Advantages and disadvantages of digital storytelling assignments in EFL education in terms of learning motivation

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Abstract. Digital storytelling is an educational practice which has attracted the attention of many experts. However, there has been little research on the disadvantages of digital storytelling assignments from the students' perspectives in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Addressing difficulties or problems which are likely to occur in integrating digital storytelling in language learning would provide better insights for education in the future. Thus, this study aims to examine not only the advantages but also the disadvantages of introducing digital storytelling assignments in EFL education by focusing on learners' motivation. To achieve the aim of this study, data was obtained from questionnaire surveys in six courses entitled 'Information English' for students in Japan. Though most students were motivated for learning with digital storytelling assignments, there were also some students who were less motivated. The findings from students' comments revealed that it would be effective to provide specific instruction based on (1) proper guidance of effective narration, (2) the condition of having sufficient time to accomplish the assignment, (3) technical support, and (4) information ethics.

Keywords: digital storytelling, advantage, disadvantage, motivation.

1. Introduction

The main aim of this study is to reveal the advantages and disadvantages faced by Japanese university students in conducting digital storytelling assignments in

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EFL classrooms. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) constitute an integral part of the teaching and learning environment and become more important in language education (Penner & Grodek, 2014). Digital storytelling is an educational practice which has received attention in the literature. For instance, Robin (2006) states that "Digital Storytelling has become a powerful instructional tool for both students and educators" (p. 709) and the StoryCenter website[2] indicates that "digital storytelling can be an incredibly powerful way to foster creativity, engage [the] community, transform perspectives, and encourage reflect[ion] upon learning and life processes" (para 1). Language learning can also be promoted with digital storytelling, as Ohler (2013) pointed out that digital storytelling has great potential to help students learn language because of the interplay between writing, speaking, and listening.

Despite the considerable amount of research that has been conducted on digital storytelling, the focus has often been on their advantages. It was stated that while some disadvantages were noted, overall, the advantages of digital storytelling outweighed the disadvantages (De Jager et al., 2017). However, it is this researcher's belief that focusing on the disadvantages or difficulties of digital storytelling would be effective for overcoming the shortcomings and utilizing the advantages. Hence, the following specific research questions were addressed:

- What are the advantages of digital storytelling assignments in EFL courses in terms of student motivation for learning?

- What are the disadvantages of digital storytelling assignments in EFL courses in terms of student motivation for learning?

- What factors are necessary to overcome difficulties?

2.   Background and method

2.1.   Background

The author has focused on the effectiveness and advantages of digital storytelling in a previous study (Kasami, 2017), where results show that most students

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2. https://www.storycenter.org/public-workshops/edu-intro-to-ds

(77.77%) were motivated for learning with digital storytelling assignments more than with the traditional storytelling assignments. However, there were still some students (7.94%) who were less motivated (Kasami, 2017). Consequently, it was necessary to find out and overcome these difficulties in order to improve teaching and learning.

2.2. Method

The courses and data collection in this paper were conducted as outlined in this researcher's previous study (Kasami, 2017), with new data from the courses held in the following academic terms. This study focuses on the practices of six courses entitled 'Information English' for students at the Faculty of Information and Communications in Japan. The courses, with 153 students in total, were held during the fall term of 2015 and spring term of 2016. This study comprised 96 students who had answered all (pre, midterm, and post) questionnaires and had taken three tests under the same conditions as those in the previous research. The open-ended questions were presented to ask 'good' and 'bad' points about the digital storytelling assignment in the post questionnaire. Sixty-six out of 96 students commented. Out of these responses, two comments were not related to motivation and 64 comments were chosen which related to motivation for learning. From the comments, advantages and disadvantages were analyzed and factors for overcoming difficulties were explored.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Advantages

Students were asked "Please write down good points of the digital storytelling assignment if there are any". Positive comments were given by 48 students. From all of the comments, the author and another collaborator collected keywords. Keywords which had a frequency of more than two are shown in Figure 1. Some students' comments had multiple keywords. From the many students who responded very positively towards the digital storytelling, the principal keywords included 'English', 'Movie / PC', 'Create' and 'Interesting / Fun'.

When asked about the advantages of introducing digital storytelling in EFL courses, most students referred to their attractive features. The following responses are some examples of positive comments (Figure 2).
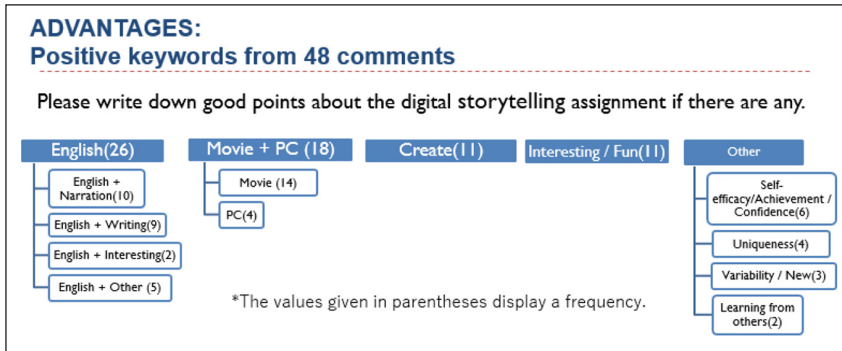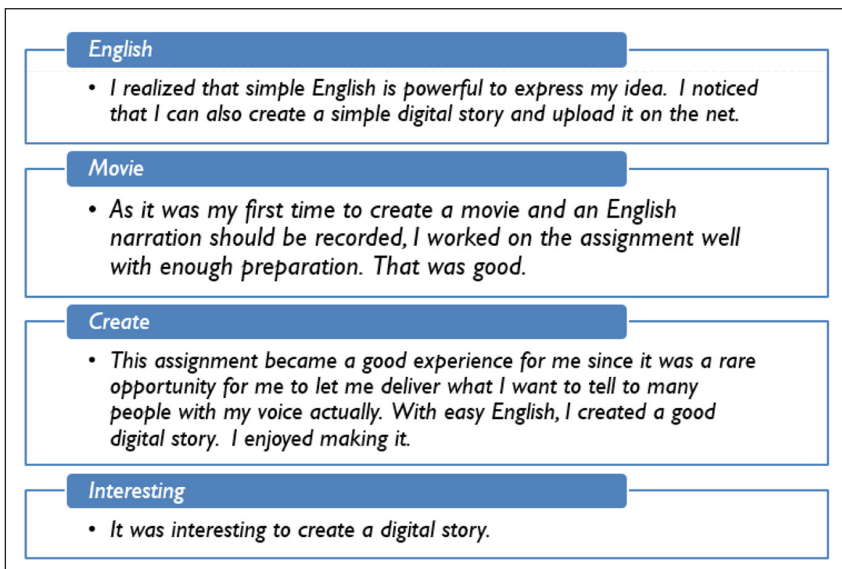
Figure 1.   Keywords of advantages

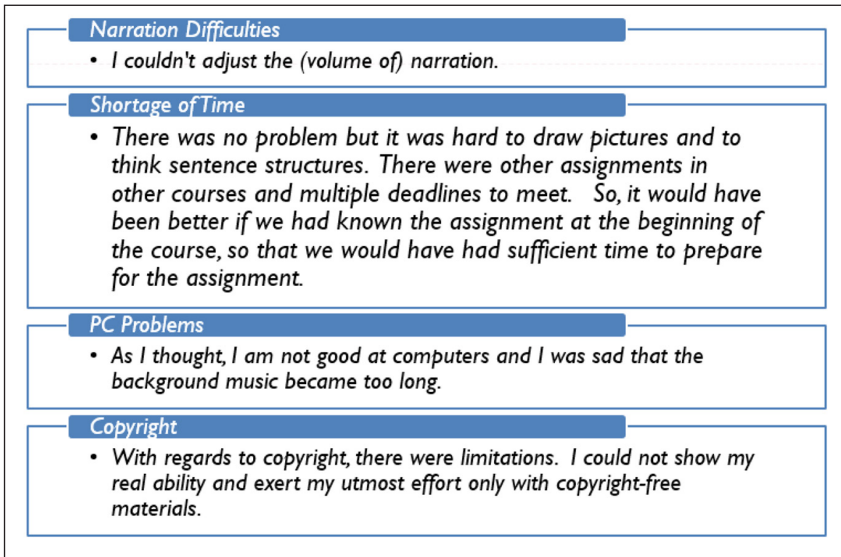Figure 2.   Examples of positive comments

3.2.   Disadvantages

Students were asked "Please write down the bad points of the digital storytelling assignment which should be improved if there are any". Negative comments were given by 16 students. All of the comments were classified into the four categories; (1) Narration Difficulties (n=6), (2) Shortage of Time (n=5), (3) PC Problems (n=3), and (4) Copyright (n=2).

When asked about the disadvantages of introducing digital storytelling in EFL courses, 16 negative comments were received from the students, including some from those who were satisfied with the digital storytelling assignment. The following responses are some examples of negative comments (Figure 3).

Figure 3.   Examples of negative comments

Narration Difficulties
- I couldn't adjust the (volume of) narration.

Shortage of Time
- There was no problem but it was hard to draw pictures and to think sentence structures. There were other assignments in other courses and multiple deadlines to meet.   So, it would have been better if we had known the assignment at the beginning of the course, so that we would have had sufficient time to prepare for the assignment.

PC Problems
- As I thought, I am not good at computers and I was sad that the background music became too long.

Copyright
- With regards to copyright, there were limitations. I could not show my real ability and exert my utmost effort only with copyright-free materials.

3.3.   Factors for overcoming difficulties

The following are some potential solutions to the problems encountered.

First, the most frequently occurring problems related to recording narration with a microphone. These problems were solved by allowing students to use additional headphones or setting the device options. Another problem was the volume of narration being set too low and some narrations were not clearly audible. To solve this problem, it was necessary to recommend that students rehearsed and checked the volume of their recorded narration at the beginning of each step. It was also effective for considering the balance of narration and selecting appropriate background music.

Second, five students indicated that there was not sufficient time to create their digital stories. It was inferred that the students who experienced difficulties with

writing scenarios in English and who spent longer periods writing fell behind schedule. Consequently, the time period for creating the digital story became limited. In order to improve this problem, it was necessary to emphasize time management skills to meet their deadlines. It was also recommended that the schedule should be less tight. If there was sufficient time, effective peer-feedback could be provided as well as teacher support.

Third, three students commented that they were demotivated because of their lower computer literacy skills and experienced difficulty with using computers. The most technically challenging parts should be explained adequately, especially adding music to the movie file, adjusting the timing of the music, and rerecording narrations.

Fourth, the copyright issues are very important in this kind of assignment. Since this format is digital, it is very important to consider how to deal with digital information, so basic information ethics become very significant. Many students would like to include their favourite music, anime, and characters, however, in many cases, this is not allowed as it infringes various copyrights and portrait rights. Therefore, it was necessary for students to use copyright free pictures and music. These issues should be explained in the early stages of the project repeatedly.

4.   Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to clarify the advantages and disadvantages faced by digital storytelling assignments in EFL. The results show that most students expressed positive views on digital storytelling assignments and considered movies and ICT both interesting and useful for English learning.

Regarding disadvantages, this research identified four problems. The findings suggested that teachers should provide specific instruction based on (1) proper guidance of effective narration, (2) the condition of having sufficient time to accomplish the assignment along with suitable advice, (3) technical support with troubleshooting tips, and (4) copyright and portrait rights which are related to information ethics.

More comprehensive views and in-depth analyses should be conducted in future research. Future studies should discuss how these improvements in instruction affect student learning motivation for better education.

5.   Acknowledgements

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