

# Constructing digital ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ gamebooks to enhance creative writing and collaboration skills

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**Abstract.** This paper explains details of a creative writing project aimed at increasing students’ motivation to write in English and develop collaboration skills. Forty-eight first-year – A2-B1 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level – English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners enrolled in a reading and writing course at a Japanese university and participated in a collaborative, project-based language learning task. In small groups, students created gamebooks (approx. 1,500 words) in the Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) style using Google Slides. Both experiences from class and survey results suggest that students found the activity highly enjoyable and that their motivation to write in English increased. In the survey, many students also commented about the positive impact that this project had on their ability to express themselves in English while collaborating with their classmates, suggesting that the project fulfilled its two aims.

**Keywords:** Google Slides, creative writing, choose your own adventure, online collaboration.

## 1. Introduction

English writing skills are often overlooked in Japanese high schools, and students arrive at university without the basic skills necessary to create even basic paragraphs in English (Mulvey, 2016). This is often frustrating for students, and their motivation to learn this fundamental skill is often adversely affected.

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The main aim of this project is to encourage EFL learners to view writing in English not as a burdensome academic activity, but rather as an outlet for creative expression. The hope is that once students' attitudes toward writing improves, they will challenge themselves to improve their writing skills. The notion of improving academic writing skills through creative writing tasks has been supported by research by [Tok and Kandemir \(2015\)](#) and [Randolph \(2011\)](#).

As collaboration has been identified as an essential 21st century skill by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), a secondary aim of this project is to improve collaboration strategies between students by utilizing the synchronous (and asynchronous) collaborative capabilities of Google Slides to complete creative writing tasks.

The student perceptions and learning achievements described in this paper are derived from a survey conducted during the fall term (September to January) of 2019.

## **2. Instructional learning context**

Forty-eight first-year undergraduate EFL learners (A2-B1 CEFR level) enrolled in a reading and writing course at a Japanese university and participated in the creative writing project. These students were tasked with working collaboratively in random groups of four to create a short gamebook (approximately 1,500 words) in the CYOA style. For those unfamiliar, the gamebook genre is based on the notion that the reader plays an active role in a story by making choices for the characters. Typically, a gamebook will allow the reader to choose between narrative branches which result in different outcomes for a story's protagonist. This means that gamebook stories develop in a non-linear fashion as readers navigate between narrative paths based on their choices. CYOA was the title of a series of books published by Bantam Books during the 1980's and 90's that were highly influential and have since become synonymous with the gamebook genre.

Lessons were conducted in English in a computer lab and held twice a week for 90 minutes during a 15-week course. The project itself was allotted five lesson periods near the end of the course after students had completed shorter writing activities both online and using a textbook to ensure that they understood the fundamentals of sentence and paragraph structure and basic narrative techniques. Of the five lessons, one is used for explaining and demonstrating a CYOA story, three are used for creating the story and uploading it to a shared class website, and the final lesson is used for reading classmates' projects and completing peer evaluations.

### **3. Tools and procedures**

Rather than assigning a more traditional creative writing task, a CYOA gamebook was chosen because this style of writing requires higher levels of preplanning and organizational skills more suited to promoting collaboration between students.

Once the students understood the concept of a CYOA-style story, the teacher explained the process of creating one. The teacher focused on two main considerations: the creative process for developing a story, and the technical process of creating a Google Slides presentation. Regarding story creation, students were asked to choose a compelling character, create a story concept, develop the plot (narrative paths), and imagine at least three possible outcomes. They were also shown a narrative path development flowchart that the teacher used when writing an example story. For the technical process of using Google Slides to present their CYOA stories, the teacher made three video tutorials that explained basic Google Slides creation (theme selection, slide layouts, and sharing), steps for adding content (text, images, and photos), and advanced techniques (adding audio, music, video, and non-linear linking within the presentation).

Because they were limited to only three in-class lessons, students had to spend a considerable amount of time outside of the class working on their stories. Fortunately, Google productivity apps allow for easy, cross-platform synchronous and asynchronous collaboration, and students could continue working on their projects together outside of the classroom. To that end, students utilized a shared Google Doc to collaboratively develop the organizational flow chart and text for each narrative branch. The students then set about the task of creating their original CYOA stories.

Before the fifth and final day of the project, students had already embedded their completed CYOA Google Slides stories to a shared class website. During this phase of the project, students read each other's stories and provided peer feedback. The students provided anonymous feedback to each other using a Google Form with a scoring rubric and section for constructive comments. The scores and comments were linked to a Google Sheet that was shared with each member of the class. Therefore, peer feedback could be provided immediately during the lesson.

### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

With regard to the main aim of this project – improving students' attitudes toward writing in English and viewing it as a creative outlet – the project was a success.

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In class, students were very enthusiastic about creating their stories and spent the vast majority of their time on-task. The stories they produced were thoughtful and well developed, and their level of narrative description was much richer than in previous forms of writing. These observations aligned closely with Kirchmeyer and Faherty (2017), who studied the use of creating gamebooks to improve L2 output with non-English major students at a Japanese university. They found that creating gamebooks led to improved classroom participation and increased engagement in classroom activities. They also found that students “succeeded in producing original gamebooks, using clear and accurate language, that were generally interesting to other students” (Kirchmeyer & Faherty, 2017, p. 188). One point of divergence with the Kirchmeyer and Faherty’s (2017) study relates to the use of the target language during the classroom tasks. Although they did not observe an increase in the amount of English being used in class, during the present study students largely communicated with each other in English when planning and writing their gamebooks. This difference may have had to do with amount of preparation students were given before the writing task, because Kirchmeyer and Faherty (2017) describe their participants’ preparation as lacking. A difference in English proficiency level may have also contributed to this divergence.

An anonymous survey using Likert scale items and open-ended questions was conducted to better understand students’ views of the CYOA project. When reporting the extent to which they agreed with a list of statements about the project using a 5-point Likert scale, students agreed that their motivation to improve their English writing skills had increased ( $M=4.27$ ,  $SD=0.78$ ). Furthermore, they indicated that the project was educational ( $M=4.42$ ,  $SD=0.70$ ), useful for studying English ( $M=4.32$ ,  $SD=0.65$ ), and that their English writing skills had improved ( $M=4.42$ ,  $SD=0.64$ ).

Several open-ended questions also explored the students’ thoughts regarding the collaborative process. While most students indicated that this was one of the most challenging aspects of completing the project, they recognized the importance of improving this skill. In particular, many students commented that they could improve their English communication abilities with regard to expressing their opinion, a skill that many students find difficult. Some students even reflected on the fact that this type of group project was a good experience to help them prepare for their futures as part of a team in a company.

A project of this type is not without its challenges. Teachers wishing to implement a similar type of creative writing project should carefully consider both their students’ language skills and their ability to use presentation software like Google

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Slides. In order for students to successfully create a CYOA story, the complexities of the planning and organization process cannot be underestimated. Therefore, it is highly recommended that the teacher creates their own original CYOA story to share with their students before beginning.

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