Meaningful Experiences: Universal Themes and Quotes in Reflective Storytelling

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Abstract

Japanese high-school English instruction has often been criticized for focusing on rote memorization of grammar patterns and vocabulary. The emphasis in high-school classrooms on preparing students for standardized university entrance exams leaves little opportunity for students to practice speaking on open-ended topics or use English to reflect on their own experiences. The author sought to address this imbalance and give students the opportunity to increase their L2 (second language) production and engage in self-reflection through discussion of meaningful personal experiences. The current study concerns a pilot study on the efficacy of storytelling, pair-recording, peer-feedback and quote-selection activities in increasing student L2 production, and improving students' confidence in and enjoyment of speaking and listening in English. Conducted over the course of one semester in freshman English Communication classes at Nagasaki University's Center for Foreign Language Studies, the study focused on three activities: storytelling and pair-recording, peer-feedback and quote-selection. The study analyzes transcripts of students' video-talks and feedback, interpretations of quotes' relevance the stories, and student survey results on the key components of the study. The findings suggested that the students L2 production increased through because the peer-feedback, and quotes increased online interaction between classmates, and deepened students' reflection as to the meaning of their stories. In student surveys students reported that the storytelling and pair recording activities helped them enjoy English more, improve their speaking and listening skills and notice storytelling outside of class. Students also reported that they enjoyed giving and receiving video feedback, and that the feedback improved both their stories and their communication.

Keywords: Storytelling, peer-feedback, universal themes, quote-selection and interpretation

1. Introduction

Japanese university freshmen arrive at university having had very little practice speaking at length in English about topics of interest to them. High-school English courses focus on test-taking skills and vocabulary memorization, so students have little chance to converse on open-ended topics, talk about and listen to personal experiences, reflect on the meaning of such experiences, or engage in interactive conversations with multiple turns. The courses are compulsory, so students have not freely chosen to take the course. Due to this, the author noticed a lack of motivation on the part of the students prior to the introduction of the activities discussed in this study. Students reported that they did not enjoy taking the class. In addition to lack of enjoyment and motivation, students reported a lack of confidence in their English ability. The current study was undertaken with the aim of (1) raising students' L2 production (second language) by giving them open-ended story topics that encourage longer answers. (2) encouraging students' reflection on the meaning of their experiences by having them choose quotes on universal theme's such as change, success and failure, friendship, and then explain the relevance to their story. (3) Promote student interaction through a. pair-recording of story conversations together with active-listening comment strategies b. recording video feedback and c. selecting quotes for ones own and classmates' stories that comment on the meaning of the stories, or what the student learned from the experience. The degree in which these goals were met will be analyzed through two kinds of data: (1) transcripts of students' stories, feedback, quote comments and counter-quote comments. (2) student surveys concerning the impact of the activities on student confidence and enjoyment.

Research Questions
1. How effective is storytelling as a vehicle for increasing students' L2 production and developing interactive listening skills?
2. How effective are quotes as a way for students to draw meaning from personal experiences and deepen their response to a classmate's story?
3. How do the storytelling, story-sharing and quote activities affect students' confidence and enjoyment in using English?

Subjects of the study

The current study was conducted over the course of one semester in three English Communication classes at Nagasaki University's Center for Language Studies. The focus of this course is developing speaking and listening skills and the students were 118 freshman students majoring in medicine, pharmacy and education. The course is mandatory for all first-year students and the students often lack motivation and are unused to speaking in more than short snippets of one sentence. The students' proficiency ranged from high intermediate for the pharmacy and medical classes to intermdiate for the education class.

Methodology: Storytelling, Video Feedback and Quotes

The activities examined in this study consist of three components. (1) Regular *storytelling and story-sharing* activity in which students choose from a selection of 25 open-ended story topics and prepare one to two-minute talks based on their own personal experiences. (2) *Quote-selection* activities in which students visit an online website where users can choose a topic or theme and access a range of quotes on that theme. The quotes are on universal themes such as change, success and failure, friendship, courage, dreams, peace and moving on. Students are required to find quotes connected to their story topic and reflect on the meaning of the quote for their story. (3) *Mind-mapping* activities in which students with the same theme work together on a group mind map, using it to tell their story without reading, and to discuss and question each other about the meaning of the experience (4) *Online free-speaking forum* in which students upload video talks and listen to each other's stories, leaving feedback with comments and questions, and finally offer their own quote as a comment on the classmate's story.

Storytelling Topics

The storytelling topics were chosen because they were open-ended enough to allow students to speak continuously for one or two minutes in order to build confidence and develop fluency. The centrality of storytelling in human conversation was stressed by the teacher to tout the utility of story-sharing activities as a way to practice and gain skill in a high-frequency genre of communication. Finally, the activity required students to go beyond storytelling as simple recitation of "what happened" to draw meaning from the experience, reflecting on how it brought change and growth. Figure 1 shows the topics students chose from:

Figure 1: Storytelling Topics

A Time I Had a Big Change in my Life

A Memory or Experience that Meant a Lot to Me

Something I Pushed Myself to Do

A Scary Experience You Had

You Had a Good Time But You Got Carried Away

You Were at a Loss for What to Do

A Time You Did Something to Please Someone

You Had a Chance to Do Something You'd Always Wanted to Do

You Had No Choice But to Do Something You Didn't Want to Do

A Time You Thought "I know I shouldn't do this, but..."

You Made the Best of a Bad Situation

You Put a lot of Thought and Effort into a Project

You Had to Put on a Brave Face

You Thought "I'll never live this down"

Something Turned Out Differently Than You Expected

You Made a Point of Being Careful About Something

A Time You Took a Firm Stand

A Great Day You Had

A Time You Did Something Wrong and Got Caught

A Time You Took On More Than You Could Handle

Did you ever have a close call?

Tell me about a time you made someone happy.

Tell me about a time someone made you happy.

Did you ever plan a surprise for a friend or family member?

Did you ever have a falling out with a friend?

Talk about an embarrassing experience you had.

Talk about one of the most difficult decisions you've made in your life

Talk about an inspirational experience you had.

A Time You Should Have Kept Your Cool

The story-sharing activity consisted of four stages. The first two stages were confined to the individual student. In stage one, each student chose one of the story topics shown in Figure 1, and video-recorded a 1 to 2-minute talk on that topic. In stage two, the first act of reflection and interpretation of meaning required students to select a quote that pointed to the deeper meaning of the experience described in the story. Once each student had chosen their quote, they were required to video-record a second talk explaining the relevance of the quote to their story.

Figure 2 shows a transcript of one students' video talk, her quote, and her second video talk.

Figure 2: Story-Sharing Activity Story, Quote, and Relevance Sample

Student 1: A Time I Had A Big Change
The time in my life when it became a big change was during the exam period. I was 18 years old and depressed because I failed to get into the school of my choice. I thought about giving up on applying to medical school, but I chose not to give up and tried again and again, and my family supported me in this. In Japan, entrance exams are a very important turning point in one's life. Especially since I wanted to become a doctor, I had to give up my dream if I did not pass the exam. However, because I chose to take on the challenge without giving up, I was able to make my dream come true. For this reason, I am convinced that the period after I failed the exam was the most transformative period of my life.
Quote: "*He who is fixed to a star does not change his mind.***"**
First reflection: Student's interpretation of quote's relevance
I had a dream about the future, but I when I failed I was afraid that change would make me a failure. But I decided that I was fixed to my dream and I didn't change my mind. I'm thankful I had the will to not change despite my anxiety.

In stage three, the interpretation of meaning expands beyond the individual reflecting on her own story, when a classmate reads the story, leaves initial feedback, and in stage four chooses a quote she thinks applies to the classmate's story and video-records a talk explaining its relevance. There were three aims of this story-sharing: (1)To emphasize for students the importance of empathy for successful communication by requiring them to read their classmate's story and reflect on its meaning; (2) To reinforce the universality of key themes in human experience by encouraging students to recognize and comment on areas of commonality in their own experiences; and (3) To gain practice in "active-listening" comment strategies such as speculation, personalization and generalization. These three strategies are outlined in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Active-Listening Comment Strategies

Speculation Comment

> I guess you----
>
> I bet you----
>
> You must have been
>
> That must have been
>
> I guess that
>
> I bet that

Personalization Comment

> I had a similar experience. In my case
>
> I did_____too.
>
> Oh I didn't do_____, I did

Generalization Comment

> _____is very **[ADJ]**, isn't it?
>
> It's (very) **[ADJ]** when you____, huh?
>
> It's (very **[ADJ]** to_____, isn't it?

These strategies were introduced to highlight the importance of signaling empathy and collaborating with the speaker in the conversation to contribute to the construction of meaning and maintain a lively flow and interaction in the conversation. The strategies were also used as a basis for the stage three, when students listen to their classmate's story and video-record their feedback comments. Figure 4 shows a transcript of a student's story and then transcripts of two students feedback comments:

Figure 4: Stage 3 Feedback Comment Video Transcripts

Student Video Transcript: *A Time I Pushed Myself To Do Something*

When I was in junior high school, I had to give a speech in front of many people. I was selected as the representative to give a speech on the impressions of the language training. When I was selected as a representative, I felt very unpleasant. Because I'm shy. I was not good at speaking in public. I made a lot of preparations for my speech. For example, I collected materials and practiced many times. I decided to decline the representative many times. However, I didn't give up. Before the performance, I was very nervous. But I did not run away and made the speech. That event was a big growth event for me. I will continue to do my best without running away, no matter what the difficulties.

Student 2 Feedback Video Transcript

I listened to your talk. I thought it was a very interesting story. You said When I was selected as a representative, I felt very unpleasant. I guess you wanted to escape that things. You said I was not good at speaking in public. I had a similar experience. In my case when I was high school student, I spoke announce in front of all students. I can imagine your feeling. You said you did not give up. It's very hard when you have to prepare, isn't it? That event was a big growth event for me. Can you speak in front of many people do not be afraid?

Student 3 Feedback Video Transcript

I read your story and was very impressed by it. You talked about the difficulties you encountered and the way you dealt with them in your story. I have also had a similar experience. In many case, I had to give a speech in English in front of many people. It was my first time to give a speech in front of many people and what made things worse was the fact that I had to speak in English. I was extremely nervous and practiced several times as you did. Practicing many times really gives you confidence, doesn't it? I really liked your final sentence of your story. I think doing your best and not running away is a very important element for people to improve.

Finally, in stage four, a classmate of the student watched her video talk, chose a quote to comment on her story, and the quote's relevance to the experience described in the video. Certain highly-motivated students chose more than one quote and asked a question which continued the dialogue beyond the required guidelines. Figure 5 shows the student's original story, the classmate's two quotes and explanation of the relevance, a question and the original student's response.

Figure 5: Stage 4 Classmate's Comment Quote

Student Video Transcript: *A Time I Was at a Loss for What to Do*

I was at my wits end when I was bullied and when I failed my college entrance exams twice. When I was being bullied I wondered when it would end. The bullying continued for four years until I eventually transferred to another middle school. I think it continued for the rest of my life until I took action to transfer schools. When I failed the university entrance examination, I was still fine at first, but when I failed the second time, I wondered what my study was worth, whether my life was worth living, and whether I would be able to live in the future. I felt like I couldn't take any action for a month. I was able to study hard again thanks to a teacher from high school and an online advisor. My first goal was to be able to study 10 hours a day. I also started to plan backwards to figure out what I needed to do by when. At first, 5 hours was my limit, but gradually I became comfortable with 10 hours. In the end, I was not able to reach my first choice, but I was able to get into a place that was 10 deviation higher than the place I failed last year. It was frustrating, but I think I gave it my all. Next, I want to do my best for the graduate school entrance exam.

Classmate Quote 1: *Success is never final, failure is never fatal. It's courage that counts*.

I can understand very well your feelings in this story. It is so hard when you make a goal and fight hard, but cannot reach the goal. I also had that same experience many times. From my experience the most important thing is courage. I think you had so much courage to never give up. You must have understood failure is never fatal.

Classmate Quote 1: *Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul - and sings the tunes without the words - and never stops at all.*

You told about two hard time when you were bullied and when you failed the entrance exam many times. I think it must have been so hard to keep trying. I remember times I was bullied in school too, but mine didn't last so long as four years. Did you almost give up hope? I believe hope is so important. This quote says sings the tunes without words. I think means even if you don't know how you can overcome your trouble, or what will happen, you have music inside you. It is hope. As long as you live it never stops. I think you can fly to your dream now!

Student Survey Results

At the end of the third semester, the authors conducted a student survey on the four key components of the study: (1) recording with a partner and responding with active-listening, (2) giving and receiving video feedback, and (3) Choosing quotes for one's own and partner's stories to draw meaning and make comments. Likert-scale questions, the most widely used scale in survey research (Brown, 2001) were used. In the survey, respondents were asked to specify the extent of their agreement to a series of statements concerning each of the three key areas. Students circled 1, 2, 3, or 4 with the descriptors *strongly agree*, *moderately agree*,

moderately disagree, and *strongly disagree*. An even number of options was given to prevent students from choosing a "safe" neutral option. Convenience sampling procedures were adopted (see Dornyei, 2003).
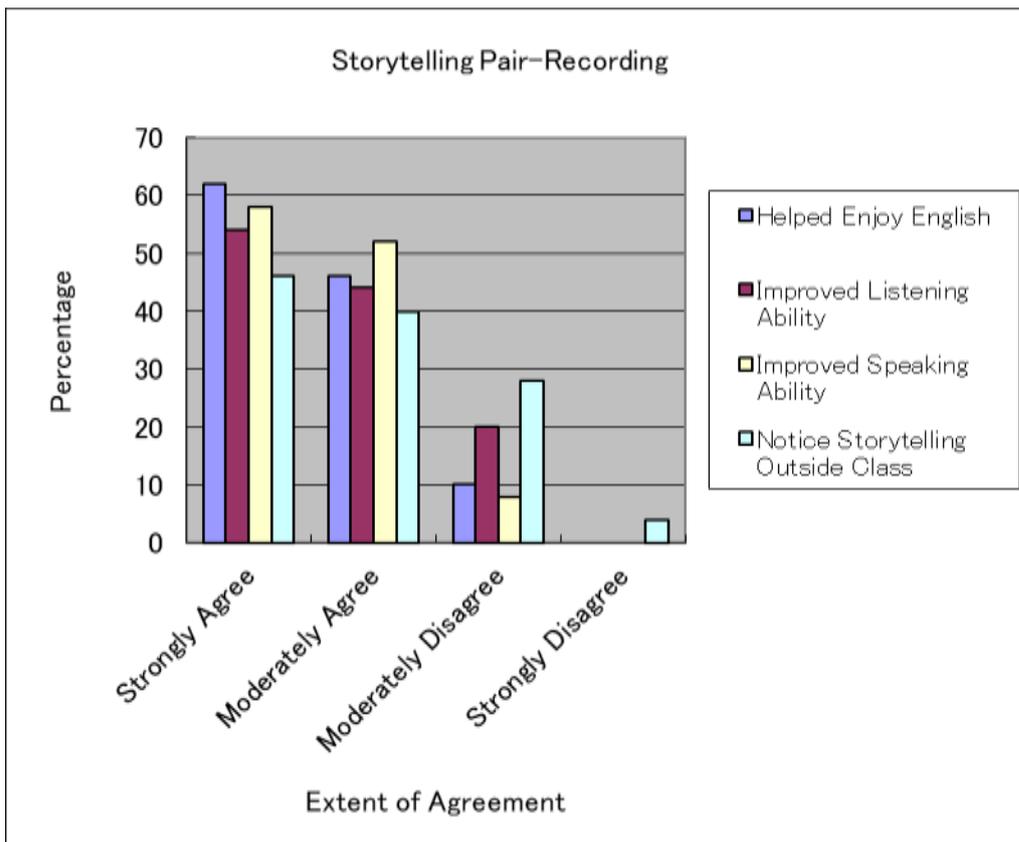

Figure 6. Survey responses for storytelling pair recording

The first group of questions in the questionnaire dealt with recording with a partner as a speaker telling their own story. Figure 4 shows the distribution of student responses. Combining the respondents agreeing strongly or moderately, 79% found the activity of recording their speaking with a partner challenging and interesting, 87% said they were trying to speak English in class more than usual, and 92% said they were trying to listen to their partner's English more than usual. Seventy-two percent said they could make their partner understand their English, and 73% said the pair recording activity helped them feel more comfortable speaking English.
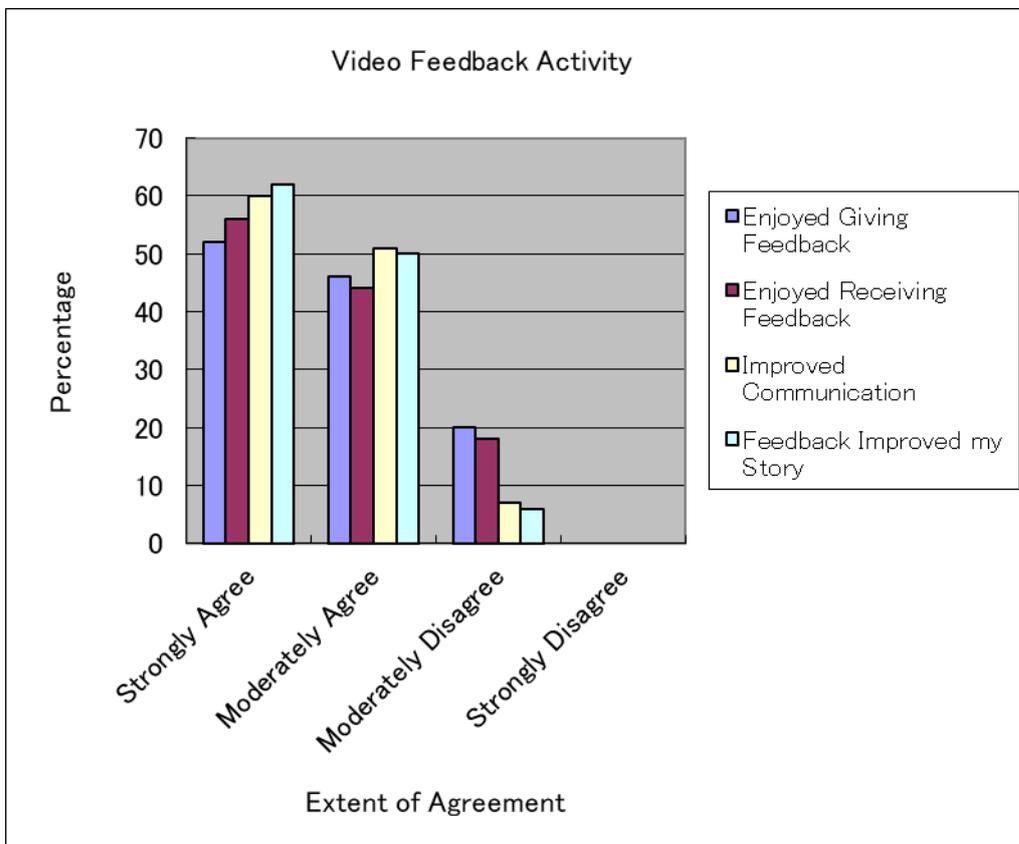
Figure 7. Survey responses for giving and receiving video feedback

The second group of questions in the questionnaire dealt with using the active listening strategies. 77% of respondents found the activity of responding to their partner's story using the active listening skills challenging and interesting. 82% said they understood that active listening was a big part of communication. 83% said that the active listening strategies helped them have a good conversation with their partner. 83% said they were able to use the basic active listening strategies, while 70% said they could use the advanced strategies.

Conclusion

At the outset of this paper, the English background of Japanese university freshemen was delineated. With their experience of learning English in high-school primarily as a set of grammar patterns and vocabulary to be memorized in order to obtain high scores on end-of-term tests and, most cruciallly for their future, university entrance-exams, the students have had little opportunity to focus on the productive skills of writing and speaking. Students tend to lack confidence in expressing themselves in English (and even in their native language) and their years being drilled in rote memorization have instilled a hypersensitivity to committing errors that often increases their anxiety and hesitancy to speak in English. The

author established in the first-year English curriculum at Nagasaki University a set of learning acitivties focusing on open-ended questions and topics designed to maximize opportunities for students to reflect on their own life experiences and discuss them with a partner. The centrality of storytelling in everyday conversation prompted the inclusion of storytelling as a key component of the speaking activities.

The research questions in the current study concerned the effectiveness of storytelling as a vehicle for increasing students' L2 production and developing interactive listening skills, the impact of quote-selection and reflection activities on helping students draw meaning from personal experiences and deepen their response to a classmate's story, and the influence of storytelling and quote activities on students' confidence and enjoyment in using English. The study presented data from two sources: (1) transcripts of students' stories, feedback, quote comments and counter-quote comments. (2) student surveys concerning the impact of the activities on student confidence and enjoyment.

As sampled in the transcripts of students' stories, and classmates' feedback, students were able to speak for extended periods of between one and two minutes, and were able to understand and use the three feedback strategies, speculation, personalization and generalization, in their feedback to provide relevant and meaningful comments on their partners' stories. The quote-selection and reflection transcripts demonstrated students were able not only to recite events in their stories, but were able to explore the meaning of those experiences by selecting quotes and explaining their connection to the experiences. Selecting and explaining the relevance of quotes to their partners' stories added another level of reflection and internation. Student survey results confirmed that storytelling improved both students' enjoyment of and confidence in their English. Students also reported that the video feedback, both comments and quotes, also increased their enjoyment and improved their confidence.

The current study has certain limitations. While the student-surveys present quantitative data, the data concerns student perception of their improvement in their speaking, listening, and communication. The study does not subject the data to statistical analysis and no data from testing to measure actual improvements is presented. The data presented on students' quote-selection and reflection, and feedback, was limited to transcrips from individual students. Future research will include statstical analysis on survey results and a speaking and listening test designed to measure students' L2 production and use of feedback strategies in real-time conversations will be implemented.

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