Reflections on designing and implementing a task-based unit using gamebooks

By

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Abstract

A small scale action-research project was designed to explore the effectiveness of using interactive narratives to facilitate L2 output in a communicative English class. A four-week unit of instruction was implemented across five classes comprised of non-English major students at a university in Japan. Using graded reader gamebooks from the Atama-ii series, activities were designed to simultaneously engage students in English reading while also promoting active discussion in English. Data was collected in the form of instructor field logs and student surveys. Researchers concluded that although the activities did not facilitate in-class L2 communicative output, the gamebooks did serve to increase students' willingness to engage in English activities.

Key Words： learner motivation, task-based teaching, gamebooks

1. Introduction

Communicative English courses in Japanese universities are often viewed by students as a tertiary extension of the compulsory language education currently enforced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Morita, 2013). English educators in charge of teaching such classes are therefore challenged with the task of designing educational activities that elicit English communication from students who lack the motivation (intrinsic or otherwise) to do so among their peers. While communicative activities such as face-to-face conversations, info-gaps, and stamp rallies are sometimes useful for speaking and listening practice, it can be more difficult for teachers to find equally motivating activities to improve reading skills. In fact, reading for the purpose of developing English skills is often negatively perceived by non-major English language learners in Japanese universities (Ryan, 2009; Whitsed & Wright, 2011).

Other challenges that plague second language reading in this context include learner anxiety experienced while reading in a second language,

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and a shortage of appropriately-leveled texts that satisfy individual student interests. For the language educator, using reading as a classroom activity might seem counterproductive, given that the act of reading is primarily a solo activity. Indeed, it might appear an obvious pedagogical choice to assign any L2 reading activities as homework or extensions, thus saving precious class time for more ostensibly communicative activities such as face-to-face conversations and group discussions.

Despite these challenges, research has shown that reading for L2 development is enormously beneficial to learners (Krashen, 2003). Interactive narratives in the form of gamebooks offer a possible solution to the problem of effectively integrating L2 reading into a communicative curriculum for university students with low intrinsic motivation. Gamebooks differ from traditional books in that they are written using the second person point-of-view, placing the reader in the role of the protagonist. The popular Choose Your Own Adventure series published by Bantam between 1979 and 1999 ("History of CYOA," 2016), offered readers the ability to make narrative choices which would ultimately lead to one of several different endings. Upon reaching the end of one narrative, readers were encouraged to start again from the beginning and make different choices for an alternate narrative.

These choices may offer a way for language educators to implement reading skills development while simultaneously keeping the attention of unmotivated students through paired readings. This paper reports on an action-research project which was carried out in order to gauge the effectiveness of using gamebooks as a means to increase English output in a university-level communication class.

2. Research Questions

The primary purpose of this project was to assess the effectiveness of using interactive narratives to elicit L2 output in a communicative English classroom populated by non-English majors. Thus, the following research questions were established:

1. To what extent does the novelty of choice in gamebooks elicit in-class English communication among non-English major university students in Japan?
2. What are non-English major student perspectives about using interactive narratives to study and practice English communication?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants consisted of 143 non-English major students from five classes taught by the researchers at a university in Japan. The students were enrolled in compulsory communicative English courses. The five classes were divided according to academic majors including architecture and mechanical engineering, aerospace systems engineering, biotechnology and nanoscience, computer information sciences, and pharmacy. Two classes consisted of first-year students, while the other three classes consisted of second-year students. All five classes met twice weekly for 90 minutes during the course of the unit. English proficiency among the participants ranged from A1 to B2 according to CEFR guidelines.

3.2 Gamebooks

The gamebooks utilized in this project were from the series published by Atama-ii, a company specializing in gamebooks written specifically for English language learners. In addition to carefully managed readability figures (see Table 1.), the gamebooks provide scaffolding features including vocabulary previews, visual storyboard previews, narrative introductions, and comprehension

questions.

Table 1.

<div align="center">Gamebook Readability Figures</div>

Difficulty

- 300 headwords; CEFR A1+;
- Beginner-High+ on the ERF scale

Length

- 2,500 words of story
- 100-110 words/page; 800-880/story thread

Pages

- 23 text pages / 23 illustrations
- 8/8 per story thread; 8 endings total
  (The Series | atama-ii books, n.d.)

As with traditional gamebooks, the reader is presented with choices throughout the narrative which drive the plot down one of several pathways. Each book in this particular series follows a set narrative structure that prompts the reader to make a decision three times before presenting one of eight possible endings. The consistency with which the books were designed helps readers to become familiarized with the narrative format series, encouraging re-reads and transition between genre types. The series currently includes ten stories of varying genres including adventure, historical fiction, horror, mystery, science-fiction, and western. Five of these books were available at the onset of this project, one of which was available with audio on YouTube.

3.3 Unit Rationale and Design

The researchers began by designing a unit of instruction that would aim to place peer communication at the center of a range of tasks involving the selected gamebooks. Task-based teaching was selected as an appropriate instructional design approach because it was thought to offset the fictional environment established by the gamebooks. In other words, the researchers reasoned that authentic L2 experiences could be facilitated through task-based teaching

despite the fictional nature of the narratives. Task-based teaching advocates for language acquisition through the completion of tasks which 1) are primarily focused on meaning, 2) involve real-world processes of language use, 3) engage cognitive processes, and 4) have clearly defined communicate outcomes (Ellis, 2003).

The unit outline focused on the development of three main tasks, broken down into a number of subtasks and linguistic skills which were deemed simpler and more readily achievable by students in a given lesson (see Appendix A). These tasks were determined to be valid additions to the students' language skills repertoire based on the range and balance of authenticity and novelty, as they were transferable to contexts extending beyond the classroom.

Activities were designed with the intention of preparing students for each communicative task by providing them with form-focused practice with the target language skills. For example, one lesson centered around the structure *I think we should... because...* and involved students considering and presenting choices and recommendations based on a variety of situations. The skills practiced in this lesson were intended to prepare students for paired read-alouds of the gamebooks, wherein students would be asked to make collaborative decisions when prompted to do so by the narrative. Another lesson contained form-focused activities on the use of conditionals to explain their decisions, which would be encouraged during the subsequent read-alouds. Most of the materials used throughout the unit were newly-designed, although several resources were adapted from the existing curriculum. In particular, lessons with a focus on creating new gamebooks utilized pre-existing graphic organizers and writing exercises.

Paired read-alouds acted as the central activities of the unit, and it was intended that the choices

prompted by the texts would serve as the basis of the unit's communicative aspect. Learners would be asked to discuss the options, and reach a decision about which one to choose by explaining their reasons for the choice. After several lessons containing repeated practice with this type of communicative activity, students would eventually be asked to collaborate in groups on the creation of new and original gamebooks. It was believed that the language structures utilized in the paired read-alouds would also be useful for suggesting possible plot events and endings during their composition sessions. In other words, the larger, more meaning-focused tasks were expected to facilitate the use of language structures which were previously practiced in more form-focused activities.

3.4 Unit Implementation

The unit was implemented over the course of four weeks, during which the classes met eight times. The scope and sequence of activities conducted varied based on the needs of each class, with variances being made for target language ability and class pace, while the overarching task sequence remained consistent. One main aim of these form-focused activities was to introduce useful vocabulary for making decisions. One such activity involved a pair work activity in which groups discussed restaurant preferences and made a decision about where to eat. Students were instructed on the vocabulary and were given time to practice key phrases involved. It was intended that learners would be able to transfer the skills practiced in these primer activities to more complex tasks ahead, such as the drafting and editing phases of new gamebooks.

Primed towards the larger tasks at hand, students were then asked to read several Atama-ii gamebooks in pairs and discuss in English the potential outcomes of their choices. To facilitate the completion of these subtasks, students were provided with graphic organizers. For example, in an effort to encourage active discussion, students were asked to note the reasons behind their decisions made at each choice encountered in the narrative. Once the pairs had finished reading and exploring several endings within one gamebook, they completed a gamebook review activity (see Appendix B). The gamebook review activity was inspired by the review system implemented by Amazon.com. After reading one of the gamebooks, groups of students were asked to find the book online and read the reviews available. It was originally intended that the students would add their own reviews to the website, but due to technical difficulties involving the creation of individual accounts it was decided that students would write reviews and submit them to their teacher for assessment.

Following the book review activities, students were then asked to create groups of about four people. Self-grouping was deemed appropriate for this project as it was believed to be conducive to honest discussions. Larger groups were not permitted to ensure that all group members were equally involved. Students brainstormed their story themes as a group, and were prompted to use the existing books as inspiration. Groups were then given a graphic organizer to help in the selection of story elements such as setting, characters, and plot events, as well as outline a storyboard. The initial stages were developed as a group, and each group member then chose about two story threads to develop individually. Groups were given three to four full classes to plan, write and illustrate their books. A few minutes at the start of each class were spent discussing their plan for that day, based on topics provided by the teacher, in order to ensure that students were able to use the time available effectively.

To encourage students to put forth their best effort, a rubric was used by the teachers to assess various elements of the gamebooks including

English accuracy, level of detail, and quality of production (See Appendix C). In an effort to encourage even participation from all group members, one section of the rubric prompted students to give their fellow group members a participation grade.

Once the stories were completed, a feedback lesson was conducted. The student-created gamebooks were circulated around the class, and groups were asked to read them following the same procedures used when reading the Atama-ii gamebooks (sections 1 and 2 of Appendix A). Students were also asked to write a brief review using the skills acquired in the aforementioned gamebook review activity.

4. Results and Discussion

Data was collected during this project in the form of field logs and observation notes written by the instructors, as well as open-ended surveys completed by the students at the end of the unit.

RQ 1: Novelty of Choice

Notes taken by the instructors of this unit indicate that the presence of narrative choices during reading activities was enthusiastically received by a majority of students. In contrast to linear narrative reading activities conducted prior, students appeared actively engaged in the reading process. This engagement was maintained over the course of several lessons as students attempted to read multiple gamebooks. However, the presence of narrative choice did not appear to have an effect on the students' efforts to hold discussions in English. Field notes from both instructors indicated that the teacher proximity was the main facilitator of English use during such activities.

As providing opportunities for English communication was a stated goal, it was disappointing that learners did not conduct their discussions in English as much as it was hoped. One strategy that was attempted was to have "English time" and "Japanese time", controlled by a timer. For example, students were given five minutes to discuss in Japanese, on the understanding that the following five minutes would be in English. Unfortunately, the result was that learners discussed quickly during "Japanese time", and worked in silence during "English time".

Two possible solutions will be tried next time this project is conducted. Firstly, further preparation activities will be developed and used throughout the semester, rather than only as part of this unit. It is hoped that, by giving learners more opportunity to practice the language in a variety of scenarios, they will feel better equipped to conduct these discussions in English. Furthermore, a greater emphasis on the need to communicate in English could be placed by grading the students on the amount of English they use. While being overly punitive is undesirable, as it is likely to create an overall uncomfortable environment in the classroom, adding points to students' grades for effective use of English may encourage students to use the target language more.

RQ 2: Student Perceptions

Overall, student feedback regarding the activities and tasks was positive. Although most students indicated that they found the main project of creating a gamebook difficult, many also stated that they felt a sense of achievement when sharing their completed books. Others stated that the creative element of the unit was enjoyable.

There were conflicting answers regarding the length requirement of the books created. While some groups stated that they would have preferred to have fewer story threads, others stated that they would have liked more. In future projects, more flexibility can be worked into the template provided to accommodate these differences in

opinion, which would also give them more control of the planning of the story.

Based on student feedback, several changes could be made in future implementation of this project. Some students felt that the time available for creating their books was too short. However, due to the current curriculum, it would be difficult to assign more class time to this project, without experiencing similar time restraints for subsequent units. It may be possible to complete the project alongside other parts of the curriculum as an on-going project. This would have the benefit of giving students more time to reflect on their ideas, which may lead to further creativity. Alternatively, the project could be completed as an on-going homework project, rather than existing journaling homework.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the instructors concluded that the project was successful on several levels. Firstly, the students in these classes succeeded in producing original gamebooks, using clear and accurate language, that were generally interesting to other students. The instructors witnessed an increase in active participation in class among a majority of students, as well as increased engagement in classroom tasks. This was considered a key benefit to the use of this project, and the teachers involved stated that they would be interested in using these materials again in the future.

However, they also stated that they did not feel that the project increased the use of English during the classes. Indeed, in most cases, it had proven difficult to ensure that students were using English within their groups when discussing the outlines for their stories. As one of the stated goals of the project was to increase the use of English within the classroom, strategies to improve on this point should be explored in the future. Although the students and teachers felt the project was generally

beneficial, changes should be made in order to address the issue of students relying too heavily on Japanese during discussion. Although it is disappointing that this stated aim of the project was not achieved, the further benefits of enabling students to use English in a creative pursuit made the project worthwhile. We believe further research should be conducted into these types of novelty texts because we feel rather hopeful in their ability to draw in even the most reluctant of readers.

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Appendix A
Task Framework

1st Level (1.2.3.)   Main Task
2nd Level (a.b.c.)   Sub Task
3rd Level (i.ii.iii.)   Linguistic Skill
4th Level (*1.2.3.*)   Language Feature

1. Recommend or criticize a book to a friend
    a. Read a book in English
        i. Identify and process the meaning of English words
        ii. Process the meaning of sentences written in English
    b. Understand the plot and main events
        i. Make connections across several pages of English text
    c. Summarize the story
        i. Distill the important information from English text
        ii. Sequence events using English
    d. Express personal opinion
        i. Identify and express personal connections with a story
        ii. Make a recommendation in English supported by reasons
            1. modals: *should, shouldn't*
            2. *because*
2. Make and explain decisions and choices in English
    a. Identify and evaluate available choices
        i. comprehend specific details
    b. Evaluate possible outcomes of decisions in English
        i. conditionals
    c. Make and defend a decision
        i. because...
        ii. conditionals
3. Write, publish and promote a book
    a. Organize a storyboard
        i. Sequence events logically using English notes
            1. action verbs
            2. descriptive adjectives
    b. Draft a story
        i. Compose sentences
    c. Edit a story for grammatical accuracy
        i. Identify grammatical errors
    d. Illustrate a story
        i. Match appropriate images to a selection of text
    e. Present and promote a story
        i. Summarize a story (1.c)
        ii. Express personal opinion (1.d)

Appendix B
Gamebook Review

Directions: After you read a book, write a review by answering the questions below.

1.   Title _____

          *   *   *   *   *

          What did you like about the book?

          What didn't you like about the book?

2.   Title _____

          *   *   *   *   *

          What did you like about the book?

          What didn't you like about the book?

3.   Title _____

          *   *   *   *   *

          What did you like about the book?

          What didn't you like about the book?

Appendix C
Grading Rubric

Story & Book								
Content	**0**	**2**	**4**	**6**	**8**	**10**	**12**	**14**
	There are no interesting details		There are few interesting details		There are some interesting details		There are many interesting details	
English	**0**	**2**	**4**	**6**	**8**	**10**	**12**	**14**
	The book is not written in English		The story is difficult to understand		The story is mostly easy to understand		The story is very easy to understand	
Format	**0**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
	The book is ugly		The book looks a bit sloppy		The book looks good		The book looks great	
							Total	**/35**

Group Members							
Effort	**0**	**2**	**4**	**6**	**8**	**10**	**12**
	The group member didn't do anything		The group member didn't help much		The group member helped		The group member helped a lot