

Individual versus collective digital storytelling in EFL education in terms of student perceptions

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Abstract. The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of individual and collective Digital Storytelling (DS). All participants were non-English major students in Japan. The study goal of the course was to acquire skills and knowledge to present ideas and messages effectively in English with the use of information communications and technology. Students in this study completed a single DS assignment under one of two different conditions; students adhering to the first condition created a digital story individually, whereas students who adhered to the second condition created a digital story collectively, in pairs or groups of three. While the analysis of the post assignment questionnaire showed that more than 90% of students under both conditions perceived the assignment positively, there are also some implications to consider for improving each approach.

Keywords: digital storytelling, individual digital storytelling, collective digital storytelling, non-English major students.

1. Introduction

Numerous researchers have studied the effectiveness of individual and pair/group writing (Strobl, 2014; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). Additionally, the effectiveness of DS in foreign language education has also been studied. A study by Castañeda (2013) indicated that DS projects give students the opportunity to write and present their stories to their audience, and allow students to engage other students in meaningful real-world tasks in the foreign language classroom. Nevertheless, while some studies have already been undertaken regarding DS

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How to cite: Kasami, N. (2020). Individual versus collective digital storytelling in EFL education in terms of student perceptions. In K.-M. Frederiksen, S. Larsen, L. Bradley & S. Thoušný (Eds), *CALL for widening participation: short papers from EUROCALL 2020* (pp. 149-155). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.48.1180>

conducted individually and collectively, only a few studies have focused on the influence of learner grouping patterns on students' autonomous language learning through DS activities (Liu, Huang, & Xu, 2018, p. 1010). Liu et al. (2018) examined the effect of learner grouping patterns on learning outcomes, such as knowledge achievement, autonomy in language learning, and emotional experience at an elementary school in Taiwan.

This article reports an investigative study of non-English major students' perceptions of individual and collective DS in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses in Japan. All students in this study were supposed to create digital stories about their student life which let people in other countries amicably understand them. These digital stories were created under one of two different conditions; each student adhering to the first condition created a digital story individually, students who adhered to the second condition created a collective DS in pairs or groups of three. Every student in either condition was encouraged to support each other and to conduct peer reviews.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

All participants were non-English major, university students from three different departments in a Japanese university. They enrolled in two elective English courses: Course A and Course B. The syllabus of the two courses was the same. Each student was supposed to present a final assignment showcasing his or her student life and culture to people in other cultures as imaginary audiences using DS. The number of registered students was 30 per course. Among them only those who voluntarily answered both mid-term and post questionnaires and participated in this research were chosen as the target of the analysis. Under these conditions, the target audience for analysis became 23 students from Course A, and 26 students from Course B.

In the mid-term questionnaire, students were asked whether they preferred to work individually or collectively for the final assignment of the course. In Course A, 65% of the students preferred an individual assignment. On the other hand, in Course B, 65% of the students preferred a collective assignment. According to the majority vote, as a final assignment, in Course A, students were required to do an individual DS assignment, and in Course B, students did the collective DS assignment.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

The data collection was conducted in a similar manner to that outlined in this researcher's previous study (Kasami, 2017), with new data collected from the courses held in the Autumn term of 2019. The mid-term questionnaire was conducted in Weeks 6-7 and the post questionnaire in the last week (Week 15) of the course in January, 2020.

The data analysed in this paper consists of responses to the post questionnaire, containing the following questions:

- RQ1: do you think that the individual DS assignment was good? (Group A); do you think the collective DS assignment was good? (Group B)
- RQ2: why do you think so?
- RQ3: how could the problems and difficulties of each DS style be improved for future courses?

For RQ1, the students were asked to indicate their degree of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1-Strongly Negative, 2-Negative, 3-Neutral, 4-Positive, 5-Strongly Positive).

3. Results

For RQ1, more than 90% of the class answered positively in both the individual and collective DS group (see Figure 1). For RQ2, there were 17 positive comments and two negative comments in the individual DS group, while there were 26 positive comments in the collective DS group (see Figure 2). As concerns the individual DS group, ten students oriented positively to the task because they appreciated being able to create the DS at their own pace and being able to concentrate on the task without having to worry about other's schedules and opinions. Six students mentioned that the individual DS assignment allowed them to show their individuality and express their unique ideas. The two negative responses concerned difficulties with English writing or editing a movie file.

In the collective DS, half of the 26 positive responses related to peer collaboration. Many students enjoyed helping each other in creating a DS by sharing ideas. There were no negative responses.

Figure 1. Students' overall assessment of the DS assignment

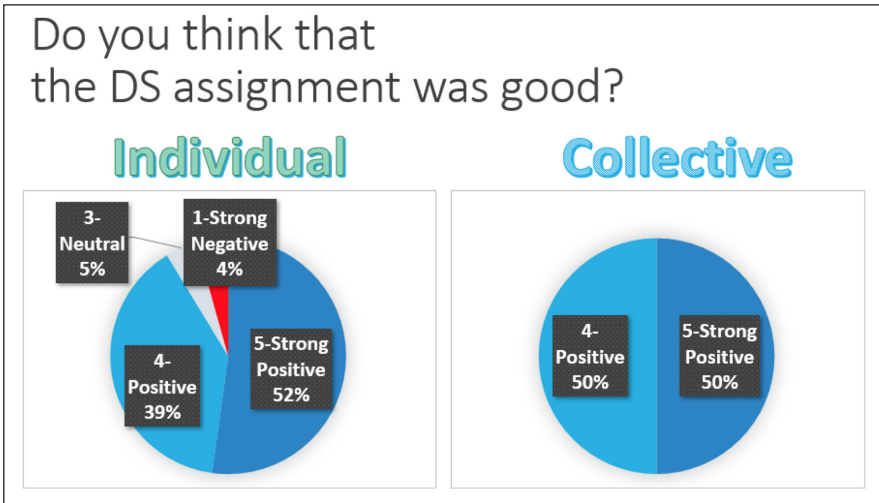
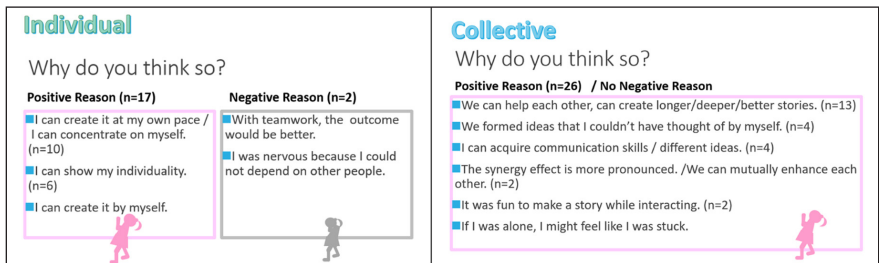


Figure 2. Students' reasons for why they regarded the DS positively or negatively

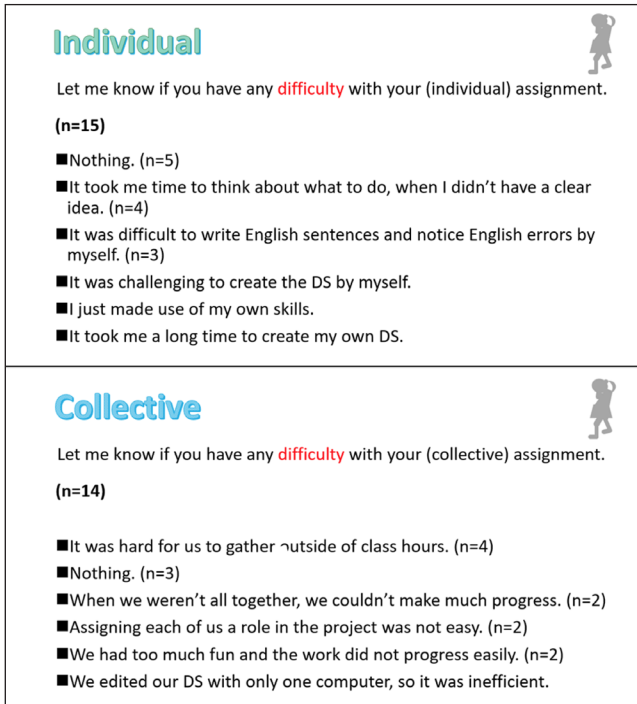


For RQ3, in the individual DS group, there were 15 responses which included five from students who answered 'Nothing'. Four students answered that it took time to solve problems by themselves without the help of others. Three students commented that writing English stories individually was difficult. For most students who felt confident in writing English and creating movie files, creating DS was a good challenge for their skills.

In the collective DS, there were 14 comments, including three where students answered 'Nothing'. Four students indicated that it was hard to get together for the assignment outside of the classroom because there were students from three different departments and their course schedules were different. There were also

students who pointed to difficulties collaborating when their partners were absent from the class and from external discussions, or due to limited computer resources for editing their work (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Difficulties of individual or collective DS



4. Discussion

The results of this analysis were found to be slightly different from previously reported studies. Liu et al. (2018) who studied elementary education classes in Taiwan reported that students working in groups outperformed those working individually in knowledge achievement, autonomy, and emotional experience in DS. Another study by Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) who studied traditional writing assignments found that pair writing was more effective than individual writing in terms of task fulfilment, grammatical accuracy, and complexity. In this current study involving non-English major students in Japan, some students preferred individual DS while others preferred collective DS and enjoyed the synergic effect

of collaborations. Some students who had clear ideas and sufficient writing and IT skills enjoyed creating their own individual DS by showing their individuality and views in their own style. Creating DS assignments requires writing, drafting, editing, revising, and presenting to an audience (Castañeda, 2013). As such, the process of conducting DS is more intensive and requires a more varied skillset than writing assignments. The results of this research do not suggest that group work is more productive than individual work. Rather, each approach seemed to have its respective advantages and disadvantages. Difficulties under each condition seem to depend on student preferences in terms of learning styles and the time they needed to invest in their work.

5. Conclusions

This study explored students' perceptions of individual or collective DS. The results showed that both individual and collective DS assignments displayed advantages and disadvantages. In this study, collective DS and individual DS were both perceived positively by students who wanted to develop things in their own time while showing their individuality.

There are limitations with this study that need to be addressed. The first limitation is that students in the two courses conducted only one specific type of DS respectively, and student experiences with the two types of DS are thus not directly comparable. Secondly, the dataset was small. Thirdly, some questions in the questionnaires were ambiguous.

Nevertheless, the study sheds new light on individual and collective DS assignments in terms of non-English major students' perceptions. Based on the findings, the following points highlight some pedagogical implications. For future courses, when individual DS is conducted, students may have difficulties with writing in English and using computers. Thus, sample English sentences and clear manual or video tutorials should be prepared for students who have difficulties with writing or who are less computer literate. When collective DS is used, each member should feel comfortable with his or her peer(s), and it is necessary to have effective project management and evaluation systems to clarify the contribution of each member.

6. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Julian Lewis for his advice on my paper.

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CALL for widening participation: short papers from EUROCALL 2020
Edited by Karen-Margrete Frederiksen, Sanne Larsen, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouéšny

Publication date: 2020/12/14

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ISBN13: 978-2-490057-81-8 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2020.