knowledge and implementing new knowledge in practice. Storyline's *Principle of the Teacher's Rope* was found to influence the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process, for example, in determining the amount of time to be spent on certain activities and the detail of instructions to be given in

advance. The *Principle of Anticipation* maintained the students' interest throughout Storyline, which also impacted on student motivation and the observed effort that they put into their work.

During the Storyline topic, instead of (only) completing tasks, the students created their own characters, took on their roles and approached the tasks 'in character', which increased their feelings of involvement (Bell, 2000), enhanced the motivating nature of the tasks (Dörnyei, 2001) and made the tasks more authentic and meaningful (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011) and the language more real for them (Widdowson, 1998).

The episodes and key questions, important parts of the planning format (Harkness, 2007), provided the necessary structure and context for the learning, building on the students' existing knowledge and developing it. Having taken on their characters' roles, the students engage in role-playing and problem-solving tasks, which were found to be particularly popular features of Storyline because they were fun (*'I really enjoyed talking about incidents and solving them'* – Learner 6, journal), authentic and viewed as meaningful and relevant to real life (*'I can see myself doing these things and solving these problems in my future profession'* – Learner 1, focus group). The incidents central to any Storyline topic allowed the students to use and further develop their knowledge (Creswell, 2007), including their language skills. The class organisation allowed for effective, collaborative work and provided opportunities for reflective thinking and support for less proficient learners (Foster & Ohta, 2005; Ahlquist, 2011). The conclusion to the Storyline topic, in terms of both the review and the celebration, did indeed provide opportunities to reflect on what was learned and accomplished, and whether the pedagogic outcomes were met (Willis, 1996). All this supports the view that Storyline has a positive impact on learners' motivation and that Storyline ought to be included in the curriculum for trainee teachers and employed on a greater scale in the classroom.

In such a small-scale study one must be cautious about making any generalisations based on such a small number of participants. The absence of a control group forces us to rely exclusively on the responses of one group of students and the observations of their teacher. In addition, the study involved descriptive statistics from the pre- and post-Storyline questionnaires supporting the qualitative data obtained (Stringer, 2008). Such data in such a small sample must be viewed with particular caution. This is, however, somewhat mitigated by the employment of triangulation in the data collection process and by providing opportunities via the interviews and focus groups for the participants to validate the findings by confirming that they were correctly understood and interpreted (Burns, 2010; Yin, 2013; Stringer, 2014).

Being a participant observer, I can make no claims to being objective, although I have made every attempt to be so to the extent possible in such a context by, for example, taking steps to ensure that no student felt coerced into responding in any particular way during the data collection and, indeed, throughout the Storyline topic. It is possible, of course, that my students wanted – even subconsciously – to please their teacher by providing answers they thought I wanted. Given the very direct responses received, however, this might be considered unlikely. The fact that they remained very engaged throughout the Storyline topic supports this. It is also possible that the very fact of

trying a new teaching approach may have affected their responses (see the ‘Hawthorne effect’ in Cohen et al., 2011, p. 314). It ought to be noted, though, that the participants’ responses seemed to become more positive as the Storyline topic continued and that they were reluctant to see it come to an end. Ultimately, the students were provided throughout with ownership of their learning and multiple opportunities to voice their perspectives, thereby enhancing the study’s trustworthiness (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

In acknowledging the limitations of the study, I make no attempt to generalise the findings to other contexts; I accept that all contexts are unique in their own ways. I state that the findings of the study and any conclusions which may be drawn are applicable only to the specific context of my research. Discussing generalisability, Cohen et al. (2011, p. 186) maintain that, ‘[I]t is possible to assess the typicality of a situation – the participants and settings, to identify possible comparison groups, and to indicate how data might translate into different settings and cultures.’ In this sense, further research on using Storyline in foreign language teaching in a variety of contexts may allow generalisations to be made.

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