Digital story (re)telling using graded readers and smartphones

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Abstract. Extensive reading and digital storytelling can utilise 'the power of stories' effectively to enhance learners' receptive and productive skills. For the past five years, the author has been working on a classroom project combining these two activities, as a way of integrating Information and Communications Technology (ICT) into his reading-oriented English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses. Each year the project has continually been updated and improved, reflecting the results and challenges from previous years. In this paper, the project implemented throughout the past two years (2014 and 2015) is reported on, particularly focusing on how the project improved regarding ways the story should be analysed and then how the digital stories should be created. It was found that the students were favourable to our new attempts – using smartphones for digital storytelling and retelling a story from the viewpoint of two characters. On the other hand, the way individual work and group work should be balanced has room for improvement.

Keywords: digital storytelling, MALL, extensive reading, BYOD, smartphones.

1. Introduction

There are several benefits that are expected by combining extensive reading (reading a lot of easy texts written in the target language) and digital storytelling (creating a movie clip made from text, images, sounds, and narration). First, it enables learners to input and output the target language with special attention to the structure of narrative texts. The graded readers, written or retold with a controlled range of vocabulary, could make the analysis of literary texts more approachable to learners than the authentic literary works that are often too challenging. Second, the digital stories can be easily shared and learned beyond the class – they can be stored in a repository that future students can use for their learning. Thus digital storytelling

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can be a communicative activity in that the creators should be conscious of the audience beyond the class and time.

The author reported at EUROCALL 2014 on his previous classroom project, where each group of students in his class was requested to choose a book from the graded readers they had studied and, based on that story, create a digital story using Microsoft PowerPoint installed in the Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) room at the university campus. While the project involving story analysis and digital storytelling provided the students with deeper understanding of the narrative texts they read, the challenging process of creating a video clip on PCs made them focus on the technology rather than learning the target language; also they found it quite cumbersome to write a summary of a book as a group activity.

There were two major improvements in the classroom practice reported in this paper: First, instead of the PCs in the CALL room, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) devices were integrated into the process. It was expected that the high penetration rate of smartphones among the college students in Japan would make it easier for them to create digital stories using a widespread-owned device. The convenience of MALL on a 'bring your own device' basis would enable them to focus more on the content of the materials rather than the technology they have to cope with. And second, instead of writing one summary in each group, they were requested to choose two characters from the book they were studying and let each of them narrate the story, so that the same story could be retold from multiple points of view.

2. Outline

The project was conducted through an EFL reading course, 'Advanced Reading', for advanced and motivated learners at a national university in Japan, during the autumn semester of the academic years 2014 and 2015. The number of participants were 27 in total (17 in 2014 and 10 in 2015). The primary aim of the project is to direct learners' attention to the story structure while developing their reading/oral fluency.

The extensive reading activities were carried out outside the class, since it was merely a part of the 15-week-long course, covering a variety of strategies for reading different types of texts. A collection of 350 graded readers, composed of Oxford Bookworms and Macmillan Readers, were brought into the classroom every week so that the students could check them out and study outside the class. The students were encouraged to read 150,000 words or more during the 15 weeks.

At the 'Book Talk' in week five, the students talked in groups of three or four about the books they had read, and then each group chose one book that the majority of the members found interesting. Then they worked in groups to analyse the books they chose in terms of plot structure and characters, using multiple tools of analysis such as Dillingham's (2001) Visual Portrait of a Story (adapted by Ohler, 2008) and Greimas's (1966) Actantial model. Based on the analysis, they collaboratively wrote two stories, each of which were narrated by two different characters that appear in the same book.

After having their stories read by their peers and proofread by the instructor and practicing reading them orally, the writers recorded them and created video clips, adding some visual images and background sounds that might help the audience understand the story. The whole process was carried out by exploiting smartphones owned by the students; Videolicious, a free and easy-to-use digital storytelling app, was used for this purpose. Since the maximum length of a video clip that can be created with Videolicious is one minute, the students needed to plan and practice their narrations to fit it within the time limit. In order to minimise the work time on the project in the classroom, the campus learning management system ('Bb9') was used to let the students share stories they had written among other group members, and collect the digital stories they had created. The movie clips were shared and peer evaluated on Bb9.

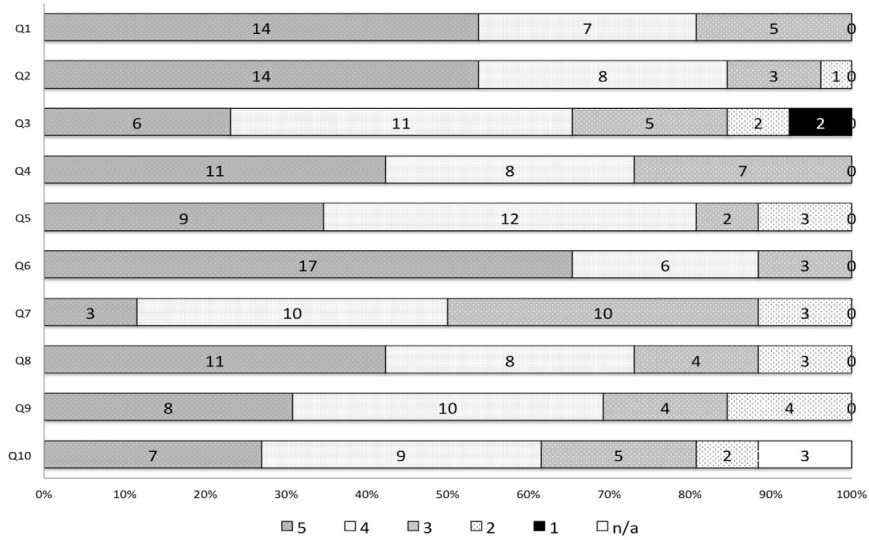
3. Results

A questionnaire survey, made up of ten items with a five-point Likert scale, was given at the end of the semester. There were 26 respondents in total. They were also asked to write comments on the project. The question items and results are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1. Questionnaire items

1. It is meaningful to retell the book from the viewpoint of one character.
2. Summarising and recording a story help me learn English.
3. Watching digital stories of the books I haven't read makes me want to read them.
4. Choosing a book for digital storytelling at the time of the Book Talk is appropriate.
5. The period of time and the deadline given for digital storytelling are appropriate.
6. It is all right to use my smartphone for my course assignments.
7. Pair/group work helps create a digital story.
8. Structural analysis of a story helps create a digital story.
9. Structural analysis of a story helps me understand other stories.
10. Overall, creating a digital story is meaningful in this course.

Figure 1. Survey results of Q1-10 (*N*=26)



The percentages of the positive feedback (4 and 5) are as follows: 80.8% (Q1), 84.6% (Q2), 65.4% (Q3), 73.1% (Q4), 80.8% (Q5), 88.5% (Q6), 50% (Q7), 73.1% (Q8), 69.2% (Q9), 61.5% (Q10). Q3 (Learning from other digital stories), Q7 (The effects of pair/group work), and Q9 (The usefulness of structural analysis) were relatively weak. (Though Q10 also looks weak, there were 3 respondents that gave no answer. The reason being that they just missed the last question).

Among the positive comments:

- There was a lot to learn from the project, like reinterpreting the story from the viewpoint of a character and performing the character in creating the digital story.
- The whole process of digital storytelling was a new and interesting experience for me.
- It was a good opportunity to practice reading my story with the audience in mind.

And here are some of the points the students found challenging:

- Using Videolicious was challenging. I had to record a couple of times to fit my script within the time limit of one minute.

- It would be better to have more time for group discussions; I don't really feel that my group collaborated our digital story.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The students viewed combining extensive reading and digital storytelling as an effective way to improve their four language skills and read narrative texts analytically. It was also found that overall the students were favourable to our new attempts to use smartphones for digital storytelling and then to retell the story from the viewpoint of two characters. It is also worthy to highlight that the students were extremely keen to use their own personal mobile devices for their course assignments. The convenience of creating a digital story using smartphones can be compared favourably with the technical challenges of doing so involving desktop PCs that have been previously reported on by the author.

On the other hand, the manner in which both student individual and group work should be balanced does have room for improvement. For example, more time should be spared for group discussions in the classroom throughout the whole process of the project as this will enhance the students' awareness of the project as a collaborative activity. Also, further investigation should be undertaken regarding what makes it relatively difficult for the students to learn from the digital stories shared by their classmates.

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