FREE COMMENTARY TO ENHANCE WRITING AND SPEAKING SKILLS IN EFL TEACHER TRAINING

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Abstract

In recent years, the application of Audiovisual Translation (AVT) in Foreign Language Learning (FLL) within a communicative approach has attracted the attention of scholars and European institutions. A fast-growing body of research supports the integration of AVT in the language classroom because of its benefits as a learning task (Lertola 2019). Captioning and revoicing (written and oral language transfer procedures respectively) can enhance receptive and productive language skills. In particular, captioning and revoicing tasks allow language learners to deal with authentic multimodal material that combines both verbal and non-verbal elements in an innovative and motivating manner (Sokoli 2020). This paper discusses an exploratory study on the application of a less-studied revoicing mode – free commentary – with 18 Infant Education students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a Vocational Education and Training (VET) centre in Madrid, Spain. Within their professional module "Teaching English in Infant Education", learners have developed a free commentary task in which they had to collaboratively create the written script of a short animation and then record it individually. The task had a double objective: to foster learners' writing and speaking skills, and to give them the opportunity to develop an infant-targeted digital storytelling activity. The didactic use of English in teacher training can be considered a form of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) since it should be tailored to the learners' future professional needs (Masoni 2019). A number of data collection instruments were employed in the exploratory study, namely a feedback questionnaire for learners, an observation rubric for the teacher-researcher and the only-observing teacher, evaluation of learners' written scripts through a tailored-made rubric, and an audio-recorded focus-group with learners. The findings of this study support previous research on the benefits of revoicing tasks in language learning.

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in the application of Audiovisual Translation in FLL within a communicative approach, which is supported by a fast-growing body of research (Lertola 2019). Captioning and revoicing can enhance both receptive and productive language skills as well as other transferable skills. On the one hand, captioning requires language learners to provide the written translation

(interlingual subtitling) or a condensed transcription (intralingual subtitling) of the original spoken language of an AV product. On the other hand, revoicing allows learners to add their voice to an AV product in a number of ways. Dubbing involves replacing the voice of the people speaking in a video with learners' voices. It is usually a challenging exercise as it entails lip synchronization. Audio Description (AD) – aimed at assisting visually impaired people – requires learners to add a spoken description of visual aspects of the video between stretches of the original spoken dialogue, while voice-over is an oral translation superposed on the original spoken text. Lastly, free commentary is an adaptation of the original spoken text which includes additions and clarifications as well as omissions (Gambier 2013). The oral adaptation should be synchronized with the visual aspects rather than with the soundtrack. This technique is usually employed in documentaries and children's programmes.

Free commentary provides learners with more freedom to revoice the video selected compared to AD. In the case of a silent video, like the one selected for this experimental research, learners can create a story by getting inspiration from the images but also by adding more imaginative elements. Furthermore, learners can play with the language by using different voices and sound effects if applicable. AD requires a higher degree of precision from learners in their description while respecting time constraints. Both didactic modes allow for the enhancement of integrated language skills, namely speaking, writing and reading skills. In addition, both modes can foster mediation skills if tasks require translation.

AVT tasks in FLL entail that captioning and revoicing can be either standard or reverse. Standard interlingual procedures refer to the written or oral transfer from L2 to L1; reverse interlingual procedures indicate the language transfer from L1 into L2, while intralingual is another combination that involves the transfer from L2 to L2. In language learning, AVT techniques do not always imply translation or the presence of a source text. According to Sokoli (2020), if the video is silent (i.e. non-verbal) the activity can be categorized as intersemiotic (i.e. from non-verbal to L2). An intersemiotic activity could be suitable for voice-over and free commentary since learners should create a suitable text and revoice the silent video in L2. To this purpose, engaging videos should be selected to attract learners' attention.

AVT tasks can be used effectively in a variety of learning contexts. Scholars and teachers have used AVT tasks as a one-off activity or as an integral part of a language course in face-to-face, blended or online contexts, mainly in secondary-school and university settings (Lertola 2019). However, research on a number of aspects is currently needed. Within revoicing, dubbing and AD are the most investigated AVT modes (Ibáñez Moreno and Vermeulen 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Talaván and Lertola 2016; Talaván and Costal 2017; Sánchez Requena 2020). Therefore, other revoicing modes such as voice-over (Talaván and Rodríguez-Arancón 2018) and free commentary could be the focus of forthcoming studies. Furthermore, learners should come from diverse backgrounds other than secondary schools and universities. Teacher training has also been largely neglected in the literature. Bearing this in mind, the current study attempts to shed more light on this aspect.

The paper presents and discusses an exploratory study on the application of a less-studied revoicing mode – free commentary – with Infant Education students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a Vocational Education and Training (VET) cen-

tre. Within their professional module "Teaching English in Infant Education", learners have developed a free commentary task in which they had to collaboratively create the written script of a short animation and then record it individually. The task had a double objective: to foster learners' language skills and to give them the opportunity to develop an infant-targeted digital storytelling activity. Therefore, participants could act both as language learners and as in-training infant teachers. A number of data collection instruments were employed in the exploratory study, namely a feedback questionnaire and an observation rubric for the teacher-researcher (TR) and the only-observing teacher (OT) during the experimental session. After the task, an audio-recorded focus-group was carried out with some participants. Furthermore, learners' written scripts and audio recordings of the short animation were evaluated through a tailored-made rubric by the English-native-speaker language assistant of the VET centre.

2. The study and the participants

The exploratory study took place in a VET centre in Madrid. In the Spanish education system vocational qualifications have both academic and professional value. Vocational qualifications are offered through a three-level programme: basic, intermediate and higher (Sancha and Gutiérrez 2016). The first level is designed for students aged 15-17 who meet certain academic requirements (European Commission 2020), while the intermediate level is post-compulsory secondary education, generally attended by students aged between 16 and 18. Finally, the third so-called higher level is considered as tertiary education (UNESCO 2012). The duration of higher VET programmes is 2,000 hours spread over two years. These programmes award the corresponding Higher Technician Diploma that grants access to further university studies. Sancha and Gutiérrez (2016: 42) point out that "VET diploma programmes are approved by Royal Decrees with a 55-65% national curricula and a 45-35% of the curricula contents settled at the regions, according to the socioeconomic characteristics of the immediate environment."

The VET centre in which the study took place has a number of programmes in different specialisms within two main occupational families, namely Business and Marketing, and Socio-cultural and Community Services. Both occupational families offer intermediate and higher programmes. However, most of the students are enrolled in higher VET programmes. There are two higher VET programmes within the Business and Marketing occupational family, whereas the Socio-cultural and Community Services has only one higher VET programme in Infant Education.

The 18 students who participated in the study were enrolled in the second year of the higher VET programme in Infant Education. The students, aged between 19 to 24 (mean age = 21), were all of Spanish nationality and thus shared the same L1. The gender of the students involved was 16 females (89%) and two males (11%). The higher VET programme in Infant Education allows students to work in the formal and non-formal education sector as well as in the social services sector as educator or children's entertainer. The two years of the VET programme are organized in modules. The duration of the study is 2,000 hours and the Autonomous Community of Madrid (Decreto 94/2008), as the regional department for education, also added two specific professional modules explicitly related to improving the knowledge of English as a foreign language, namely "English language" (130 hours) and "Teaching English in Infant Education"

Children's literature and storytelling	
Learning objectives	**Contents**
- To introduce and explore children literature (definition, origin and objectives). - To select stories according to children's interest. - To master reading techniques. - To learn how to introduce book covers in order to let children understand the top to bottom concepts. - To understand how children can benefit from storytelling. - To learn effective techniques to perform storytelling. - To gain performance skills (voice, body language, eye contact, etc.). - To know popular children books. - To know characteristics, story and activities of a sample of books.	- Children's literature (definition, origin, objective). - Quality in stories. - Reading tips. - Book covers. - Benefits of using storytelling. - Performance techniques. - Performance skills. - List of books. - Sample of books (*The very hungry caterpillar*; *Little red riding hood*; *Goldilocks and the three bears*; *Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?*).

Figure 1. Language objectives and content of the book unit on "Children's literature and storytelling"

(200 hours). Usually, both modules amount to six contact hours per week during the two academic years of the VET cycle.

The syllabus of the professional module "Teaching English in Infant Education" includes theoretical and practical foundations for in-training infant teachers. The module makes use of a tailor-made book entitled "English Teaching Resources for Early Childhood Education". In view of the syllabus, this experimental research refers to the unit about "Children's literature and storytelling". The book unit includes the learning objectives and contents presented in Figure 1.

Within the unit, under the supervision of their English teacher, students had practised a traditional storytelling activity in which they were divided into small groups and had to present a classic fairy tale using costumes and various objects. In this experimental study, participants were required to develop a free commentary task that was presented as a digital storytelling activity in which they had to collaboratively create the written script of a short animation, and then record it individually. In didactic AVT, one of the most important aspects of free commentary is that the oral adaptation should be synchronized with the visual aspects rather than with the soundtrack. In this exploratory study, a silent video was used to challenge participants to focus on the visual information. Therefore, they had to describe what they could see in order to create an attractive story for their students. Considering the aims of their professional module "Teaching English in Infant Education", the task had a double objective: to foster the participants' language skills, and to give them the opportunity to develop an infant-tar-

geted digital storytelling activity. Thus, participants could act both as language learners and as in-training infant teachers.

In particular, the main objectives of the free commentary tasks are to develop writing and speaking skills as well as put into practice the theory learned during their professional module. To this purpose, participants could discuss in pairs or small groups the written script of the story and then record it individually. In order to develop a coherent story, they were required to use a number of tenses (i.e. present simple and present continuous), the passive voice, and appropriate vocabulary. As far as recording is concerned, the core learning objectives are to use correct pronunciation and intonation. Thus, participants were encouraged to pay particular attention to these aspects. Recording the story allowed participants to repeat their oral performance several times until they were satisfied with the result.

2.1. *The procedure*

Under the supervision of the students' English teacher who acted as OT, the free commentary activity was implemented by the TR during a 55-minute session. The TR introduced the activity to the participants and provided a step-by-step instruction sheet: on the back of the sheet is a blank page where participants could also write the script of the story. The TR informed participants about the aspects they should focus on while writing the story (i.e. grammar and vocabulary) and while recording it (i.e. pronunciation, intonation and synchronization) over the short animation. The short film, *Big Buck Bunny* (Blender Foundation 2008), is a 10-minute 3D animation distributed under an open licence. *Big Buck Bunny* is a comedy about a rabbit who has his day spoiled by the three bully rodents. For the free commentary activity less than two minutes of the video was used, in which one can see Big Buck Bunny waking up in an idyllic forest, running after butterflies and smelling flowers until one apple falls from a tree. Sokoli (2020: 89) finds this "humorous animation" appealing to younger learners and considers the silent video more suitable for learners that have no experience in synchronization. After the extract of the animation was shown to the entire class, the TR asked participants which verbs and which words they thought they could use to write the story (i.e. using present simple and continuous, and passive voice). Some examples were also provided. Participants were divided into pairs and into groups of three. Each pair/group had to create a coherent story suitable for infants to accompany the images. In order to collaboratively prepare the script of the story, participants could watch the video several times using their mobile phones. Once they had finished writing the story collaboratively, each participant had to record the script with a mobile phone individually. In order to be able to synchronize the words with the video, participants could record the audio using their own mobile phone while watching the video on the mobile phone of a classmate. Finally, each participant had to send the audio recording to the email address of the VET-centre English Department.

2.2. *Data collection instruments*

A number of data collection instruments were employed in this exploratory study. During the 55-minute experimental session a feedback questionnaire for learners and an observation rubric for the TR and the OT were used. After the task, learners' written scripts and audio recordings of the short animation were evaluated through a tai-

lored-made rubric by the English-native-speaker language assistant of the VET centre, and an audio-recorded focus-group was carried out with some participants. Considering the small number of participants involved and the absence of a control group, the exploratory study made use of triangulation in order to make the outcomes as reliable as possible. Triangulation is generally considered as a valuable strategy since it involves the use of multiple sources to make the research more rigorous. In particular, the study employed data and observer triangulation by including more than one method of data gathering and by having more than one observer.

Recent experimental studies on the application of AVT tasks in the language classroom make use of pre- as well as post-questionnaires to gather valuable information on the learning experience (Talaván and Rodríguez-Arancón 2018; Talaván 2019). Due to time constraints, this study employed only one post-questionnaire to collect learners' feedback. The feedback questionnaire was designed to elicit basic factual and attitudinal data (i.e. gender and age, as well as the participants' opinion about their learning experience respectively). The section on attitudinal data includes two sets of statements on a five Likert-type scale (i.e. a psychometric response scale in which participants specify their level of agreement to a statement in the following five points: strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree nor disagree; agree; strongly agree) and an open-ended question. The first set of statements (S1) elicits participants' opinion as EFL learners, while the second set of statements (S2) is focused on their point of view as future infant teachers. In order to obtain more accurate and thorough answers, the paper-format questionnaire was administered in Spanish, the learners' L1. The first and the second set of statements are presented in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively.

At the end of the questionnaire, the open-ended question requires participants to share their opinion on the activity both from their point of view as language learners

S1.1. The activity has helped you to improve your written production.
S1.2. The activity has helped you to improve your oral production.
S1.3. The activity has helped you to improve your knowledge of grammar (present simple and continuous, and the passive voice).
S1.4. You enjoyed the digital storytelling activity.
S1.5. You enjoyed being able to learn with ICT (Information and Communication Technologies).

Table 1. The first set of statements (S1) elicits participants' opinion as EFL learners

S2.1. The video content is suitable for your future students.
S2.2. The length of the video is suitable for your future students.
S2.3. You are satisfied with the story you have prepared.
S2.4. You would use this activity with your future students.
S2.5. You enjoyed being able to prepare an activity with ICT.
S2.6. You would combine traditional storytelling with digital storytelling in your future work.

Table 2. The second set of statements (S2) focuses on participants' point of view as future infant teachers

and as future infant teachers. This type of question can provide greater freedom to participants and thus richer data.

The other instrument used during the session was one observation rubric specifically designed to collect observations of the TR and the OT. The rubric is comprised of eight criteria that can be evaluated on a five Likert-type scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always) and an open-ended question that allows for the possibility to leave further comments. Similarly to the feedback questionnaire, the paper-format observation rubric was administered in Spanish, the OT's L1.

The eight criteria (C) prepared for gathering structured observations are as follows:

C.1 Students pay attention.
C.2 Students ask coherent questions.
C.3 Students are aware of the objectives of the activity.
C.4 Students work collaboratively.
C.5 Students actively participate in the activity.
C.6 Students seem interested.
C.7 Students use mobile devices correctly.
C.8 Students submit their activity respecting the deadline.

Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that classroom observations differ from questioning since it offers thorough information rather than self-reports and represents rich data sources for empirical research (Dörnyei 2007). In classroom research, there are two basic dichotomies "participant" vs. "non-participant" and "structured" vs. "non-structured" (*ibid.*). The former defines the role of the participant-observer - here the TR - as a full member of the experimental group since he/she takes part in all the activities. The latter dichotomy can be assimilated to the quantitative/qualitative distinction in terms of observation since highlystructured observation, like the ones provided by the eight criteria, provides quantitative data, while non-structured observation, such as the open-ended question, has no clear focus thus allowing the observer to comment on what is considered significant for the research in terms of qualitative data. Structured and non-structured observation should be combined as they complement each other.

After the experimental session, an audio-recorded focus-group was carried out with some participants. Focus-groups are group interviews that allow for tracing a collective view on a topic as they empower participants to share their view as a group rather than individuals (Cohen *et al.* 2007). The focus-group should foster interaction among participants so that their view can emerge rather than that of the researcher. The contrived nature of focus-group interviews is their strength as well as their weakness. Focus-groups are usually carried out in artificial settings and focus on a very precise topic. Thus, focus-groups make it possible to obtain data and outcomes otherwise not available. In addition, this type of group interview is effective since it produces a large amount of data in a limited period of time.

Breen (2006) suggests writing out an interview schedule for the focus-group including the following five stages: welcome; overview of the topic; statement of the focus-group ground rules; questions (starting with general experiences and moving to more specific issues); and gathering of background information. The focus-group of this exploratory study followed Breen's (*ibid.*) stages. After welcoming the participants, the

topic of the focus-group was presented. Participants were told that the interview was about their digital storytelling experience, and in particular it aimed at having insights on their answers to some questions of the feedback questionnaire. Participants were informed that there was going to be a short focus-group (about 10-15 minutes).

Finally, in order to assess the participants' written collaborative scripts and the individual audio recordings, an evaluation rubric was specifically created. The five grading criteria for assessing written production are use of grammar and vocabulary, description, creativity and overall story, while the five criteria for evaluating oral production are pronunciation, intonation, fluency, use of different voices and sound effects, and synchronization. Each criterion scores from 0 to 5, with 0 being the lowest value and 5 the highest. In addition, each criterion has a blank space for leaving further comments. The final grade is the result of the sum of all the evaluation criteria.

3. Data analysis

The exploratory study attempts to examine the application of free commentary in EFL teacher training using a number of data collection instruments. This section presents the analysis of the data gathered through these instruments. Quantitative data - obtained from the feedback questionnaire as well as the evaluation rubric for participants' written scripts and audio recordings - are laid out. Qualitative data - collected with the observation rubric for the TR and the OT as well as the audio-recorded focus-group - were systematically analysed and supplement the quantitative data.

3.1. *The feedback questionnaire*

The feedback questionnaire collected attitudinal data through two sets of statements (S1 and S2) on a five Likert-type scale and an open-ended question. On the one hand, the five items of S1 aims at prompting participants' opinion as language learners. As shown in Figure 2, almost all participants felt that the digital storytelling activity helped them improve their writing (94%) and speaking skills (89%). More than half of the respondents (61%) felt that the activity had also improved their grammar knowledge. Participants acknowledged that they enjoyed the digital storytelling activity (94%) and being able to learn English with the use of ICT (89%).

On the other hand, S2 aims at eliciting the participants' point of view as future infant teachers through six items. All participants considered the video selected for the digital storytelling activity suitable for their future infant students in terms of content and length. The vast majority of them (89%) said they were satisfied with the story they had prepared. S2.4 required participants to indicate whether they would use this activity with their future students, and responses were more varied. As many as 14 participants (78%) agreed with this statement, while one of them (6%) neither agreed nor disagreed with it, and three of them (16%) disagreed. Further comments to these responses were provided in the open-ended question that closes the questionnaire. Responses to S2.5 reveal that all participants have a positive opinion about the use of ICT in their training as teachers. Ultimately, as many as 15 participants (83%) agreed that they would combine traditional and digital storytelling in their future classes with infants.
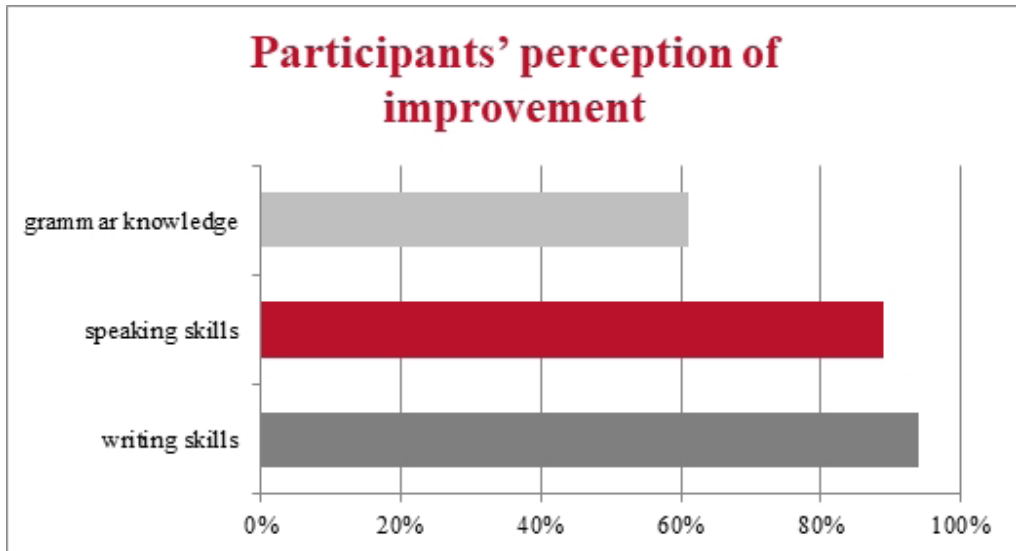
Figure 2. Participants' perception of improvement as language learners

The open-ended question encouraged participants to leave further comments on the activity both as language learners and future infant teachers. 13 participants (72%) left a comment, a high percentage that provides an interesting statistic in itself. Many participants declared they had enjoyed the activity from both perspectives. As one participant (P7) stated, "it was a different way to practice English and prepare storytelling". Participants highlighted that it was an original and fun activity that allowed them to develop a number of skills simultaneously. In particular, one participant (P15) stated "I liked it very much, in my opinion you can express yourself much better if you record yourself in audio rather than if you do it in person on in video recording". A number of participants also emphasized the creative aspect of the activity. Another participant (P6) mentioned that, beside creativity, the activity fosters pronunciation and teamwork. Furthermore, participants stressed the beneficial use of ICT in FLL both for them and for infants. Overall, they confirmed that the activity was suitable for infants, and that they could use it in their future teaching career. One participant (P12) acknowledged that she "disagreed" with the suitability of the video for infants in terms of length because she was going to teach 0-3 year-old children, and found them too young for this type of activity. Another participant (P17) admitted that she was not sure she would use it in her future classes, but she did not specify whether this was due to the children's age. However, P17 stated that she enjoyed the activity as a language learner.

3.2. *The observation rubric*

The observation rubric allowed for the collection of structured and non-structured observations of the TR and the OT about the experimental session. Considering that is essential to write down the notes as soon as possible after observation to avoid forgetting information (Cohen *et al.* 2007), the rubric was completed at the end of the session while participants were filling in the feedback questionnaire. The TR and the

OT agreed in most of their responses to the rubric's eight criteria in terms of frequency. It is worth noting the high number and degree of positive responses (*always*) regarding participants' attitude during the experimental session (C.2; C.3; C.4; C.5; C.6; C.8). One reason might be that the participants are enrolled in the second year of the higher VET programme in Infant Education. Consequently, they are older students who are focused on finishing their training and preparing to take on their future job. Another aspect that might have positively influenced the participants' behaviour is that the session was very concise. Compared to the OT, the TR marked the attention of the learners (C.1) as slightly lower (*often*). As the person conducting the experimental session, the TR might have been more critical towards this aspect, while the different opinion (TR: *always*; OT: *often*) regarding the correct use of mobile devices (C.7) could be due to the fact that the OT might have noticed some participants using their devices for personal use instead of using their devices for carrying out the revoicing activity as requested by the TR.

The second part of the observation rubric offered a dedicated space for further comments. The TR reported that

> [w]hen the students have started working together they have really focused on what they were doing. You could hear them talking to each other about the story in a lively way. They helped each other and checked vocabulary on the internet. If needed, they asked me for advice about the English sentences. Once the story was prepared, they recorded it separately or together if they had to create different voices within the story.

The OT stated that

> [t]he activity on digital storytelling carried out in the classroom has been very useful and interesting for the students since storytelling is part of the topics of their evaluation. The students have been interested in the activity and, in general, it has been performed satisfactorily.

Overall, the opinions of the two observers coincide, and thus provide encouraging feedback regarding the use of free commentary in teacher training, and more generally in VET.

3.3. *Audio-recorded focus-group*

The focus-group of this study took place one week after the experimental session with eight participants (six females and two males, mean age = 22) and lasted for about 10 minutes. The focus-group interview was audio-recorded. Besides the audio recording, notes were also written down immediately after the interview. Unfortunately, the quality of the sound is not consistent but most of it is intelligible, thus it was transcribed for analysis. Breen (2006) states that the formal analysis of focus-group data should comprise three elements, namely the most important themes, noteworthy quotes and any unforeseen findings. It is also good practice to conduct a pilot study: however, in some cases, as in the current study, it was not possible due to the small number of participants and time constraints. If the pilot study cannot take place, in the analysis of the focus-group it is of paramount importance to be especially "reflexive and critically aware of the amount of influence [the researcher] had during the interview […] and be

careful about attributing opinions to the group in cases where [the researcher] introduced that opinion to the group" (*ibid*.: 472).

Similarly to the feedback questionnaire, the questions of the focus-group regarded their opinion as language learners and as in-training infant teachers. The participants of the focus-group acknowledged that from a language learning perspective they found the digital storytelling activity appropriate for their level and useful, especially for developing their speaking skills. From the point of view of in-training infant teachers, the participants agreed that the digital storytelling activity can be a suitable activity for infants. However, the participants had different opinions regarding the age range of the infants. Some participants considered the activity apt for 2-3-year-old children if slightly adapted, while others saw the activity suitable for children from 5 years of age. When asked to compare the digital storytelling activity with traditional storytelling, one participant replied that "it was good to work with digital media. It was a bit different from traditional storytelling as it is a change from using books. Children can watch a video, and this might interest them", a statement with which most of the other participants agreed. Overall, the participants' responses during the focus-group interview largely confirm the opinions shared in the feedback questionnaire. Despite the fact that the focus-group interview was carried out with a small number of participants, it proved difficult to keep their attention for more than 10 minutes. This could be attributed to the fact that the focus-group was carried out in the participants' classroom, and this allowed for greater confidence and consequently distraction. Furthermore, it should be noticed that the focus-group interview took place only with the TR. Perhaps the presence of the OT, as in the experimental session, would have helped to keep participants more focused.

3.4. *Evaluation rubric for written scripts and audio recordings*

The written collaborative scripts as well as the individual audio recordings were assessed by the English-native-speaker language assistant of the VET centre using a tailor-made evaluation rubric. Each skill was evaluated on five grading criteria which score 0–5. Thus, each skill sums up to a maximum of 25, and provides a final grade up to 50. It should be pointed out that collaborative written scripts were evaluated with the same mark for each member of the pair/group. In Table 3 the average mark (i.e. the mean) and the standard deviation (SD) are presented for each skill as well as for the final grade. If the SD is low, the sample is usually homogeneous as the scores are positioned closer to the mean, whereas if the SD is high, the sample is generally heterogeneous since it contains extreme scores. Consequently, the smaller the SD the better the mean represents the group.

As shown in Table 3, the average marks for written and oral production are very similar (19.5 and 19 respectively). However, the SD for each skill is different. The SD of the written production is lower (3.29) compared to that of the oral production (4.01),

	Written production	Oral production	Final grade
Average marks	19.5/25	19/25	38.5/50
Standard deviation	3.29	4.01	5.84

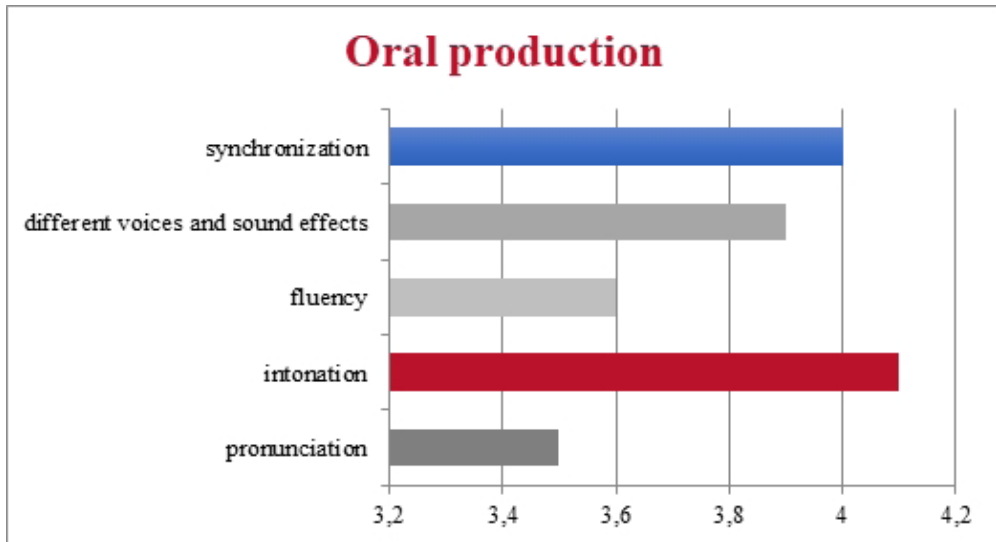***Table 3.*** Evaluation of participants' written and oral production

Figure 3. Participants' oral production results according to the five criteria

thus indicating that the participants' performances are more similar for the written scripts while their audio-recording scores are remarkably different. One reason is due to the fact that written scripts were prepared collaboratively, and therefore marked identically for the members of each pair/group. Another reason is that the level of participants' speaking skills is noticeably different as can be clearly appreciated in the audio recordings.

In this regard, it is worth looking more closely at the participants' oral production results according to the five criteria. As can be seen in Figure 3, the average mark for the five criteria is generally high: pronunciation (3.5), fluency (3.6), use of different voices and sound effects (3.9), synchronization (4), and intonation (4.1). However, pronunciation and fluency scored the lowest marks. Participants made a great effort in providing a good digital storytelling performance by using different voices as well as adding sound effects (e.g. birds singing), using an appropriate intonation and trying to synchronize their voice to the images as much as possible.

The participants' written production results according to the five criteria also provide a noteworthy insight as shown in Figure 4. Once again, the average marks for the five criteria are generally high: creativity (3.7), use of grammar (3.8), description (3.9), overall story (3.9), and vocabulary (4). The use of appropriate vocabulary scored the highest mark. Useful vocabulary was brainstormed before starting the collaborative writing process. Participants made good use of online dictionaries, and frequently asked the TR for advice. The overall story and description got an average positive result. These positive elements denote their interest in producing a well-crafted script.

Further comments provided by the English-native-speaker language assistant corroborate the previous results both for written and oral production. On the one hand, the language assistant confirmed that written descriptions were generally very accurate despite being a bit short at times and contained a good variety of vocabulary. On the
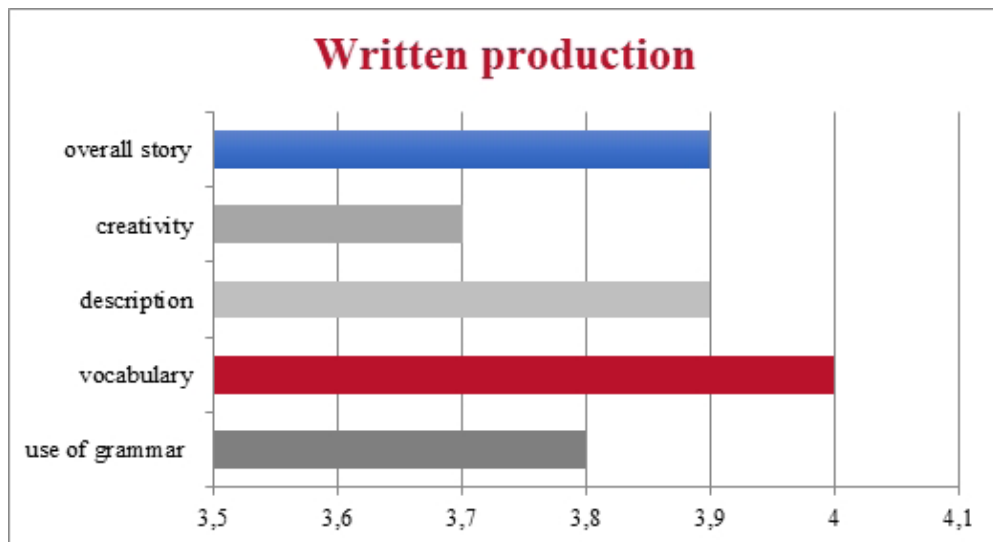
Figure 4. Participants' written production results according to the five criteria

other hand, the language assistant noticed a lack of creativity since participants mainly described what was happening in the video rather than being imaginative. However, they included different voices and sound effects. One of the reasons why participants decided to provide accurate but short descriptions could be due to the fact that the digital storytelling activity was targeted for infants and, as pointed out during the focus-group, the digital storytelling should take into account the age range of the children.

4. Discussion

This study was designed to explore free commentary in language learning and in teacher training by evaluating participants' language performance and feedback. During the experimental session, a feedback questionnaire for learners was administered and an observation rubric was filled in by the TR and the OT. The feedback questionnaire reveals that almost all learners believe that digital storytelling of a silent animation has enhanced both writing and speaking skills. Learners also believe that the revoicing task has fostered their grammar knowledge, in particular the tenses used in their stories. They affirmed that they had enjoyed the ICT-based task enormously. Regarding their opinion as future infant teachers, learners found the video and the digital storytelling activity suitable for their future classes, and the vast majority confirmed that they would incorporate traditional and digital storytelling in their classes. The results of the feedback questionnaire support previous findings. Thanks to revoicing tasks, learners feel that they have improved their speaking and writing skills (Ibáñez Moreno and Vermeulen 2015a; Talaván and Lertola 2016; Calduch and Talaván 2018). Furthermore, learners perceived the revoicing task as an innovative and highly motivating way to learn an FL (Ibáñez Moreno and Vermeulen 2015a, 2015b; Talaván and Lertola 2016; Calduch and Talaván 2018), and appreciated the use of creativity (Tala-

ván and Rodríguez-Arancón 2018). The observation rubric filled in by the TR and the OT reveal that they agree in most of their responses. They considered learners' attitude and behaviour during the experimental session consistently positive. Both observers highlighted how learners have successfully carried out the task, and the TR emphasized the collaborative aspect of free commentary.

After the task, a reduced number of leaners took part in an audio-recorded focus-group. The focus-group has proved to be an appropriate data collection instrument since it empowered learners to share their opinions as a group. It made it possible to obtain further insights on their opinions about some issues raised in the feedback questionnaire. Learners' responses in the focus-group interview confirmed those previously provided in the feedback questionnaire. As EFL learners, they declared that the revoicing task was useful and appropriate for their proficiency level. As in-training infant teachers, they found it to be a suitable teaching strategy to use in their future classes. Nevertheless, the age range of the infants gave rise to a debate. Some participants found the task apt for two-to-three-year-old children if adapted, whereas others saw it more suitable for children from the age of five. Finally, the learners' language performance was evaluated. The English-native-speaker language assistant of the VET centre assessed learners' written collaborative scripts and individual audio recordings using a tailored-made rubric. The average marks of written and oral production show that learners performed similarly well in both. However, as suggested by the standard deviation, learners' written production is more homogeneous compared to oral production. This is due to the fact that written scripts were created collaboratively and marked the same way for each member of the group, while revoicing was carried out individually. Moreover, their oral proficiency proved to be quite diverse.

5. Conclusions

The present exploratory study has tried to shed light on the potential benefits of free commentary in EFL teacher training. Being an exploratory study, no hypotheses were formulated. The aim was to investigate how free commentary of a silent animation can foster learners' language skills and give them the opportunity to develop an infant-targeted digital storytelling activity. To this purpose, a number of data collection instruments were employed in the study both during and after the experimental session, namely a feedback questionnaire for learners, an observation rubric for the TR and the OT, an audio-recorded focus-group, and evaluation of learners' written scripts and audio recordings carried out by an English-native-speaker using a tailored-made rubric. By triangulating quantitative and qualitative data, the exploratory study suggests that free commentary could possibly contribute to the improvement of speaking and writing skills of EFL learners. The revoicing task proved to be a highly motivating language learning activity that makes use of audiovisual material and ICT in an innovative manner. Free commentary proved to be a suitable task for training future infant teachers, since it allows them to create a digital storytelling activity appropriate for their forthcoming classes and, to a greater extent, to encourage them to incorporate traditional and digital storytelling in their teaching.

Besides the double objective of exploring how free commentary can enhance learners' language skills and assist in-training infant teachers developing a digital story-

telling activity, the present study addressed the application of a less-studied revoicing mode. As the literature reveals, the majority of research examining the use of revoicing in language teaching and learning has focused on dubbing, audio description and, in a limited manner, on voice-over. The findings of this exploratory study coincide with those of previous research on revoicing. Thanks to revoicing, learners perceive an improvement in written and oral production, and they are motivated by the innovative language learning task which makes use of AVT and ICT as well as creativity.

Being a small-scale exploratory investigation, the study has a number of limitations. Only a small number of participants were involved, and it was not feasible to have an experimental and a control group. Therefore, no statistical measurements could be performed. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to add pre- and post-language tests. Some issues also arose during the focus-group interview. Due to lack of participants' attention, the focus-group interview only lasted about 10 minutes, thus preventing further exploration into certain issues.

However, the study could help to set the basis for future systematic research. It might assist in determining hypotheses, appropriate research designs, data collection instruments and target participants of future empirical investigation. It could be worth planning an empirical study with a larger number of EFL learners in VET, and in particular future infant teachers, to assess the enhancement of language skills as well as grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Finally, it would be worthwhile to continue researching the effectiveness of free commentary in teacher training at university level with in-training primary teachers as well as secondary-school language teachers.

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