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## Literacy in our Lives, Past, Present and Future: Exploring Digital Stories by UAE Pre-service Teachers

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## **Literacy in our Lives, Past, Present and Future: Exploring Digital Stories by UAE Pre-service Teachers**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research study was to examine how pre-service teachers in a college of education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) used multimodal digital storytelling to explore their language and literacy learning experiences in Arabic and English. Twenty-one pre-service teachers participated in this qualitative study. Drawing on the digital stories, reflection papers and open-ended surveys as data, the study explored the pre-service teachers' bilingual literacy language experiences and how they created their digital stories. Emerging themes included early experiences in language and literacy learning at home and at school, and expanded notions of literacy. The memoirs offered a glimpse into the cultures, linguistic development and schooling of the participants and importance of using multimodal digital storytelling to support literacy and language learning in ESL/EFL contexts.

The purpose of this research study is to examine how pre-service teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) used multimodal digital storytelling to explore their language and literacy learning experiences in in Arabic and English.

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates in the Middle East near the Persian Gulf. It has only been in existence for 43 years, but because of its oil revenues, development is occurring at a breathtakingly fast pace (Sowa & De La Vega, 2008). Currently, the educational system in the UAE is undergoing radical reform. The country has introduced student-centered forms of teaching and new curricula. Arabic is the official language of the UAE, however, noting the prominence of English in world business and trade, in 2010 the emirate of Abu Dhabi, introduced bilingual education in the teaching of Arabic and English from kindergarten. Arabs speak a colloquial regional dialect of Arabic; speak and write Modern Standard Arabic which is taught in schools, and used in formal and official contexts; and also learn classical Arabic, the language of Islam and the Quran (Baker & Jones, 1997). The pre-service teachers in this study are being prepared as teachers who will educate the next generation of UAE children to be bilingual in Arabic and English.

In some ways, students in the UAE have been disadvantaged in learning English because access to English books through schools and public libraries has been limited, but this is changing, with the Abu Dhabi government opening 6 public libraries in 2012 (Cleland, 2012). In contrast, the UAE has a high internet penetration of 70.9 percent (<http://internetworldstats.com>). Many of the pre-service teachers that the researcher encounters in her classes, have access to and are skilled at using the latest technologies such as smartphones and tablets. Consequently, the pre-service teachers have both traditional print and new technological resources to use in

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developing language and literacy in both Arabic and English for themselves and for their future students.

It is against this backdrop that the researcher explored pre-service teachers' experiences in becoming literate in Arabic and English. This study is important because it gives insight into the pre-service teachers' understandings of their own literacy development. Furthermore, teacher educators in the UAE, are most often expatriates. It is essential for these teacher educators, to be culturally responsive, to understand the perspectives as well as the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the pre-service teachers they teach (Gay, 2010; Herrera, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2001). The attention to these facets of our pre-service teachers' lives, and incorporating them into our teaching serves to build relationships in the classroom, fostering understanding and demonstrate that as teacher educators we too value the knowledge that our students bring to university classrooms. We model constructivist and student centered approaches in the university classroom that we espouse for teaching in K-12 schools settings. The research questions which guided this study are:

1. What did Pre-service teachers' digital narratives reveal about their experiences in becoming literate in Arabic and English?
2. How did Pre-teachers use multimodal digital texts to describe their experiences in becoming literate in Arabic and English?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study uses a sociocultural framework, which is crucial to the study of language and literacy and the expanded notion of new literacies. A sociocultural perspective roots language and literacy "in an anthropological understanding of culture; and views learning and texts as socially constructed and mutually negotiated" (Nieto, 2010, p. 4). Exploring and teaching language and literacy from a sociocultural perspective brings into play pre-service teachers' home and school environments, their social interactions and the social, political and cultural factors which influence how and when they learn. (Nieto, 2010; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Moll, 1992, Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Moss & Lapp, 2010). Furthermore, our new understandings of text as including the various ways in which individuals communicate with each other, underpins the sociocultural nature of texts, and the need to conduct this study using a sociocultural lens.

#### **Pre-service Teachers and Autobiographical Writing**

The terms narrative, autobiography, memoirs and stories, will be used interchangeably in this study. For many years courses in teacher education programs have required pre-service teachers to write autobiographies about their learning experiences in schools. Alvine (2001) stated that autobiographical writing was originally "used as a way to identify the concerns of pre-service teachers" (p. 5). However, as researchers noted the power of story to transform individuals, and "that stories can be a means for teachers to express beliefs about theory, practice and curriculum," (McVee, 2004, p.881), the use of narratives in the form of autobiographies, memoirs or life stories gradually changed. Narratives came to be regarded as central to teacher

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education, the study of teachers and teaching practice (Carter & Doyle, 1995, p.120). They are used as reflective tools, interventions for critical reflective practice, a means for pre-service teachers to explore their identities, and how their identities might impact their teaching (Brown, 1999; Connelly, & Clandinin, 1994; Gomez, 2000; Rodriguez & Cho, 2011). Teacher educators in various disciplines, have required pre-service teachers to write science, math, and literacy autobiographies, to “make explicit for them knowledge about teaching and learning – as they have experienced it” (Alvine, 2001, p.5). Autobiographies and storytelling have also been used in foreign and English language learning to improve language and to bring first language literacy into Kindergarten through higher education, as well as non-formal settings (Nicholas, Rossiter, Abbott, 2011; Steinman, 2007; p. 566; Wajnryb, 2003). Pre-service teachers have been asked to write about their literacy development through literacy autobiographies in order to understand language learning or to model “strategies for literacy teaching” (Brown, 1999, p. 402; Danielson, 1989). This study adds to the research on the writing of literacy autobiographies by pre-service teachers, by exploring their reflections on their experiences learning Arabic and English.

### **Digital Storytelling**

This study also draws on research on multimodal theory, the concepts of new literacies and multiliteracies. Multimodal theory explores the role of modes as “semiotic resources for meaning making” (Jewitt, 2011, p.246). Modes “carry the meanings that a social collective recognizes and understands” (Albers & Harste, 2007, p. 11; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt, 2008). Images, writing, sound, speech and gesture are all examples of modes. New literacies or multimodal literacies expand the traditional notions of literacy to include multimodal texts found on the Internet such as blogs, wikis, instant messaging, and social network sites (Gee, 1996; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leu et al, 2005). In the context of this study multiliteracies refer to the ability to read, write and produce these multimodal texts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Digital stories are narratives which use new media and technology such as sound, images, and voice ([http: Storycenter.org](http://Storycenter.org); Dreon, Kerper, & Landis, 2011; Robin, 2008). In the area of education and teaching, digital stories are described as powerful multimodal pedagogical tools which can give students opportunities to make sense of their lives, their identities “and what their social worlds mean to them” (Hull & Nelson, 2005, p. 14; Scott Nixon, 2009, Long, 2011; Skinner, 2008; Vasudevan, Schultz & Bateman, 2010).

Researchers have extensively explored general classroom uses of digital storytelling, especially in K-12 settings. Benefits of digital storytelling include improvements in engagement, motivation, reflection, critical thinking, technological skills and information literacy (Hett, 2012; Hur & Suh 2012; Robin, 2008; Yuksel & Robin, 2008; Robin & McNeil, 2010; Long, 2011; Walsh, 2010; Gee, 2014). In English and/or foreign language learning, researchers posit that digital storytelling is beneficial in improving the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Angay-Crowder, Choi, & Yi, 2013; McGeoch & Winston, 2012; Reinders, 2011). In teacher education, researchers have explored digital storytelling as a means of helping pre-service or beginning teachers practice and understand the potential of using this medium in their elementary, middle and secondary school classrooms in various content areas (Doering, Beach, & O'Brien, 2007; Dreon, Kerper, & Landis, 2011; More, 2008; Sancar-Tokmak & Incikabi, 2013; Heo, 2011; Kobayashi, 2012).

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A thorough examination of the research literature revealed very little research on bilingual Arabic-English pre-service teacher use of digital storytelling in the Middle East. Through its examination of the language learning experiences of Emirati pre-service teachers in an English medium university, this research study adds to the literature on the use of multimodal digital storytelling in ESL/EFL contexts.

## Methods and Data Sources

### Background and Context of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted in a college of education in the UAE. In addition to English and Arabic, Urdu, Hindi and Tagalog make up the rich tapestry of languages spoken in the country because of the large numbers of expatriates from Pakistan, India and the Philippines (Lacina, Levine & Sowa, 2010). Since English is seen as very important, UAE citizens or Emiratis have been enrolling their children in private schools because English is the medium of instruction in the majority of these schools. This trend, as well as the traditional ways of teaching in government schools is among the factors which led the government of Abu Dhabi to implement educational reform and bilingual education. Pre-service teachers' experiences in learning Arabic and English have been very traditional, involving rote level drill and practice (Moussly, 2010), especially if they attended government schools. Researchers state that the "lack of the target language environment" also creates a particular difficulty for students who are Arab speakers who are learning English. (Mukattash, 1983, Rabab'ah, 2002, p. 184, Syed, 2003). Consequently, many students struggle with both languages at university level.

English is the medium of instruction at this university. This means that although one of the learning outcomes for the students in the university is for students to be fluently bilingual, the majority of courses, especially at the level of majors, are taught in English. In order to ensure their proficiency in English the students have to attain certain scores in English proficiency exams before they can start their general education courses. Students who score below the required scores have to spend a few semesters in the university intensive English program to attain the required levels of proficiency. However, by the time they enter higher level coursework in their major areas of study, many students still struggle with university level English.

*Participants.* Twenty-one participants in the study were female pre-service teachers between the ages of 19 and 32 who had taken the researcher's 15 week children's and adolescent literature course. All the participants spoke Arabic as a first language. All but one of the pre-service teachers were Emirati. This pre-service teacher was born and raised in the UAE, but was of another nationality. Sixteen of the pre-service teachers were being prepared as early childhood teachers, while the other five were English education majors preparing to teach English learners in middle or Cycle 2 schools. The digital stories were collected over a period of three semesters (Spring 2013 – Fall 2014). Participants had taken a general education course in educational technology. The purposes of the course were to immerse pre-service teachers in reading and evaluating children and adolescents' literature, introduce them to various new literacies which they could use in their own teaching, and have them reflect upon and explore literacy and language learning in their lives.

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*Assignment Description.* One of the assignments for this course was developing multimodal digital literacy memoirs on pre-service teachers' experiences in becoming literate in Arabic and English. To brainstorm the assignment, the pre-service teachers first answered a series of questions about how they learned Arabic and English, influences on their language learning, and how they saw themselves as readers and writers of both languages. The participants then developed a storyboard to help them sequence their stories. The instructor gave them examples of digital stories as models from YouTube as well as pre-service teacher work developed in previous semesters. The first set of 4 pre-service teachers used Windows Moviemaker to develop their memoirs. The participants who took the class in subsequent semesters used iMovie with iPads provided by the university. Since they are bilingual, and to reinforce the importance of Arabic, pre-service teachers were encouraged to use written and spoken Arabic and English as well as other semiotic modes such images and sound effects to create their memoirs. The assignment was designed to help the pre-service teachers tell their personal language and literacy learning stories and to explore different ways of making meaning through a variety of media. The assignment gave the participants the opportunity to experience to potential uses of digital stories in their future classrooms.

*Qualitative Methods.* This study is a basic qualitative research study (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research was best suited for this project because it addresses "how people make sense of their world, and the experiences they have in the world" (p.13). A qualitative approach enabled the researcher to seek understandings of teacher candidates' language and literacy learning experiences through the exploration of their digital stories. Additional data sources included reflection papers, comments from students, and answers to open-ended survey questions. The surveys were sent by email to teacher candidates who had already completed the course. The survey items included questions asking the participants about the most significant parts of their stories, whether they felt the assignment helped them improve their English proficiency, and what their stories revealed about themselves as readers and writers of English and Arabic. Eleven out of the 21 candidates returned the survey.

The data were coded in two ways. Initially, the 21 digital memoirs were coded for the various semiotic modes pre-service teachers used to compose their digital stories such as music, images and animation. Subsequently, the content of the digital stories, surveys and reflection papers were examined and then coded for emerging themes and patterns using the constant comparative method (Creswell, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The findings from the analysis of the digital memoirs were cross-verified or triangulated with the findings from the additional data throughout the analysis and interpretation of the data. Ethical permission was sought for this study, and neither the real names of the pre-service teachers nor their images are used.

## **Findings**

The majority of the narratives examined pre-service teacher literacy and language learning in the past, present and future. The semiotic modes pre-service teachers used included clip art, images from the internet, voice overs, music and written texts in Arabic and English. The digital stories ran from the very simple; linear with pictures and words and music, to the very sophisticated with music, words and animations such as transitions, and pan and zoom. On

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average, the stories were about seven to eight minutes long.

### **Photographs, Images and Clip art**

The majority of pre-service teachers did not include photographs of themselves as adults in their stories. Eight out of the twenty-one pre-service teachers included pictures of themselves as children. Although Emirati women take pictures of them and use social media applications such as Instagram quite frequently, it is culturally frowned upon to publicly show pictures of themselves as adults. Two of the 21 did include their pictures, but made sure their faces were obscured. Muna had pictures of herself taken from a distance. Shamsa was the only teacher candidate who had a picture of herself taking a selfie on the last page of her memoir. Half of the pre-service teachers had pictures of their fathers and grandfathers. Two of them had pictures of their mothers who were veiled. One had a picture of her brother. These photographs were used to illustrate the importance, power and influence of family in their language and literacy learning. “If my parents were not there for me and my siblings [sic],” Hamda wrote, “I don’t think we will [sic] be as good as we are now.” Three pre-service teachers had pictures of themselves as part of a group of prize winners of reading or writing competitions. Muna had the most personal photographs in her story. She had pictures of herself as a child and as an adult, as well as of her parents, and her children.

The vast majority of clip art and images from the Internet that the pre-service teachers used were images of Caucasians or westerners including babies, women reading to children, teachers, and families reading together. When asked by the researcher why she had chosen a Caucasian baby to represent herself, Safeya shrugged and said it was an image she found “cute”. Three pre-service teachers had pictures of Emirati children in their stories. Maha had the most photographs of Arabs. The photographs she used included Arab children learning at a traditional school, a woman dressed in traditional Emirati attire, Emirati children in a classroom, and at a school assembly.

The pre-service teachers also used images of television shows such as the Oprah Winfrey talk show to illustrate how they learned English. Clip art for technology consisted of images of the twitter logo, keyboards, iPhones, Blackberries, PCs and laptops. All the stories had pictures from google images of old and new Arabic and English books on shelves, in piles and on desks. They all also had images of the front covers of their favorite books. Five of the twenty-one, had pictures of an Arabic comic book anthology and children’s magazine called Majid which the majority of participants stated was highly influential in their lives when they were children. “I waited every Wednesday for the next edition,” Safeya said.

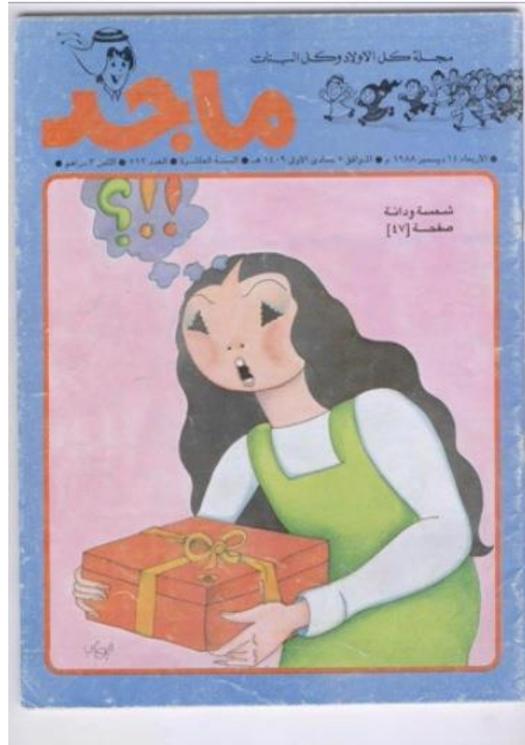


Figure 1: Screen shot Majid magazine.

The majority of clip art and images used by the pre-service teachers had English words. There were not as many with Arabic words. The participants also used clip art of worksheets of Arabic letters as well as of the English alphabet to illustrate how they learned to read and write both languages. Pre-service teachers were very careful to make sure their images and photos matched the stories they told.



Figure 2: Arabic Alphabet Worksheet

## Music and Words

All of the pre-service teachers used music in their digital stories. Only one pre-service teacher used an Arabic soundtrack. The rest used sound clips of jazz and classical music. In their interviews, the pre-service teachers stated that they used music which they liked and felt matched their stories. The participants used music to mark significant periods in their lives: for example, when they started school, when they got married and had children and when they started university. Eighteen of the participants used voice overs and written words or sentences to tell their stories. The other three only used written words and music. Usually the words were written alone on a slide, but many participants wrote sentences below or on their clip art images.

It is important to note that although the majority of pre-service teachers did not use photographs from their personal lives, they still managed to tell stories which evoked personal experiences. They looked to the future and spoke of being good mothers and teachers who would read to their children and future students respectively. The words, music and images they used worked together to achieve this effect. Wadeema wrote and spoke about how she loved school, how she taught her little brothers and sisters, and how she had to drop out of school to get married. Nevertheless, she continued reading to learn more about herself and how to raise her children. "Then I wrote grocery lists, and read recipe books ... I became a mother. ... I read to raise my kids. I read to them." She eventually returned to school and then to university. She wrote "I'll keep reading even after I graduate, for my family, to my students, and in the near future to my grandchildren."

## Emerging Themes

Further analysis of the content of the digital memoirs, the reflection papers and interviews led to three emerging themes related to participant literacy and language development in Arabic and English. These themes are: early influences from home and school, perceptions of themselves as bilingual learners, and expanded notions of literacy.

*Early influences at home and school.* The participants' descriptions of their experiences provided a look into their sociocultural worlds. As the literature indicates, coming from print rich literate environments had a huge influence on the language and literacy learning of the participants, particularly in their learning of Arabic, as well their reading habits (Neumann, Hood, Ford, & Neumann, 2011; Purcell-Gates, Melzi, Najafi, & Orellana, 2011). Three of the 21 participants stated they had little access to books in their homes. One wrote that she was not encouraged to read at school or at home, and discovered the joy of reading and writing on her own. At home, some had libraries with books that were old and "boring" which remained untouched. Family is very important to Emirati and Arab families and this was very evident in pre-service teacher stories. Many participants told stories about the influence their families had on their language and literacy learning. The teacher candidates who enjoyed reading were usually influenced by their parents and /or older siblings. Whatever their level of education, fathers were the literacy and language role models, and played a huge role in this aspect of participants' lives. The stories revealed fathers were readers and that they primarily read newspapers, the Quran and religious books, no matter their level of education. "I remember my father always holding something to read" Safeya narrated. Fathers helped with homework, read Islamic stories, bought books and children's magazines, and encouraged their daughters to read.

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“My father read stories about the Prophet to me and my brothers and sisters,” Ayesha wrote. The majority of the participants stated that their fathers and families encouraged them to read in Arabic. “There is no one [sic] of my family members or school teachers who encouraged us to practice reading in English,” Miriam wrote. Only two participants stated that their fathers also encouraged them to read in English. An extract from Noura’s, voice over encapsulates the involvement of fathers in the participants’ lives, “My father was my hero in learning Arabic and English ... he encouraged us a lot to read and learn how to read and write.” Many of the participants who mentioned their mothers, stated that they were either uneducated, could only read the Quran, or educated up to primary school grade two or three. Only one participant mentioned that her mother had a first degree. Nevertheless, mothers also played a role in encouraging their children to read and write Arabic. “I used to recite the Holy Quran with my mother and I read in the right way with her,” Noura wrote. Mothers and grandmothers also told them traditional stories. Other family members who helped in participating language and literacy learning included grandfathers, older brothers and sisters. Safeya was very “curious” to know what was in the books her older sister was reading so her sister started to read stories to her and explained the standard Arabic words Safeya did not understand. Meera stated that she and her grandfather spent hours listening to the radio, and this helped her learn Arabic. Five of the 21 pre-service teachers attended Quranic schools where they learned to read the Quran and memorize verses. The pre-service teachers stated that the Quranic schools helped them to improve their Arabic literacy. Sameera stated, “... this experience helped me a lot to read in Arabic ... especially to spell the hard and long words.”

To improve their English language 90% of the candidates, watched television shows and movies mainly from the United States, like the *Bill Cosby Show*, the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Once Upon a Time*, and *Bride Wars*. Ibtisam stated that she watched Korean television shows with subtitles to help her improve her English.

At school, all the participants continued or started to learn Arabic in kindergarten. However, 50% of the participants started learning English in kindergarten, and most of these teacher candidates attended private schools where they stated more emphasis were placed on teaching English than Arabic. “Later on when I entered school, more concentration was given on [sic] English from the teachers rather than Arabic. So my reading level became better in English and I became more familiar with it,” Noura wrote. Other participants, especially the ones who were a little older, started learning English in public schools in grades 3 or 4.

Some of the stories revealed traditional ways of teaching both languages, with an emphasis on textbooks, rote learning, worksheets, grammar and good handwriting in Arabic, rather than meaning. The teacher used to have us “copy lists of words” Sameera wrote. “Sometimes I was rewriting [sic] paragraphs over and over. I do not even know why I had to rewrite them.” Three candidates noted that they were not encouraged to read at school. Ameena stated “reading wasn’t part of the curriculum ... teachers did not put in any effort to make us read books.”

Portrayal of teachers were mostly positive, however there were some exceptions. Asma stated that her first grade teacher frightened her so much, that she really did not begin to read and write Arabic properly until third grade when she had a wonderful Arabic teacher. Overall,

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participant stories revealed positive, albeit traditional school language and literacy learning experiences at school. The majority of pre-service teachers enjoyed their teachers, who encouraged them to read and to participate in reading and writing competitions. Several of the participants stated that their teachers encouraged them to read by giving those books as gifts. However, the majority of the pre-service teachers believed that some of the challenges and struggles they have with English and Arabic at university were caused by the traditional ways in which these languages had been taught.

*University-Perceptions of themselves as bilingual learners.* For the majority of the participants entering university and the intensive English program marked a significant and positive change in their learning of English. Hanan wrote, “When I graduated from school and entered university, I did not understand the teacher.” Meera narrated, “Everything changed . . .” as she described how the intensive English program helped improve her English. All of the pre-service teachers noted that they continued and/or started to read English novels at university. They stated although there was a lot of work, they were encouraged by their instructors to write and read more in English. They read abridged classics, like *North and South* (Gaskell, 2009) and *Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1998) and stated this helped improve their language considerably. Three pre-service teachers stated they rarely read for pleasure in either language, especially now they were at university, because their time was taken up with reading and writing assignments. Those pre-service teachers who enjoyed reading mainly read books in Arabic. Eliaziah wrote of reading many English classics translated into Arabic. Pre-service teachers’ favorite books included comic books, Japanese and Korean manga, and self- help books written in Arabic.

Seven out of the 21 PTs stated that the children’s literature course had an immense influence on their lives because it motivated them to read more books in English. Muna wrote that she bought her “first ever English novels” the year she took the children’s literature course in spring 2013, at the Abu Dhabi book fair. Muna and Fatima stated that they had begun to read to their children in both Arabic and English and that their children now love to read, and hold books. Muna had pictures of her children reading books and playing with an iPad. Fatima wrote that her daughter “enjoys books the most.”

All the pre-service teachers, especially the 5 who have since graduated, noted that composing the memoirs helped them realize how far they had come in their language learning. “I was very proud of what I achieved so far,” “I can tell that my level in these [sic] both languages have improved!” are some of the comments participants wrote. Many of them felt they still needed to improve and continue to strengthen their English proficiency. “The digital memoir also made me realize that there is no end to learning,” Hamda said. These findings demonstrate that the pre-service teachers recognized the personal and professional significance of being bilingual and using Arabic and English in their lives and that of their families.

*Expanded Notions of Literacy.* The pre-service teachers included their personal and professional uses of technology in telling their stories. All of them use smartphones to text, read email, and surf the Internet. Laptops and iPads are used to do the same as well as to complete assignments. Muna had lived in the US for a year and a half, with her husband. She describes herself as becoming “addicted to the Internet.” These days she texts, chats, uses twitter and stated she could not live without her Blackberry. Five pre-service teachers said they read

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electronic books. Eight participants used twitter. The pre-service teachers used Twitter in various ways. While some used it to keep current with the news, others used it for fashion tips, and to communicate with others over topics of interest like raising children.

With the exception of one person, all the pre-service teachers stated that they preferred composing their memoirs digitally rather than simply writing narrative literacy autobiographies. Noura stated that she preferred the digital memoir because she felt she needed to practice her speaking. Hamda wrote, “It is way better than putting my thoughts on paper. Using pictures, music and effects is more fun than writing.” In addition to expanding their notions of literacy, several of the participants, especially the ones majoring in English, stated that they would use these new literacies in their own teaching. These findings indicate that the experience in composing multimodal digital stories helped them understand the power and potential of these media for supporting literacy and language learning.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study have implications for teachers and teacher educators in ESL/EFL contexts. It is important for classroom teachers and teacher educators in countries such as the UAE, to give English learners the opportunity draw on their home languages as well as multimodal resources to help them communicate, transform and make meaning of their world. Composing digital narratives helped pre-service teachers reflect on their language and literacy learning experiences in the past, present and future. Telling and reflecting on their personal stories through a variety of media as well as in Arabic and English allowed pre-service teachers greater expression, and freed them from the constraints of English, which frequently limits their communication. Through these media they were able to express themselves with authenticity and authority. They connected images, their voices, music, popular culture texts and their own writing to tell their stories (Doering, Beach, O’Brien, p.44, 2007; Santos Green, 2013). The assignment also expanded their notions of literacy (Gee, 2014; Leu et al., 2005). They recognized that they could use multiliteracies to learn and teach language. Although improvement in language learning was not a primary goal of this study, in their interviews, the pre-service teachers reported recording and listening to their voice overs helped them pay more attention to and improve their speaking skills in English (Angay-Crowder et al., 2013). Overall many pre-service teachers found the creation of digital memoirs beneficial and reported that the project made them more aware of how much they have progressed as bilingual learners, as well as how far they need to go to become fluently bilingual (Brown, 1999). More than half of the participants stated that they would use similar projects with their future students in schools.

The memoirs also provide an intimate a glimpse into the sociocultural factors such as linguistic development, schooling and funds of knowledge which influenced participant learning of literacy and language (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2006; Neito, 2010). Families, especially fathers, played a prominent role in the development pre-service teacher’s Arabic literacy. All the candidates described “turning points” (Bruner, 1994, p.42) in their lives, the most important of which were having children for the married pre-service teachers, and entering university for the ones who were single. These turning points also give insight into how the pre-service teachers viewed themselves as bilingual language learners.

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This study demonstrates that it is vital for expatriate teachers and teacher educators to find ways to hear the voices and learn from the experiences of their students whose cultures may be significantly different from their own so that they might better prepare them to be productive citizens and/or effective teachers. This is particularly crucial in countries like the UAE where there are more expatriate teachers and teacher educators than Emiratis in schools and universities.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how Emirati pre-service teachers used multimodal digital storytelling to explore their bilingual language and literacy learning experiences. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2013) states 21st century literacies require teachers to be proficient “with the tools of technology” and have the ability to “create, critique analyze and evaluate multi-media texts.” This study therefore, is particularly relevant to countries such as the UAE which have high rates penetration of smartphone and internet usage, and which also want to promote bilingual education in schools (Internet World Stats). Educators in the UAE must play an important role in developing students’ bilingual literacy and language learning by facilitating their acquisition of the skills needed to produce as well as critically read and write using different media. Pre-service and in-service teachers must learn how to teach and experiment with digital media as well as new forms of strategic knowledge such as how to how to communicate on blogs, and social networking sites, and move through texts efficiently and effectively to help them meet their language and literacy learning needs (Moss & Lapp, 2010, p. 4 ). Incorporating multiliteracies in language learning will also lead to shaping new roles for teachers, and the creation of new spaces and classroom contexts as they teach language learners to navigate as well as interrogate the variety of texts afforded by the new literacy (Leu, et al, 2005, Moss & Lapp, 2010; NCTE, 2013). Creating digital stories helped the pre-service teachers in this study develop the “skills, strategies and dispositions necessary to adapt to the changing technologies in our lives”(Moss & Lapp, p. 5), learn about themselves, and practice using multimodal literacies to help support the literacy and language learning of the children they will teach in the future.

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