

Enhancing EFL Learners' Free Writing Skill with a Web 2.0 Tool 'Storybird'; an Action Research

Zeynep Çetin Köroğlu
zeynepcetin86@gmail.com
Aksaray University, Turkey

DOI: [10.35974/acuity.v8i2.3041](https://doi.org/10.35974/acuity.v8i2.3041)

Abstract

Freewriting is perceived as a pre-writing activity to collect language learners' initial ideas before the actual writing process. Unlike brainstorming activities, language learners should write their ideas and thoughts without concern for grammatical rules, spelling, punctuation coherence, etc. throughout the given time. Freewriting activity prepares the student for an actual writing activity and enables them to produce more comprehensible and eligible texts. Current research aims to investigate whether free writing activity can be digitalized through a handy tool, which is Storybird, in preparatory classrooms. The research was carried out with 54 EFL learners in the 2019 fall term of the academic year. The participants were English language teacher candidates who had studied English for many years in Turkey. The research was designed as action research and qualitative findings were gathered. The treatment process lasted for four weeks and a written structured interview was administered at the end of the treatment process. Results of the current study show that nearly all the participants are satisfied with the utilization of Storybird in free writing activities. Additionally, they thought that the tool boosted their attitudes towards writing. The results indicate that free writing activities can be carried out digitally to make language learners more engaged and productive in writing.

Keywords: *Freewriting, English as a foreign language, Storybird, Technology-Enhanced Language Teaching, and Learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Technological changes have a huge impact on English language teaching like other fields of education, language teachers cannot disregard the impact of new educational tools in both teaching practice and their profession. Digital tools' use for writing skills development, Howell et al., (2020) mention that most students at the secondary and university level use technological devices to consume content rather than create information with them. However, disregarding the positive impact of technological advances may hinder language learners' development. Writing is a functional and multifaceted skill for language learners because they use writing to present what they know (Tavsanlı et al., 2020). Additionally, EFL learners have many opportunities to practice and develop their writing skills through the internet nowadays since education has entered a digital age in which there are countless ways to it (Dizon & Thanyawatpokin, 2018). As one of the productive skills, written texts of language learners can be regarded as a representation of their language proficiency. In other words, 'writing is about expressing knowledge and the students have to express their knowledge as thoughtfully and clearly as they can' Urquhart and McIver, 2005,

p.23). Despite the importance of writing skills in language classrooms, many students do not develop adequate writing proficiency which is necessary for their success (Unesco, 2015). Related research indicates that Turkish students have problems learning to write like other more and less affluent countries (Başkan, 2019; Müldür & Yalçın, 2019). The problem is that traditional classroom settings do not offer many options for language learners to develop their foreign language writing skills. On the other hand, the internet, and web 2.0 tools contain various activities and tasks to develop these skills digitally. One of the significant advantages of these technologies is that they enhance a positive language learning environment (Wang & Vásquez, 2012). One another positive impact of Web 2.0 applications is their adaptability and promoting interaction and collaboration among language learners (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Moreover, digital writing is a perfect mixture of pedagogy and technology which can enhance language learners' abilities and acquire various subject knowledge (Davy, et al., 2022). Within this scope, the current research aimed to investigate whether storybird is effective to develop EFL learner's prewriting skills or not. The research was guided by the following objectives.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

- 1) investigate the effectiveness of storybird to enhance student teachers' creativity in free writing.
- 2) explore student teachers' perspectives on the use of storybird to foster creativity in free writing.

The following research question was aimed to be answered through the research.

Research question

1. What are the participants' perspectives on using a digital storytelling tool?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Related research indicates that web 2.0 tools have an impact on writing skills development (Blythe, Lauer, & Curran, 2014; Purdy, 2010; Wolff, 2013). A research study was carried out to investigate the effectiveness of storybird on narrative writing skills (Shamsulbahri & Aziz, 2020). The research was designed as an action research and pretest, posttest, semi-structured interviews, and observations were administered to collect data. Results of the study reveal that storybird has a positive effect on participants' narrative writing skills. Moreover, it was found that students' motivation and interest in learning English affected positively. The study utilized storybird to improve participants' narrative writing skills and it is clear that as a web 2.0 tool, it is quite effective. Another research was carried out by Andriani and Wahyuni (2018). The authors aimed to investigate whether storybird is effective to develop English language learners' narrative writing skills through storybird. In the action research, tests, observation checklists, field notes, and interviews were utilized to collect quantitative data. Results of the study show that participants' attention and motivation levels increased. Besides, they become more eager to write narrative tests after administration (Andriani & Wahyuni, 2018). Additionally, participants' generating ideas, vocabulary language use, and mechanic skills were developed due to the second cycle results of the study. Another research study was carried out to discover storybird's effectiveness on students' overall reflections on English writing. Kazazoğlu and Bilir (2021) carried out a qualitative study in which they aimed to discover Turkish student's overall reflections on writing in English through storybird. In the research, pre- and post-open-ended questionnaires, observations, and pictures were used to collect data. The results of the study are in line with the results of the above-mentioned similar research that the tool has a positive impact on participants' writing skills. Moreover, they concluded that the tool can be used to foster EFL learners' writing skills. Even though educators think that storybird is an effective tool to develop EFL learners' writing skills such as narrative writing (Wertz, 2014; Nazri et al., 2016), there is limited research on storybird's effect on free writing of student teachers of English. For this reason, the current research aims to investigate storybird's effectiveness on student teachers' free writing skills. The research was carried out by scholars to find out whether language learners are capable enough to create flash fiction in the

storybird application (Setyowati, Feriyanti, & Maborah, 2020). Related research indicates that storybird is an effective tool to develop EFL learners' writing proficiency in many ways. However, there is a gap in related literature about students' prewriting skills which is highly important to develop their narrative skills. For this reason, the present research aimed to fill this gap by carrying out this research.

METHODOLOGY

The current research was designed as action research. Elliott (1991) defines action research as: "Action research is the process through which teachers collaborate in evaluating their practice jointly; raise awareness of their theory; articulate a shared conception of values; try out new strategies to render the values expressed in their practice more consistent with educational values they espouse; record their work in a form which is readily available to and understandable by other teachers; and thus develop a shared theory of teaching by research practice". An open-ended interview and classroom observations are used to find out participants' writing practice and perspectives towards the tool.

Data Collection Tools

Open-ended interview and classroom observations were used to collect qualitative data for the research. The interview includes four questions and participants were free to answer those questions after the treatment phase. Each question aimed to find out participants' perceptions of the tool. A digital classroom namely 'writing skills I' was created on the storybird website. Participants were expected to complete each week's free writing task individually and digitally through the online class.

Research Participants and Sampling Procedures

The participants of the present research were 54 EFL learners who are English language teacher candidates of the ELT department of a state university, in Türkiye. Participants consist of 30 female students and 14 male students. They have been studying English for many years and they have similar educational backgrounds.

Procedure

The treatment phase of the current research lasted for four weeks and before the phase, an introduction to the web 2.0 tool has been made to the participants by the researcher. It was believed that participants would be familiar with the features of storybird and would use the tool more effectively during the treatment phase. Each week during the treatment, a free writing task was assigned to students, and they were expected to complete the tasks before their face-to-face writing course. After they completed free writing activities on storybird, they had narrative writing tasks in class. Each free writing activity took nearly 15 minutes. Nearly all the participants have personal computers or laptops to fulfill the task. At the end of all sessions open-ended interview was conducted to collect participants' perspectives and thoughts about the tool and their experiences. The language of the interview was English.

As a web 2.0 tool storybird combines art and writing. Additionally, users may write a long-form book, a poem, or a picture book. In this respect, language learners have different options for writing.

Data Analysis

The data for the present research were collected through an open-ended interview which was administered at the end of the treatment phase. Additionally, classroom observations were used to

gather data. The questions utilized in the interview are based on existing literature on digital storytelling. The data were analyzed through content analysis.

Storybird

Storybird is a web 2.0 tool that can be reached at (<https://storybird.com/>). The tool is a highly engaging collaborative storywriting website that combines three ideas – creating, reading, and sharing. Students can focus on content rather than pre-prepared artful drawings. Since the tool presents various drawings which have a sequence (Menezes, 2012). Floyd et. Al. (2014) has mentioned that Storybird as a "hybrid" or collaborative storytelling is a free website in which the learners can create their creative narratives from the artworks that they have chosen.

Once the student creates an account, he/she can select collections of art. Then they just need to write their own stories. Moreover, the tool offers a variety of genres such as poetry, mystery, tales, etc. Additionally, students can create storybooks that consist of different stories written by them and publish them to share with others online. The following pictures were taken from storybird website to present a quick view of the website.

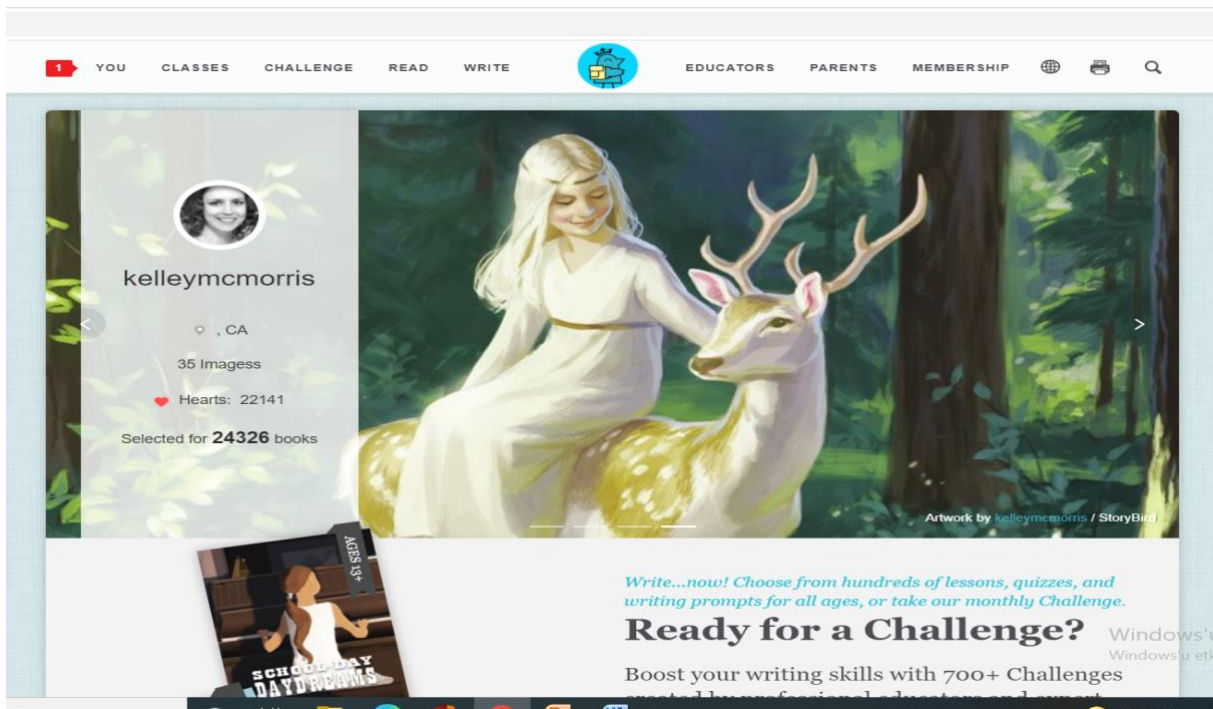


Figure 1. Art for stories on the Storybird website.

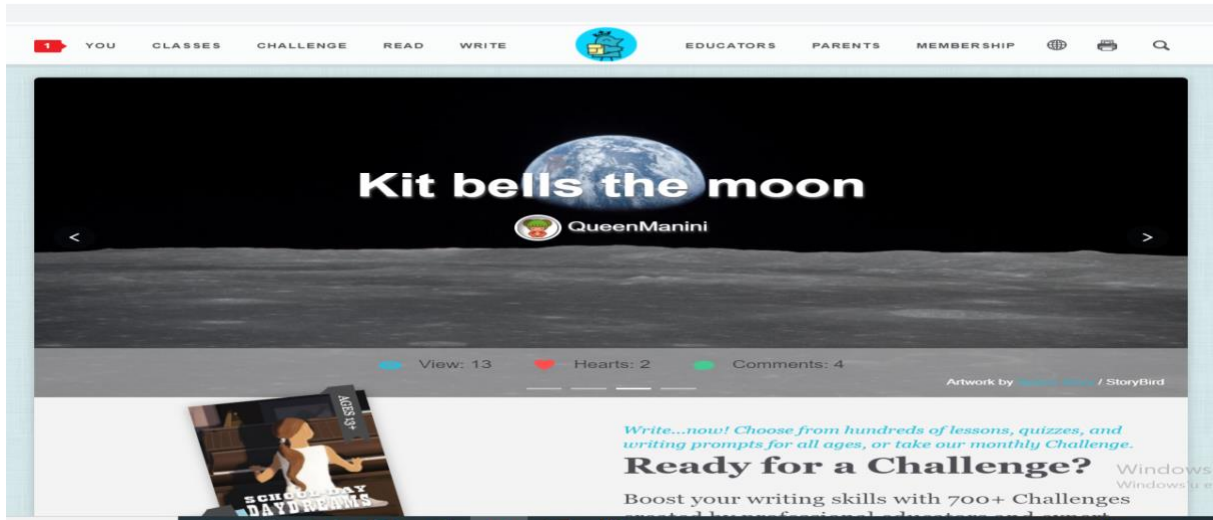


Figure 2. Art for stories on the Storybird website.

FINDINGS & RESULTS

The data of the present research were collected through open-ended interview questions and classroom observations which were carried out digitally through the treatment process. The coding of the data, the finding of the themes, the organization and definition of the data according to the codes and themes, and the interpretation phases of the findings were followed (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2005, pp. 228-238). The first interview question aimed to find out participants' overall point of view towards the web 2.0 tool which was used in the research. The question is 'What are your opinions about storybird?'. Four different themes were created due to students' responses as 'user-friendly', 'colorful', 'fun and enjoyable', and 'motivating'. The themes and their repetition rates among students' responses are presented below in table 1.

Table 1. Theme and repetition rates in participants' responses for Q1.

Theme	Repetition Rate
User-friendly	22 repetitions
Colorful	15 repetitions
Fun & enjoyable	25 repetitions
Motivating	18 repetitions

Results indicate that EFL learners have positive perceptions towards storybird in general because they think that the tool's usage is fun for writing. The related theme has the highest repetition rate among the themes with twenty-five repetitions. Additionally, EFL learners think that the tool is user-friendly in terms of writing skills development which means it is easy to use. The theme 'user-friendly' has twenty-two repetitions. Another significant finding is that using storybird for teaching writing skills, especially for free writing activities is motivating. The tool presents digital backgrounds, pre-prepared characters, and digital visuals without stories which can initiate users' imagination and creativity. Some of the students' responses to question one is presented below.

S.R. 'I think storybird is a creative tool to develop writing skills. Thus, there are lots of pictures and you can write a story related to those pictures. I don't like writing too much, but the website drew my attention after our teacher introduced it to us'.

S.R. 'Everybody can use such a lovely website for writing because it presents funny pictures. Moreover, I read other people's exciting stories. I guess this is a new way of storytelling that everyone has a story in life.'

S.R. "I like the pictures because all pictures are lovely. The pictures help me to imagine the characters of my story".

The second interview question aimed to figure out EFL learners' thoughts about the effect of storybird on their free-writing skills. For this reason, the second question was asked as 'How storybird affected your free-writing skills?'. Two themes were created to analyze the results of the second interview question. The themes are 'supporting' and 'leading'. The results for the themes and their repetition rates are presented below.

Table 2. Theme and repetition rates in participants' responses for Q2.

Theme	Repetition Rate
Supporting	20 repetitions
Leading	25 repetitions

The results show that most of the participants think storybird is a supportive and leading Web 2.0 tool in terms of both teaching and learning writing skills in English. Thus, the repetition rates for the two themes are significantly high. Some of the students' responses are presented below.

S.R. 'Generally, I have problems with starting writing. Storybird provides pictures and it made me write more easily. Our teacher set us free to write for five minutes by using pictures. I think this is a great opportunity to begin writing because I didn't worry about some boring stuff such as grammar'.

S.R. 'I wrote so many sentences to pictures because we were free to write. I think the website initiates our ideas on a topic'.

The participants of the current research are student teachers of English in an English language teaching department, and they are going to be English teachers in the future. For this reason, their knowledge of the Web 2.0 tool has significant in terms of their future usage of the tool in their professional career. The third interview question was created as 'will you use storybird in the future? And do you recommend storybird to anyone?'. Two themes were created as 'recommend' and 'future usage' to analyze the data of the third interview question. The results are presented below in table 3.

Table 3. Theme and repetition rates in participants' responses for Q3.

Theme	Repetition Rate
Recommend	39 repetitions
Future usage	25 repetitions

The results of the third interview question show that student teachers of English are satisfied with storybird in using writing activities, especially for free writing. They are eager to use the tool in their professional career in the future and recommend the tool to others. Some of the students' responses are presented below.

S.R. 'I definitely use it in my future classrooms because it is colorful and fun'.

S.R. 'I decided to create my children's book series through storybird. Publishing these stories with others will be great'.

S.R. 'At first, I had difficulty in using storybird because this was my first time using it and did not know how the website works. After our teacher introduced it, I could easily use it and wrote my stories. I use it in the future'.

S.R. 'Yes, I do recommend it because it motivated me to write something'.

The findings of the current study show that storybird is user-friendly, motivating, colorful, and enjoyable for participants of the study, who are student teachers of English. Most of the participants think that the tool is user-friendly and enjoyable. Since 25 of the total participants think that it is enjoyable and 22 of them think that it is user-friendly. The result indicates that student teachers enjoyed their free writing experience during the treatment process and did not face difficulties in using the Web 2.0 tool. Thus, Web 2.0 tools can be used to develop learners' existing knowledge and foster individual learning. The tools enable learners to create content, modify it, to interact with each other through the platforms and products (Bozna & Yüzer, 2020). Another significant finding of the study is that student teachers think the tool is motivating because 18 participants stated it. The result is like Shamsulbahri and Aziz's study results (2020) in that they figured out that the use of storybird increased the motivation of language learners. In this respect, storybird can motivate EFL learners to further their writing practices. Additionally, 15 student teachers found the website colorful which means it draws language learners' attention and can make the writing process more enjoyable. The results indicate that the web 2.0 tool is quite supporting and leading their writing process. In this respect, the tool can be used pre-writing activities to foster writing activities. Thus, using interactive Web 2.0 tools in writing classrooms increase language learners' motivation and academic achievement by providing a more dynamic and interactive atmosphere (Bozna & Yüzer, 2020). It is stated that well-established online platforms such as storybird allow language learners to collaborate with each other's and provide feedback on their writing products (Yamaç, et. al., 2021). Utilizing digital tools to develop EFL learners' writing skills is an alternative way to include learners into learning process while shaping distance learning programs as well (Chen, et al. 2021). Another important result of the current study is that most of the participants were eager to use storybird in their future careers. They also recommend the tool for further use.

CONCLUSION

The present research aimed to investigate a web 2.0 tool's 'storybird' impact on student teachers' free writing skills. Results of the study reveal that participants learned new vocabulary items and grammar structures when they write their free-writing text over four weeks. Additionally, they memorize and recycled the existing vocabulary knowledge and grammatical structures by using them in meaningful contexts. Participants of the current study were responsible for their learning through the process that they were free to use open educational resources and the internet to search for new vocabulary items and structures. The use of interactive Web 2.0 tools and technology to teach foreign languages is becoming more and more common, with programs designed to meet the requirements and independent learning goals of students (Hsu, 2013). Being active during the treatment phase and utilizing a technological tool made them more motivated in terms of writing skills development. As it is stated by scholars (Akpınar Dellal & Yücel, 2015) multimedia environments foster students in many aspects such as cognitive, social, behavioral, and emotional with the appropriate selection of content that is suitable for learning outcomes. These environments may facilitate students' motivation to learn more about the issue while they study autonomously. The results are in line with Shamsulbahri and Aziz's study results (2020) and Arianti's research (2018) which found out storybird increase EFL learners' narrative writing skills. It is believed that as student teachers of English, the participants will use storybird and similar Web 2.0 tools in their future language classroom. Moreover, results indicate that the colorful and enjoyable artwork of storybird and digital storybook features of the tool fostered participants' imagination. Thus, they

created highly well-written pieces of text. Thus, the integration of an internet-based CALL-like storybird enhances creativity, collaboration, and motivation (Arianti, 2018). Digital writing tools and AI-based writing assistants are effective tools for both EFL learners and language teachers (Khabib, 2022). Thus, Technology-assisted language learning presents a variety of opportunities to develop the writing skills of EFL learners (Bahari, & Gholami, 2022). One another result of the current research is that students could read other students' text through storybird after each student published his/her digital text. Hence, it supported collaborative learning among participants. For this reason, it can be said that the tool is effective to develop the free writing skill of EFL learners. The use of the tool can positively contribute language learning process.

REFERENCES

- Akpınar Dellal, N. & Seyhan Yücel, M. (2015). Yabancı dil öğretmenlerinin derslerinde materyal kullanımına ilişkin tutum ve görüşleri. *Turkish Studies International Periodical For The Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic*, 10(2), 1051-1066.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7827/TurkishStudies.7950>
- Andriani, R. & Wahyuni, D. (2018). Improving Students' Writing Skill in Narrative Text by Using Storybird at Grade X Teknik Komputer Jaringan 1 of SMK Yayasan Pendidikan Persada Indah(YPPi) Tualang. *ELT- Lectura: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 5(1), 78-85.
- Arianti, E. P. (2018). Storybird: A Motivational Storytelling Website to Increase Students' Ability In Narrative Writing. *Journal of English Teaching, Literature, and Applied Linguistics*, 2(1), 26-37.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.30587/jetlal.v2i1.2431>
- Bahari, A., & Gholami, L. (2022). Challenges and affordances of reading and writing development in technology-assisted language learning. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 1-25.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2022.2065308>
- Baskan, A. (2019). Yedinci sınıf öğrencilerinin öyküleyici metin yazma becerilerinin çeşitli değişkenler açısından incelenmesi. *Abant İzzet Baysal University Journal of Faculty of Education*, 19(2), 453-467. <https://doi.org/10.17240/aibuefd.2019.19.46660-465652>
- Blythe, S., Lauer, C., & Curran, P. G. (2014). Professional and technical communication in a web 2.0 world. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 23(4), 265-287.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2014.941766>
- Bozna, H. & Yüzer, V. T. (2020). Digital Natives' Use of Web 2.0 Tools in Learning Foreign Language: A Case Study. *Language and Technology*, 2(1), 26-43.
- Chen, C., Landa, S., Padilla, A. & Yur-Austin, J. (2021). Learners' experience and needs in online environments: adopting agility in teaching. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, 14 (1), 18-31. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIT-11-2020-0073>
- Davy Tsz Kit, Ng, Wanying, L., Helen Man Yi, C., Samuel Kai Wah, C. (2022). Using digital story writing as a pedagogy to develop AI literacy among primary students. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, 3(2022), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2022.100054>.
- Dizon, G. & Thanyawatpokin, B. (2018). Web 2.0 tools in the EFL classroom: Comparing the effects of Facebook and blogs on L2 writing and interaction. *The EUROCALL Review*, 26(1), 29-42.
<https://doi.org/10.4995/eurocall.2018.7947>
- Elliot, J. (1991). Action research for educational change (Theory in Practice) Retrieved from <http://amirhamzah.students.uui.a.c.id/2012/03/07/action-research>.
- Floyd, J. et al. (2014). Storybird. *EDUC*, 5553.
- Harrison, R., & Thomas, M. (2009). Identity in online communities: social networking sites and language learning. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*, 7(2), 109-124.
- Howell, E., Perez, S., & Abraham, W. T. (2020). Toward a professional development model for writing as a digital, participatory process. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.294>
- Hsu, L. (2013). English as a foreign language learners' perception of mobile-assisted language learning: across-national study. *Computer-assisted language learning*, 26(3), 197-213.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2011.649485>

- Kazazoğlu, S. & Bilir, S. (2021). Digital Storytelling in L2 Writing: The Effectiveness of Storybird Web 2.0 Tool. *TOJET: The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 20(2), 44-50.
- Khabib, S. (2022). Introducing artificial intelligence (AI)-based digital writing assistants for teachers in writing scientific articles. *Teaching English As a Foreign Language Journal*, 1(2), 114–124. <https://doi.org/10.12928/tefl.v1i2.249>
- Menezes, H. (2012). Using Digital Storytelling to Improve Literacy Skills. *International Conference on Cognition and Exploratory Learning in Digital Age (CELDA 2012)*.
- Müldür, M., & Yalçın, A. (2019). Öz düzenlemeye dayalı yazma eğitiminin Middle School öğrencilerinin bilgilendirici metin yazma becerisine, yazmaya yönelik öz düzenleme becerisine ve yazma öz yeterlik algısına etkisi. *Elementary Education Online*, 18(4), 1779–1804. <https://doi.org/10.17051/ilkonline.2019.639323>
- Nazri, N. M., Shah, P. M., Yunus, M. M., & Zakaria, S. M. (2016). Students' experience of using story bird in writing ESL narrative text. *Creative Education*, 07(15), 2107-2120. <https://doi:10.4236/ce.2016.715210>.
- Purdy, J. P. (2010). The changing space of research: Web 2.0 and the integration of research and writing environments. *Computers and Composition*, 27(1), 48-58. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2009.12.001>
- Shamsulbahri, N. F., & Aziz, A. A. (2020). The Effectiveness of Storybird in Improving English Narrative Writing. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(2), 316– 322. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v10-i2/6932>
- Urquhart, Vicki and McIver, Monette. (2005). Teaching Writing in the Content www.storybird.com.
- Tavsanlı, O. F., Sadioglu, O., Sezer, G. O., & Kaldırım, A. (2020). An investigation into how parental literacy experiences are reflected in literacy tendencies and experiences of preservice teachers. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 16(5), 13. <https://doi.org/10.29329/ijpe.2020.277.9>
- UNESCO. (2015). *Logros de aprendizaje*. In *Tercer Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo [Learning achievements Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study]*. Caribe (OREALC) <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000243532>
- Wang, S., & Vásquez, C. (2014). The effect of target language use in social media on intermediate-level Chinese language learners' writing performance. *CALICO Journal*, 31(1), p. 78-102. <https://doi:10.11139/cj.28.2.345-368>.
- Wertz, J. A. (2014). Bitstrips and Storybird: Writing Development in a Blended Literacy Camp. *Voices from the Middle*, 21, 24-32.
- Wolff, W. I. (2013). Interactivity and the invisible: What counts as writing in the age of Web 2.0. *Computers and Composition*, 30(3), 211-225.
- Yamaç, A., Oztürk, E., & Mutlu, N. (2020). Effect of digital writing instruction with tablets on primary school students' writing performance and writing knowledge. *Computers & Education*, 157, Article 103981. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.103981>
- Yıldırım, A., & Şimşek, H. (2008). *Nitel araştırma yöntemleri*. (7. Baskı). Ankara: Seçkin.