Students' perceptions of digital storytelling
in primarily asynchronous EFL classes
at a Japanese university

Naoko Kasami[1]

Abstract. This study aims to analyse the initial use of Digital Storytelling (DS) in primarily asynchronous classes in order to yield results and recommendations for future courses. All participants were students in elective English courses at a Japanese university in Spring, 2020. Due to COVID-19, the courses were redesigned and conducted remotely with the use of pre-recorded materials. Data were collected through a post-questionnaire. This short paper reports what was found from the data by analysing the questionnaire with CALL evaluation criteria developed by Jamieson, Chapelle, and Preiss (2005). From the post-questionnaire, it was revealed that the DS assignment was perceived positively to some extent in remote learning settings. However, it also highlighted the need for further in-depth technical and language support and interactive learning opportunities.

Keywords: digital storytelling, on-demand course, remote learning, EFL, university students.

1.   Introduction

The purpose of this study is to review and clarify potential improvements in DS assignments with pre-recorded materials in primarily asynchronous classes prepared during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focused on the DS in primarily asynchronous English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses which ran from May to August 2020. The study goal of the course was to acquire skills and knowledge to present ideas and messages effectively with the use of Information

1. J. F. Oberlin University, Tokyo, Japan; naoko.kasami@gmail.com; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3775-6827

and Communications Technology (ICT) and English. DS was the main assignment of the course and was conducted in the latter half of the term.

Recent studies have reported students' perceptions of DS from various perspectives with questionnaires (Liu, Wang, & Tai, 2016; Oskoz & Elola, 2016). In this paper, the students' perceptions of DS assignments in primarily asynchronous classes were investigated using questions based upon a questionnaire evaluating CALL materials which was produced by Jamieson et al. (2005) and based on six criteria defined by Chapelle (2001): (1) language learning potential, (2) meaning focus, (3) learner fit, (4) authenticity, (5) positive impact, and (6) practicality.

This study aimed to answer the two research questions below.

- What were the students' perceptions of the DS assignment with pre-recorded materials in terms of the six criteria?

- What factors were preferable and what should be considered in the DS assignment for future remote courses?

2. Method

2.1. Participants and courses

Most students were basic or intermediate level English learners majoring in ICT related fields. In spring 2020, 90 students enrolled in the elective EFL courses for second to fourth year students, and 64 (44 male and 20 female) students agreed to participate in this research by answering the post-questionnaire survey.

The DS assignment was conducted in primarily asynchronous classes, supported with complementary short (30-minutes) online (synchronous) meetings held every few weeks in Spring, 2020. Each student was supposed to create a digital story about their 'future dream'. The pre-recorded videos for DS covered; (1) basic grammar (to infinitive) instruction relating to expressing future dreams, (2) an example of DS (which included various English expressions related to future dreams), (3) how to write a scenario in English, and (4) how to create a digital story technically including tips for recording narration clearly and checking pronunciation with the use of Google Translate. The length of most pre-recorded videos was less than 15 minutes, and was accessed from the university learning management system.

On each weekly page, students could view instructions, pre-recorded materials, lecture notes, comprehension quizzes, tasks and challenging content on their schedules. They could also post and share their essays, create digital stories, and receive feedback from the teacher and classmates.

2.2. Data collection

In the course, three questionnaires were conducted during the term similarly to the past courses (Kasami, 2017). The post-questionnaires in the term consisted of four sections – general impression of the remote course, students' perceptions of DS, self-evaluation of DS, and learning motivation. The study focused on the section of students' perceptions of DS. In Jamieson et al. (2005)'s research, the CALL material, Longman English Online (LEO), was evaluated. This study customised the students' questionnaires of Jamieson et al. (2005, pp.131-133) by changing the terms LEO to DS (see supplementary materials, Appendix 1).

Even though the DS assignment with pre-recorded materials was not included in CALL materials, CALL evaluation criteria were used in this study, as most questions seemed to be appropriate and useful to get a grasp of the perceptions and problems of the DS assignment. The post-questionnaires were analysed using Google Forms after the peer-reviews at the end of the course.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Students' perceptions of the DS assignment as measured by the six criteria

The results from the questionnaires, which explored the six criteria are shown in supplementary materials Appendix 2, are reported according to each criterion.

- **Language learning potential**. Most of the students reported that their English improved to some extent after working on the DS assignment, but three students (4.7%) answered that their English did not improve. Most students thought that they understood the grammar explanation and the quizzes helped them to learn English to some extent.

- **Meaning focus**. Most of the students tried to understand the story in the sample DS whose topic was 'future dream' (to publish a travel photo book).

- **Learner fit**. Students were asked about the difficulty of the DS assignment. Though most (87.5%) of the students reported that the DS assignment was set at a good level of difficulty, 10.9% of students felt it was very difficult (see Figure 1).

- **Authenticity**. The students found that what they learned from the DS assignment was useful and nobody negatively answered the question: is what you learned in the DS assignment useful outside of class?

- **Positive impact**. It was reported that 45.3% of students liked the DS assignment, and 42.2% of students liked it somewhat. There were 12.5% of the students who did not like it.

- **Practicality**. Figure 2 shows that 78.1% of students thought they understood the directions, while 45.3% of students reported that they needed some help. There were six responses to the open-ended question, of which four answers were technically related. Two students also commented that they needed assistance with writing English sentences. More than 90% of students reported that they spent between one to four hours writing their scenarios in English. The time spent for creating DS varies from student to student: about 70% of students spent one to five hours creating their DS while about 14% of students spent more than five hours.

In this study of the DS assignment, learner fit tended to be comparatively higher than other criteria. However, it was reported that 45.3% of students needed help to some degree.
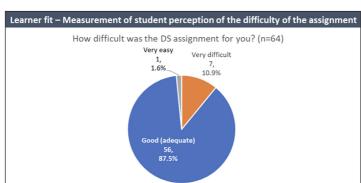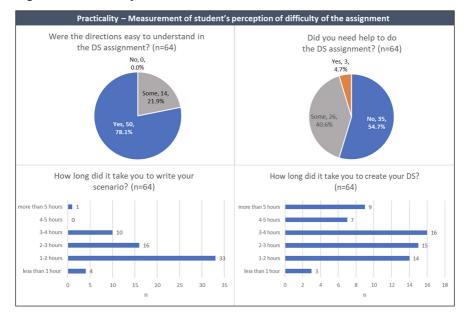
Figure 1.   Learner fit

Figure 2. Practicality

Practicality – Measurement of student's perception of difficulty of the assignment

Were the directions easy to understand in the DS assignment? (n=64)

- No, 0, 0.0%
- Some, 14, 21.9%
- Yes, 50, 78.1%

Did you need help to do the DS assignment? (n=64)

- Yes, 3, 4.7%
- Some, 26, 40.6%
- No, 35, 54.7%

How long did it take you to write your scenario? (n=64)

Time	n
more than 5 hours	1
4-5 hours	0
3-4 hours	10
2-3 hours	16
1-2 hours	33
less than 1 hour	4

How long did it take you to create your DS? (n=64)

Time	n
more than 5 hours	9
4-5 hours	7
3-4 hours	16
2-3 hours	15
1-2 hours	14
less than 1 hour	3

3.2. What was preferable and what could be improved?

Two open-ended questions were presented, and answers solicited from the students. For the question regarding which points were preferable in the DS assignment, there were 28 responses as follows.

> "It was good to know what each person thought and felt from each video and message. I also enjoyed reviewing each participant's work with the peer review sheet. I was glad that I learned something new from work created by my classmates".

> "Conducting this assignment was very rewarding. I enjoyed watching other people's work".

> "Though I do not have many opportunities to pronounce English in my daily life, I had chances to listen to my English narration and noticed how to improve my pronunciation".

For another question concerning which points were bad (or needed to be improved) in the DS assignment, there were nine responses as follows.

"I wanted to talk about our work with my classmates more. The time spent for peer review should have been longer".

"I felt that it would be easier to understand if there were more models or example digital stories".

"The operation sometimes did not work due to the different versions of PowerPoint. So, I would feel more confident if there had been more Q&A functions or FAQs".

These comments suggest that for future courses it is important to hold more and longer online meetings so that students can have more support and interaction with their classmates and teacher.

4. Conclusion

From the analysis of the post-questionnaire, most students regarded the DS assignment in primarily asynchronous classes somewhat positively, and most students (87.5%) rated the difficulty level of the assignment as appropriate, and the DS assignment allowed students to enjoy sharing ideas and learning together even in remote settings. Despite this, seven of the participating students (10.9%) found the DS assignment was very difficult, and more than 45% of students needed some help. Therefore, in-depth language and technical support should be provided with revised FAQs and additional online meetings to allow students to ask questions and communicate with others.

The courses of 2021 are in progress with these improvements, and the results of the courses will be reported in future studies.

5. Supplementary materials

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6. Acknowledgements

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