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Analysing language development in a collaborative digital storytelling project: Sociocultural perspectives



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ABSTRACT

Digital storytelling is a process of crafting multimodal narratives using video editing software or Web 2.0-based applications. Adopting digital storytelling as a collaborative learning task in the language classroom provides learners with the opportunity to discuss language problems with their peers and co-construct knowledge of their target language. Despite the potential benefits of learner collaboration for language learning, very few studies have investigated how learners of Japanese collaboratively develop knowledge of Japanese in a collaborative digital storytelling project. To identify effective pedagogical strategies, this study drew on the construct of 'collaborative dialogue' and the notion of 'private speech' to analyze both the processes and the learning outcomes of learner collaboration and knowledge construction during a collaborative digital storytelling project. The findings showed that learners strategically used their first language, grammatical terminologies, and private speech in the process of collaborative knowledge construction during the project. However, they also revealed pedagogical constraints on implementing the project in mixed ability classrooms and a large retention gap in language knowledge. The findings suggest grouping learners into groups of similar proficiency levels so that they can work on learning language at that level.

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1. Introduction

The rapid growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the knowledge-based economy means the ability to work collaboratively with others has become an essential skill in the workplace. Employees are expected to accomplish highly cognitive tasks by collaboratively working with people who have different areas of expertise and who are potentially located in different places and thus reliant on ICT mediated interaction (e.g., [Dede, 2011](#); [Karoly & Panis, 2004](#)). One of the pedagogical strategies to develop these abilities is to engage learners in digital storytelling. Digital storytelling is a process of narrating stories by co-concurrently manipulating different modes such as images, music, narration, written text, video, and transition effects, using either video editing software or Web 2.0-based applications for digital storytelling (e.g., [Chung, 2007](#); [Hafner & Miller, 2011](#); [Lee, 2014](#); [Robin, 2006](#)). In the field of second language education, digital storytelling has been increasingly adopted as a pedagogical tool to enhance learners' capacities to work collaboratively as well as to enhance target language proficiency (e.g., [Hafner & Miller, 2011](#); [Lee, 2014](#)).

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The strengths of digital storytelling compared to paper-based learning tasks include the capacity to support the immediate distribution of the story online, as well as to support online interactions with the audience. Learners can easily share their stories with a large audience as well as interact with them either by uploading their stories on Web 2.0 platforms or producing digital stories using Web 2.0 applications. For example, Alameen (2011) and Lee (2014) exploited the interactivity of Web 2.0 digital storytelling applications to promote learner collaboration by requiring learners to provide feedback to their classmate using their interactive functions. In addition, the process of crafting digital stories engages learners to use computers as mindtools to search for and analyze information relevant to their topic, and then organise and present their personal knowledge in meaningful ways with an audience (e.g., Jonassen, 1995; Jonassen & Reeves, 1996). Furthermore, digital storytelling also serves as a tool for language learning. Digital storytelling can develop the four core language skills (i.e., speaking, listening, writing, and reading) as well as to discuss language problems with peers, communicate using target language in meaning contexts, and share their final work product with an authentic audience for authentic communication purposes (e.g., Dal, 2010; Lee, 2014; Levin, 2011; Nishioka, 2012, 2014b).

Recent studies in digital storytelling have increasingly integrated learner collaboration into their project design (Alameen, 2011; Lee, 2014). This is in contrast to early studies in which the project was typically designed as an individual learning activity (e.g., Tsou, Wnag, & Tzeng, 2006; Verdugo & Belmonte, 2007). Despite the new project design, however, our understanding of effective pedagogical strategies to promote collaborative knowledge construction in digital storytelling projects remain limited as the process of learner collaboration during the project has not been properly analysed. To further our understanding of this aspect, the present study examines the process of joint knowledge construction of Japanese by Korean second language learners while engaged in a collaborative digital storytelling project. The rate at which knowledge of Japanese language was retained by the Korean students at the end of the project was also examined in the paper.

2. Literature review

2.1. Digital storytelling for language learning

Despite being a relatively new research area, a substantial number of studies have implemented digital storytelling projects as individual learning activities and examined their impact on students' language development (e.g., Normann, 2011; Tsou et al., 2006). The findings from these studies showed digital storytelling is effective for improving speaking proficiency (e.g., Baghdasaryan, 2012), pronunciation (e.g., Normann, 2011), listening skills (e.g., Verdugo & Belmonte, 2007), grammatical knowledge (e.g., Baghdasaryan, 2012), and writing complexity (e.g., Tsou et al., 2006).

2.2. Collaborative language learning

Collaborative learning is defined as two or more learners working together either as a pair or group to achieve shared goals (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2014). The benefits of collaborative learning over individual learning for language learning have been supported by several studies (e.g., Dobao, 2012; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). Kim (2008) drew on the concept of Language-Related Episodes (LREs) proposed by Swain and Lapkin (1998) to compare the efficiency of individual learning and pair work for vocabulary learning. LREs are defined as 'any part of a dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others' (Swain & Lapkin, 1998: 326). In the study of Kim (2008), pair learning groups were assigned to discuss lexical related LREs while engaging in dictogloss; whereas individuals were assigned to complete the same task by engaging in think-aloud protocols of lexical related LREs. The findings identified that the pair groups resolved more lexical related LREs with better in post-test recall compared to the individuals. Williams (2001) explored the relationships between the participants' proficiency levels, LRE providers (e.g., other learners, a teacher, the participant themselves), and the test scores related to LREs. The results indicated that the more proficient learners retained the LREs more effectively regardless of the LRE providers. Swain (2001) examined the types of LREs the learners in French immersion programs generated in dictogloss and during a jigsaw task. The analysis showed that form-based LREs were more frequently generated than vocabulary-related LREs regardless of the task design. Finally, Dobao (2012) compared the accuracy of compositions written by individuals, pairs, and groups of four. The researcher found that the compositions collaboratively written by groups of four were more accurate compared to compositions written by individual learners or pairs.

2.3. Collaborative learning in digital storytelling projects

Most early studies of digital storytelling investigated the form as an individual learning activity; to create digital stories for homework (e.g., Baghdasaryan, 2012), or to watch individually during class (e.g., Verdugo & Belmonte, 2007). However, recent studies have increasingly focused on collaborative learning tasks where more than two learners work together to develop

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