

# Creating collaborative digital stories to promote community awareness

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**Abstract.** The study presented in this paper explores the impact that a geographically situated digital storytelling project has on community awareness and engagement. A mixed method, exploratory case study approach was adopted for this study. Data was collected during in-class and fieldwork observations, with self-assessment surveys, open-ended questionnaires, and post-project individual debriefing sessions. Eighty-three first year undergraduate students at a rural Japanese university participated in the project. Seventy-nine (n=79) participants completed optional and anonymous self-assessment surveys and questionnaires. The results showed that participants' community awareness increased significantly after completing the project. Results also indicated that participants believed there was a strong likelihood that they would engage with the local community more in the future. Regarding L2 learning outcomes, data from the self-assessment surveys showed that students believed their English language ability improved alongside an increase in their motivation to study English.

**Keywords:** digital storytelling, community awareness and engagement, project-based language learning.

## 1. Introduction

The aim of the present study was to have students explore the local community in their university town to promote community awareness and engagement while at the same time improving their English communication skills. Working in small groups of three or four members, participants were tasked with creating digital stories about locations within their university town using only their smartphones. They were instructed to establish criteria for determining a historically or culturally

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significant location or place of interest within the town and to create a five-minute video highlighting the importance of the location. Students were required to use English during each phase of the project to develop communicative skills for effective collaboration and narrative techniques necessary to make their videos entertaining while also conveying complex ideas. In order to maximize potential English learning outcomes, students prepared for their projects by conducting research, creating storyboards, and drafting scripts, before finally traveling together to film their projects on-location.

A collaborative digital storytelling project was viewed as an ideal means to achieve these goals since research has shown that storytelling of community history can be used to increase community engagement and participation (Gaver, Dunne, & Pacenti, 1999). Carroll and Rosson (1996) also identified digital storytelling as a means to bond community members to one another and to foster a sense of engagement and attachment to a local community. In terms of language learning, several researchers have shown that students who participate in digital storytelling projects improve speaking and oral communication skills because of the narrative techniques required to complete the task (Hwang et al., 2016; Irwin, 2019; Razmi, Pourali, & Nozad, 2014). Listening ability has also been found to improve as a result of completing digital storytelling activities (Verdugo & Belmonte, 2007). Presently, the author is unaware of any published studies that explore the use of mobile devices to create collaborative digital storytelling projects in language learning contexts.

Although the full scope of this study investigated a broad range of areas of interest concerning language learning outcomes associated with collaboratively created digital storytelling projects made using only mobile devices, this paper briefly outlines the results of the following research questions:

- Can English language learners improve their English skills by creating collaborative digital storytelling projects using mobile devices?
- Can students increase community awareness and engagement through a geographically situated digital storytelling project?

## 2. Method

Eighty-three first year undergraduate students taught by the author of this study at a mid-sized liberal arts university in rural Japan participated in the digital

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storytelling project. All participants were enrolled in a compulsory English course and were assessed as having proficiency levels between A2 and B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) scale. Of the 83 project participants, 79 completed the optional and anonymous self-assessment surveys and questionnaires.

In order to collect sufficient data to address the research questions, a mixed method, exploratory case study approach was adopted. Data was collected during in-class and fieldwork observations, with self-assessment surveys using 5-point Likert scale items, open-ended questionnaires, and post-project individual debriefing sessions. A pre- and post-project test was also conducted to assess whether creating the digital projects had an impact on local area knowledge and community awareness. Quantitative and qualitative data were combined to validate data through triangulation and provide a deeper understanding of the results.

### 3. Results and discussion

Data from the pre- and post-project test was analyzed using a paired samples t-test to compare differences in local area knowledge and community awareness before the digital storytelling project and after its completion. The results showed a significant increase in scores from before the digital storytelling project ( $M=24.94$ ,  $SD=13.14$ ) to after its completion ( $M=42.91$ ,  $SD=5.39$ );  $t(78)=12.76$ ,  $p=.00001$ . While these results suggest that participating in the digital storytelling project significantly increased local area knowledge and community awareness, it is difficult to account for any external factors that may have also contributed to this raise.

As meaningful community engagement is a repeated activity that occurs over a period of time, the time constraints of this study proved to be problematic. Participants were asked to assess the degree to which they believed they would engage with the local community in the future. The results of the self-assessment survey measuring potential future community engagement are displayed below (see [Table 1](#) below).

Two notable results can be observed. First, participants strongly agreed that they would go to the places that their classmates had presented about in their video projects ( $M=4.5$ ,  $SD=0.67$ ). This finding indicated that the participants' interests were piqued about places they had not already visited within the town after watching their classmates' videos. Second, participants also strongly agreed that they would

become more active in the community after having completed the digital storytelling project ( $M=4.4$ ,  $SD=0.61$ ). Thus, the results of the self-assessment survey indicated that there was an increased likelihood of future community engagement because of participating in the digital storytelling project.

Table 1. Self-assessment responses to statements measuring community engagement (n=79)

Statements	Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree					Mean (SD)
	5	4	3	2	1	
I will go back to my location in the future.	28	34	14	3	0	4.2 (0.72)
I will go to the locations presented in my classmates' videos.	46	28	4	0	0	4.5 (0.67)
I will recommend the places presented in the videos to my family and friends.	27	38	12	1	1	4.2 (0.69)
I will become active in the community by participating in events and activities at video locations.	36	37	5	0	0	4.4 (0.61)

Students were also asked to assess the amount of English they used during each phase of the digital storytelling project, whether they believed their English had improved, and if their motivation to study English had increased. Table 2 shows their responses.

Table 2. Self-assessment responses to statements measuring English language use (n=79)

Statements	Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree					Mean (SD)
	5	4	3	2	1	
I made an effort to use English to complete the research phase.	20	26	11	16	6	3.5 (1.28)
I made an effort to use English to complete the drafting phase.	36	27	12	4	0	4.2 (0.88)
I made an effort to use English to complete the filming phase.	18	29	21	8	3	3.7 (1.06)
My English has improved as a result of this project.	46	27	5	1	0	4.5 (0.68)
My motivation to study English has increased because of this project.	34	34	11	0	0	4.3 (0.70)

During the research and filming phases, students were less likely to make an effort to use English than during the drafting phase. During classroom observations it was apparent that students were more likely than not to search for information about their locations using Japanese. In some cases, there was actually very little

online information in English about the places being researched. Because students were filming on-location, some of them were reluctant to use English in public in front of strangers. Students also strongly agreed that their English ability had improved as a result of the project ( $M=4.5$ ,  $SD=0.68$ ). Another important result was that students felt their motivation to study English had also increased because of their participation in the project ( $M=4.3$ ,  $SD=0.70$ ).

## 4. Conclusions

The present study investigated the impact of a geographically situated digital storytelling project using smartphones on language learning and community awareness. To address the first research question, results indicated that participants felt their English ability improved and that their motivation to study English had increased. Regarding the second research question, the results showed a significant increase in subjects' community awareness and potential future engagement. These findings were similar to those of Gaver et al. (1999) whose research showed that community history storytelling could be used to enhance community engagement and participation.

To improve English language use during the research phase, it would be useful for teachers in our context to select locations that have ample amounts of information in the target language. Also, to help improve target language use during the filming phase, students could be advised to go to their locations when there is less chance that others may be present. Finally, to build speaking confidence, it may also be worthwhile to have students practice the English narration by making mock videos before going to their locations.

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