



Online Comic Creator for EFL Writing: An Effective Tool for Collaborative Learning

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Abstract

This study introduces a successful example of an L2 writing project that can appeal to unmotivated EFL learners. The author will show how a project-based activity using an online comic creator could stimulate the intellectual curiosity of learners and change their attitudes toward learning English and interacting with other students.

Forty-four Japanese computer science majors participated in the study. Many of them had negative attitudes toward English and collaborative activities. They were asked to work on a group project through the course, and created Japanese/ English comics that contributes to the revitalization of a disaster-hit community. An online comic creator was the key tool in the project, and the participants elaborated unique language for each comic character and created comics as writing activities.

The post-study survey indicated various positive effects of the project. The participants enjoyed using the comic creator and the collaborative activities with other students. It was found that the project with the comic creator was a fascinating experience for computer science majors, and positively changed their perspective toward group work and learning English.

Keywords: *Comic creator, L2 writing, unmotivated learners, collaborative learning;*

1. Introduction

Although they spend years on English education, many Japanese people would say they failed to learn English. Most of them learned English as a tool for entrance examinations, not for real-life purposes. As a result, once entrance examinations are over, students are demotivated. They may eventually forget what they have memorized for entrance exams, and feel they have learned nothing. Under such circumstances, college-level English instructors often find their students unmotivated. Additionally, in my experience, computer science students are often unsociable and lack communication skills. Such students tend to enjoy online activities but avoid face-to-face communication or group activities that are essential in L2 learning. When learners are not motivated and reluctant to interact with others, how can instructors make the learning meaningful and effective? This study will introduce a motivating collaborative project with a digital tool focused on improving English writing skills and fostering positive attitudes toward group work.

2. Literature review

In order to motivate learners, this study adopts three key concepts; 1) computer-assisted project-based learning, 2) role language analysis, and 3) a bilingual approach in L2 writing.

2.1 Computer-assisted project-based learning

Project-based learning (PBL) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) can provide motivating and productive activities in language classrooms. Many English textbooks contain unrealistic and uninteresting exercises, and students may not see any purposes in such “meaningless” activities. With such un motivating learning materials, language learning tends to be superficial without a deep understanding. PBL offers real-world activities that can motivate learners. It is ideal because it allows students to engage in authentic activities that are relevant and similar to the activities that adult professionals engage in [4]. PBL allows learners to be assertive, with the learning process centered on themselves, and choosing a project they wish to work on can motivate them and make the learning experience exciting and successful.

The effectiveness of PBL can be enhanced by adapting CALL. Online contents and multimedia applications are fascinating tools for students in the digital age. Many studies have found positive effects of CALL. Digital tools can enhance the students’ learning motivation, problem-solving competence, and learning achievement, and self-confidence in learning [1] [8].



2.2 Role language analysis in EFL

The second key concept for a motivational language learning is role language analysis. Young people in Japan enjoy pop culture contents such as Manga comics and anime. Thus, comic making as an EFL activity can motivate learners [7]. The virtual language that frequently appears in Japanese Manga comics is called role language. Kinsui [3] defines role language as a linguistic stereotype associated with a particular character type. Role language is especially distinctive in Japanese; however, it exists in English as well. For example, men and women are associated with different sets of linguistic features. Women may use polite forms, exaggerated expressions, and a lot of empty adjectives while men prefer to use command forms, rough expressions, and fewer adjectives [5] [6]. Such features could be based on the stereotypes; however, L2 comic activities with role language analysis allow learners to elaborate different expressions and sentence patterns that match the identity of Manga characters and promote learning [7].

2.3 Bilingual approach in L2 learning

The third concept, a bilingual approach in L2 learning allows low-level language learners to use their L1 for a better performance in L2. Studies have shown that the use of L1 in L2 learning may have positive effects, especially for novice learners. Adequate use of L1 may lower the anxiety in learning and encourage learners to interact actively. Ishibashi [2] reported that prewriting activities in L1 helped students to organize their thoughts in L2 writing. She found that using L1 improved L2 writing fluency of her low and intermediate-level students. If the students are not experienced L2 writers, writing in their L1 first may facilitate writing in English.

3. Research design

This project integrated the three concepts described in the previous section, and the goal of the project is the revitalization of a disaster-hit community through activities in English.

A group of Japanese undergraduate students participated in a project in which they created Japanese/English bilingual comics for tourists. The project aimed at 1) revitalization of the disaster-hit community, 2) promoting a local mascot to attract visitors to the prefecture, and 3) improving L2 writing skills and motivating the participants to learn English.

3.1 Background of the project

The project was aimed at the revitalization of Fukushima Prefecture, Japan. Fukushima was struck by a dreadful earthquake and the consequent nuclear accidents in 2011. Even in the areas that were not affected by the nuclear disaster such as Aizuwakamatsu City, the number of tourists decreased. This project was conducted at a university in Aizuwakamatsu City, a famous tourism destination in Fukushima, to bring tourists back to the city.

3.2 Course

This study was conducted in an elective English course called “Language in Manga”. This course aimed at improving writing skills by creating comics. Students analyze personality and the language pattern of comic characters and use different expressions and sentence patterns that match the characters. Students were expected to distinguish the conversational style and the narratives style in their writing.

3.3 Participants

Forty-four Japanese students at a computer science college participated in the project. Most of them were low-intermediate EFL learners. The pre-study survey revealed that about half of them had negative attitudes toward English: They hated English and had no motivation to learn it. Also, 25% of them were unwilling to work with other students. About half of them were worried that their poor English skills might be obstructive to the group activities and lower the group grade.

3.4 Tools

The key tool in this project is an online comic creator called PIXTON (www.pixton.com). It is a drag-and-drop comic creator that can make artistic comics instantly. This is a fascinating tool for computer science majors who love comics and digital gimmicks.

Yuru-kyara or “a laid-back mascot” is another key in this project. The participants used an open content mascot “Akabekochan” (Little Red Cow) in their comics. *Yuru-kyara* mascots are popular in Japan, and play an important role in the local economy. They appear in events for promoting local

foods, products, and attractions for tourists. As this is a revitalization project, using Akabekochan was expected to appeal to tourists and helps the economic growth of the city.

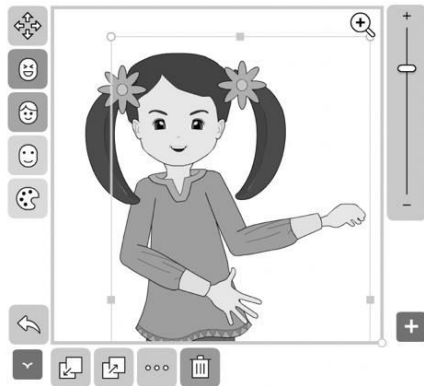


Fig. 1. Comic creator PIXTON



Fig. 2. Akabekochan

3.5 Procedures

The class met 15 times from October to December, 2017. In each class, unique linguistic features in comics (i.e., role language) were explained to the participants with examples. After that, the participants worked in groups and created a comic that introduced their favorite local restaurant using Akabekochan as the main character. First, they analyzed Akabekochan's role language in her official website and then created a comic in Japanese adapting her role language (Fig. 3). Then they elaborated Akabekochan's role language in English and created the English version (Fig. 4). The participants also proofread comics created by other groups and provided feedback for revision. Pre and post-study surveys were conducted to examine how the project had influenced the learner motivation and group work anxiety.



Fig. 3. Akabekochan comic in Japanese

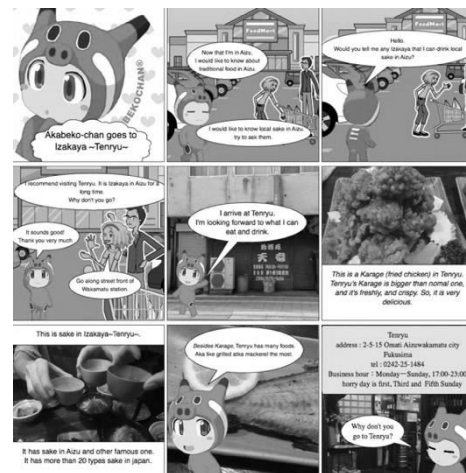


Fig. 4. Akabekochan comic in English

4. Results and discussion

The post-study survey indicated various positive effects of the project using a comic creator. Most of the participants mentioned that they enjoyed using the comic creator and the collaborative project with other students. It was found that the use of the online comic creator was a fascinating experience for computer science majors, and positively changed their perspective toward group work and learning English.

According to the pre-study survey, 11 (25%) of the participants had negative attitudes toward working in a group. Fifteen (34%) answered that they neither like nor dislike group work.

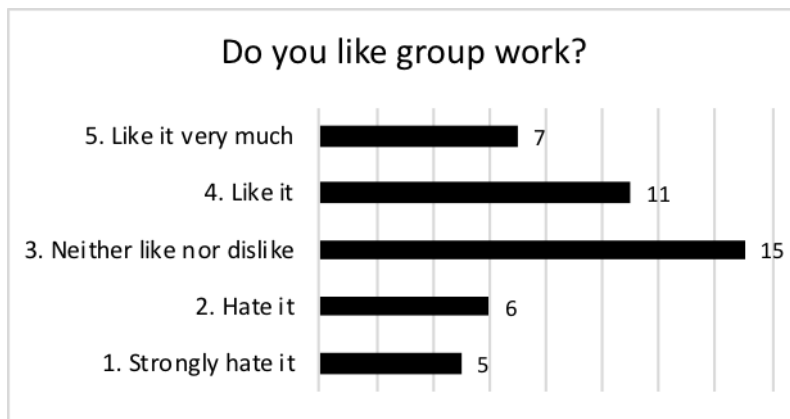


Fig. 5. Pre-study survey: Do you like group work? (N=44)

However, the post-study survey revealed that all participants except one answered that the group work was successful.

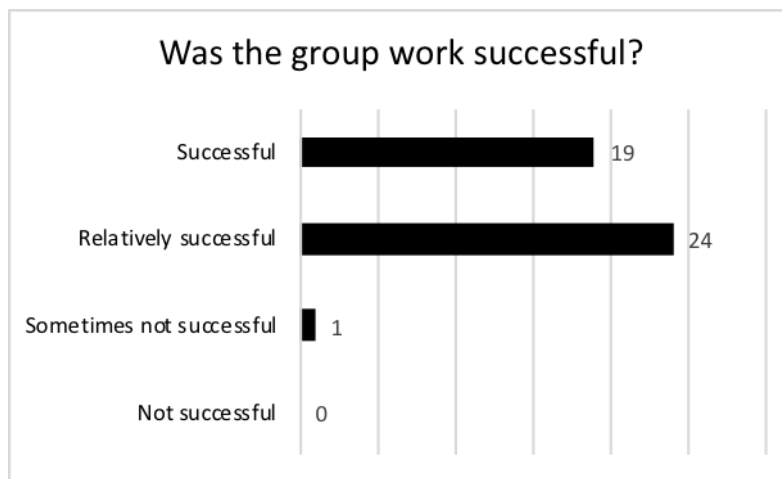


Fig. 6. Post-study survey: Was the group work successful? (N=44)

Fig. 7. shows the changes in learner attitude. Twenty-two (51%) of the participants showed positive changes. This is a considerably encouraging result.

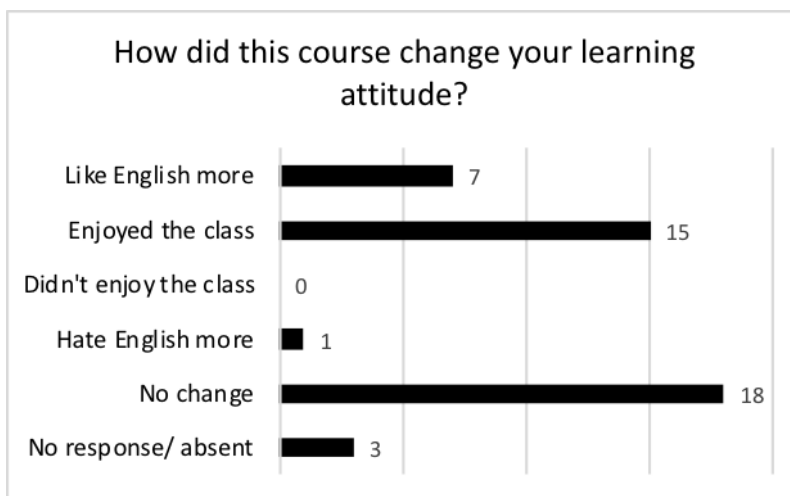


Fig. 7. Post-study survey: How did this course change your learning attitude? (N=44)



The participants provided some comments on the comic creator and the project. Most of them show positive effects of the project.

Positive comments:

- The comic creator was fun.
- The topic of the project was authentic and relevant to our daily lives.
- I enjoyed working with other group members.
- A lot of group work assignments gave us opportunities to exchange different ideas with group members.
- The project with friends was far more interesting than a lecture.
- We made the project a better one by working together.

Negative comments:

- School PCs did not support the comic creator.
- Collaborative work using the comic creator was sometimes difficult due to technical issues.
- It was inconvenient to share one PC with other group members.

All negative comments were on technical issues. The university PCs stopped supporting the comic creator in the middle of the school year, and this strongly affected the project. Students had to bring their laptops to class and share them with other group members. When a digital tool is the main instrument, unexpected technical problems could influence the whole study. Despite the difficulty, the overall positive comments proved that the use of the comic creator in project-based learning resulted in a lot of positive changes in learners. Using the comic creator along with a real-life topic could help learners to engage in the task, intellectually stimulate them, and change learning attitudes and motivation positively.

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