



Students' perceptions of digital storytelling in online EFL classes with Zoom at a Japanese university

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Abstract. This study reports on the results of students' perceptions of Digital Storytelling (DS) in online classes enhanced with synchronous Zoom meetings. Two main problems were identified with remote English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses conducted primarily as asynchronous classes in spring 2020. Firstly, seven of the 64 participating students (10.9%) found the DS assignment very difficult. Secondly, there should be more opportunities for students to learn from others. In order to solve these problems, the courses in spring 2021 were enhanced with synchronous (90-minute) Zoom meetings held approximately every two weeks to increase interaction and support in the classes. The analysis of the post-questionnaires showed that there was a slight improvement, with only five out of 77 students (6.5%) reporting that they found the DS assignment very difficult; most students (92.2%) rated the difficulty level of the assignment as appropriate. Regarding learning from others, there were more positive responses from students in 2021.

Keywords: digital storytelling, online learning, Zoom, EFL.

1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a rapid transition from classroom learning to online learning. In the field of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), there have been positive findings in regard to the implementation of videos in language education (Yu & Zadorozhnyy, 2022), and synchronous

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How to cite this article: Kasami, N. (2022). Students' perceptions of digital storytelling in online EFL classes with Zoom at a Japanese university. In B. Arnbjörnsdóttir, B. Bédi, L. Bradley, K. Friðriksdóttir, H. Garðarsdóttir, S. Thouësnay, & M. J. Whelpton (Eds), *Intelligent CALL, granular systems, and learner data: short papers from EUROCALL 2022* (pp. 214-221). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2022.61.1461>

learning with video communication apps such as Zoom and Google Meet have become widely used. Numerous studies have demonstrated the advantages of using 'breakout rooms' in these apps (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020; Siang & Mohamad, 2022).

At EUROCALL 2021, the author reported students' perceptions of DS in primarily asynchronous EFL classes at a Japanese university (Kasami, 2021). The study reported on findings from asynchronous classes held during spring 2020 due to COVID-19, using pre-recorded materials, which were supported by complementary short (30-minute) synchronous online meetings every few weeks. There were two main problems with the use of primarily asynchronous classes. Firstly, as seven of the 64 participating students (10.9%) found the DS assignment very difficult, there was a need for more appropriate language and technical support. Secondly, there was a need to provide more opportunities for students to have collaborative and interactive learning.

In order to solve these problems, the courses were redesigned. The courses in spring 2021 were enhanced with synchronous (90-minute) Zoom meetings held approximately every two weeks. During these meetings, students were encouraged to communicate in groups through the use of 'breakout rooms'. The rooms encouraged students to speak and write in English with others and to provide peer-reviews of their assignments. They were also expected to ask questions during the meetings or at the end of the meetings. A few optional meetings were held only for those who wished to ask additional questions or who requested individual support. In addition, answers to frequently asked questions related to DS were revised and shared to support students.

Thus, the purpose of the present study was to examine students' perceptions of the DS in online classes enhanced with synchronous Zoom meetings in EFL courses which ran from April to July 2021.

This study aimed to answer three research questions:

RQ1. How difficult was the DS assignment?

RQ2. What were students' perceptions of learning from others and the frequency of the meetings?

RQ3. What were the pros and cons of the DS assignment from the student's perspective?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Most students were basic or intermediate level English learners (from A1 to B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages proficiency levels) majoring in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) related fields. In spring 2021, 90 students enrolled on three elective EFL courses for second to fourth year students, and 77 students agreed to participate in this research by answering a post-questionnaire survey. The study goal of the course was to acquire skills and knowledge to present ideas and messages effectively using ICT and English. DS was the main assignment of the course. The amount and conditions of the DS assignments were identical to the previous year.

2.2. Data collection

In the course, three questionnaires were employed during the term, as had been used in the past courses (Kasami, 2021). The post-questionnaires consisted of four sections (general impression of the remote course, students' perceptions of DS, self-evaluation of DS, and learning motivation) in the same format as previous questionnaires. Like the previous study (Kasami, 2021), questions on students' perceptions of DS were generated in line with studies by Jamieson, Chappelle, and Preiss (2005, pp.131-133). Only a few questions on the general impression of the remote course and students' perceptions of DS in the post-questionnaire were focused upon in this study. The post-questionnaires were conducted at the end of the course and were created using Google Forms with a combination of closed and open-ended questions.

3. Results and discussion

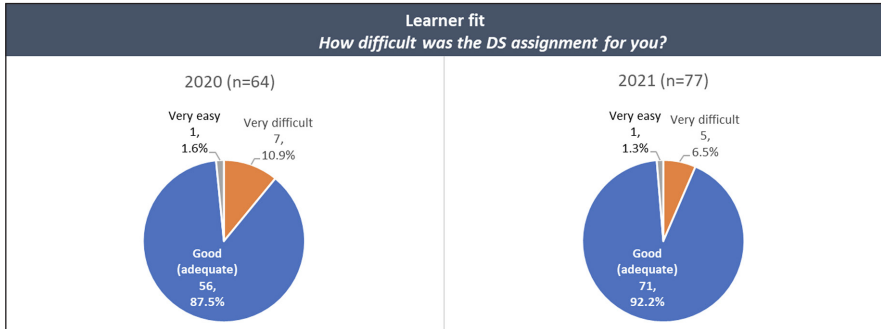
3.1. Difficulty and ease of the assignment

The aspects of 'learner fit' and 'practicality' analyzed in the previous study (Kasami, 2021) were also focused upon in this study.

In spring 2020, students were asked about the difficulty of the DS assignment through the question 'how difficult was the DS assignment for you?' (Figure 1).

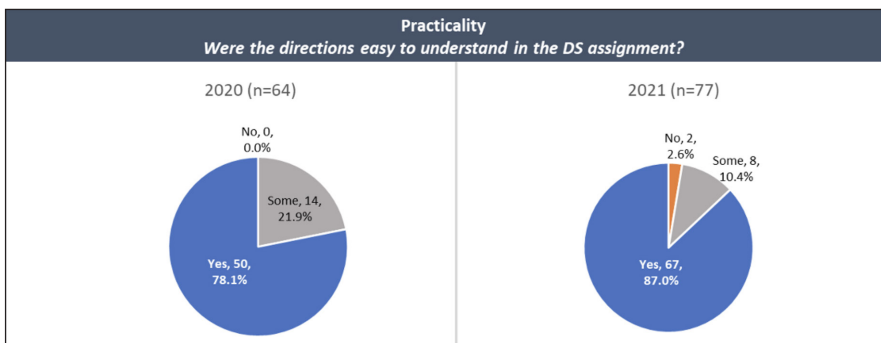
Though most of the students (87.5%) reported that the DS assignment was set at a good level of difficulty, 10.9% of students felt it was very difficult. In spring 2021, fewer students (6.5%) answered that it was very difficult, and more of the students (92.2%) reported that the DS assignment was set at an appropriate level of difficulty.

Figure 1. Learner fit



While in spring 2020, 78.1% of students answered positively to the question ‘were the directions easy to understand in the DS assignment’, in spring 2021, 87% of students answered positively (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Practicality

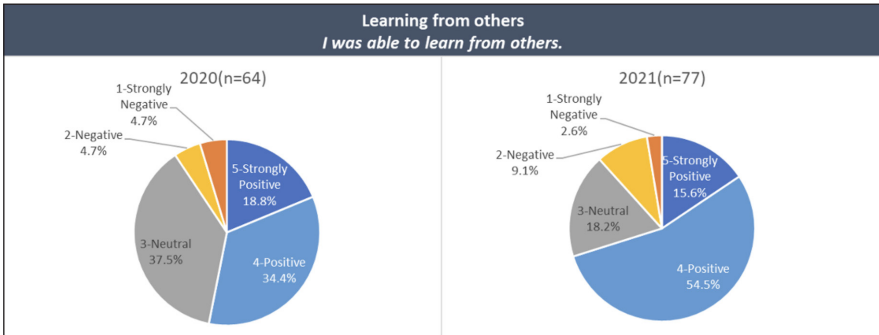


3.2. Learning from others in Zoom meetings

Regarding collaborative learning, for the statement ‘I was able to learn from others’, the students were asked to indicate their degree of agreement on a five-point Likert scale (1-Strongly Negative, 2-Negative, 3-Neutral, 4-Positive, 5-Strongly Positive).

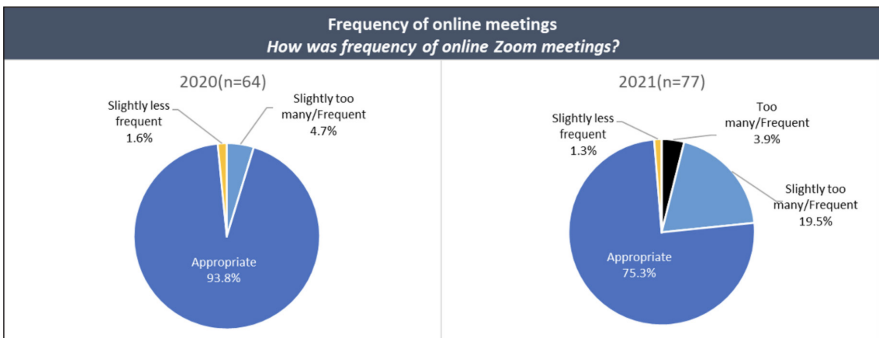
There were more positive responses from students in 2021. Positive responses (4-Positive, 5-Strongly Positive) were received from 53.2% of the students in spring 2020, but this improved to 70.1% in spring 2021 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Learning from others



As for the frequency of meetings, the number of students who answered ‘appropriate’ decreased from 93.8% in 2020 to 75.3% in 2021. At the same time, the number of students who answered ‘slightly too many/frequent’ or ‘too many/frequent’ increased from 4.7% in 2020 to 23.4% in 2021. In both years, only one student answered ‘slightly less frequent’, and nobody answered ‘too infrequent’ (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Frequency of meetings

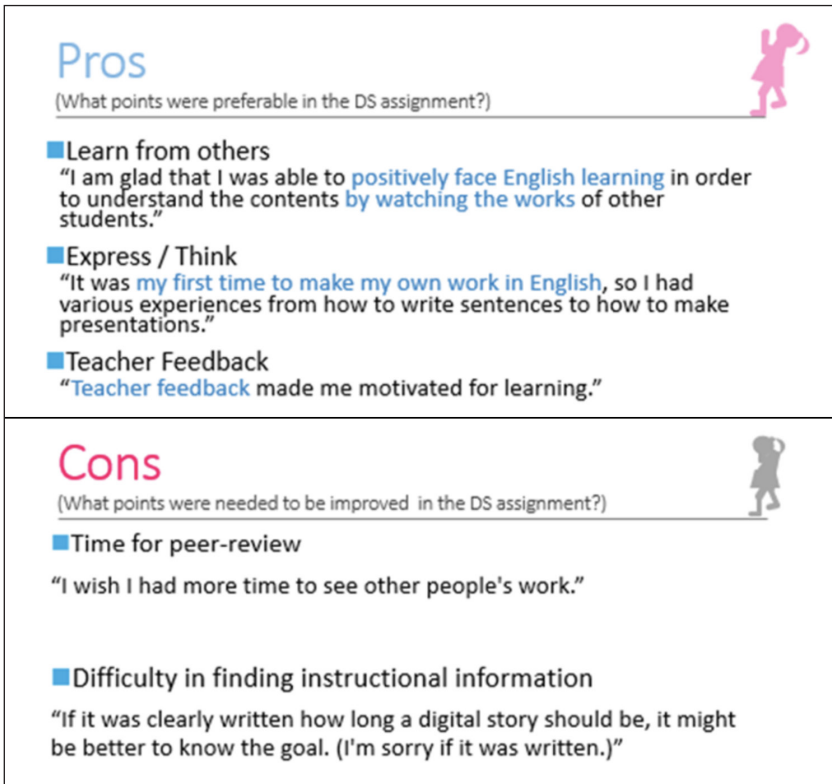


3.3. What were the pros and cons of the DS assignment

Two open-ended questions were presented, and answers were solicited from students. For the question ‘what points were preferable in the DS assignment?’,

there were 26 responses as follows. All the responses were separated into six categories according to common words: (1) 'Learning from others' (n=10), (2) 'Express/Think' (n=4), (3) 'ICT skills' (n=4), (4) 'Teacher feedback' (n=3), (5) 'Interesting/Fun' (n=3), and (6) 'Sense of accomplishment' (n=2). Figure 5 shows examples of students' comments.

Figure 5. Students' comments



For the question 'what points needed to be improved in the DS assignment', there were seven responses, and the common words were (1) 'Time for peer-review' (n=2) and (2) 'Difficulty in finding instructional information' (n=2).

These comments showed that more Zoom meetings enabled students to have more learning opportunities with classmates which consequently made it easier to complete the DS assignment. The frequency and length of meetings and assignments were generally regarded as appropriate, but there were also some students who preferred fewer meetings as they seemed to proceed with their assignments on

their own. On the other hand, a few students preferred having more interactions with others and additional support to understand what to do. Based on various comments, it would be important for teachers to engage students' personal voices and exploit digital technology appropriately in language education as outlined by Ushioda (2011).

4. Conclusions

The DS assignments were conducted more effectively with other students in online classes when enhanced with synchronous Zoom meetings compared with primarily asynchronous classes. Yu and Zadorozhnyy (2022) observed that creating video was perceived positively though some students experienced difficulties due to lacking some skills and knowledge. In accordance with this, most students perceived the difficulty level and learning from others positively while there were also some students who felt the assignment was difficult and advanced students who did not need some meetings. These various responses suggest that future courses and study may benefit from different lesson styles (such as face-to-face, hybrid, synchronous, and asynchronous) which students can select according to their preferences and conditions.

5. Acknowledgments

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

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

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Intelligent CALL, granular systems and learner data: short papers from EUROCALL 2022
Edited by Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, Branislav Bédi, Linda Bradley, Kolbrún Friðriksdóttir, Hólmfríður Garðarsdóttir, Sylvie Thoučsny, and Matthew James Whelpton

Publication date: 2022/12/12

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Cover photo by © 2022 Kristinn Ingvarsson (photo is taken inside Veröld – House of Vigdís)
Cover layout by © 2022 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-38372-015-7 (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 2022.