

“*Nihon to Watashi: Japan and Myself*” – Digital Stories to Enhance Student-Centred Japanese Language Learning

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Abstract

The primary aim of this paper is to introduce the day-to-day workings of the Digital Story module that has been running as part of the ANU second year intermediate Japanese language course for the past three years, and secondly to present the findings of a pilot research project that aims to generate questions and parameters for a more extensive research survey. The paper also aims to discuss something of the appeal of these stories to teachers and students and examine their value in foreign language teaching as an alternative to the individual oral/aural presentations or tests. The Digital Story module has, overall, proved successful as a teaching and learning strategy for second language learners with a medium through which they can better express their opinions and emotional responses to Japan and its role in their lives. Although not without problems, particularly the balance between technological expertise and content, this mode of teaching and learning encouraged student motivation and enhanced learning outcomes, by challenging the students to incorporate their own interests, opinions and emotions.

1 Introduction

Students often find it hard to express their emotions and opinions in their target foreign language. Digital stories are an amalgam of image and text that focus on tales ‘from the heart’. They provide a useful teaching and learning model for encouraging students to tell personal stories. The University of Houston website, one of the first places to focus on the educational uses of digital storytelling, stresses the enormous creative scope of this medium, noting that “the topics that are used in Digital Storytelling range from personal tales to the recounting of historical events, from exploring life in one’s own community to the search for life in other corners of the universe, and literally, everything in between” (University of Houston University, 2010).

The intermediate students participating in the ANU Japan Centre digital story module – *Nihon to Watashi: Japan and Myself* – were required to create a personal story about their relationship with Japan and their study of Japanese¹. As intermediate level students, they had become increasingly skilled at talking in their target language (Japanese) on such topics as, home and family, university life or travel and transportation, however, they had more trouble trying to express their own opinions and emotional responses, and more particularly the reasons behind these responses. The goal of the digital story module was to encourage students to draw on their own personal opinions and emotional responses as they considered their relationship with Japan, and the role it plays, or has played, in their lives. Asked to select a series of images and

background sound to enhance their narrative, their storyboards and their final 3-5 minute short movie became an amalgam of the visual and the auditory. The inclusion of images and sound helped them focus on the key points and transitions in their story and to consider the impact their story would have on the viewer.

Photographer, educator and digital storyteller, Daniel Meadows characterises digital stories as ‘multimedia sonnets from the people’ in which ‘photographs discover the talkies, and the stories told assemble in the ether as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, a gaggle of invisible histories which, when viewed together, tell the bigger story of our time, the story that defines who we are’ (Meadows, 2009). Sue Thomas, Professor of New Media at De Montfort University in the UK also stresses the importance of the multimedia nature of digital stories, arguing that they develop what she refers to as “transliteracy”, that is the ability “to read, write, and interact across a range of platforms, tools, and media (Handler Miller, 2008, p. x). To both Meadows and Thomas, the creation of a digital story allows students to develop the “transliteracy” skills that are so vital in the 21st century, as they translate across different mediums and communication styles. Furthermore, digital stories build on how we process information and their combination of both visual and auditory stimuli help provide a better way of learning because “delivering information through both representational systems (visual and auditory) reduces cognitive overload in the working memory” and it is this that attracts many teachers and learners to multimedia” (Rudnicki et al., 2006).

After a brief review of the current research to better frame the discussion, this paper will introduce the ANU Japan Centre module Digital Story module – *Nihon to Watashi: Japan and Myself* – that has been running as part of the second year core intermediate Japanese language courses JPNS2012/6012 *Spoken Japanese 3* and JPNS2013/6012 *Spoken Japanese 4* for the past two years. The overall structure of the course and how the digital story was incorporated into the program, including discussion of how feedback was given at various stages throughout the process and how the final product was assessed, will be outlined. The second part of the paper will present the findings of a pilot research project which examined whether the digital story module was successful in providing a new means of assessing student’s oral and aural skills, and will outline how the project was viewed by the students in the light of student surveys and responses gathered through interviews.

It is important to note at this stage, that this paper is only the first step of a larger study. The author has been awarded an *ANU Teaching and Learning Grant* to: (1) collate and analyse the digital stories created over the last two-year period, reviewing the content and linguistic structures used in the story drafts, storyboards and completed movie files; (2) survey and interview 2010 and 2011 student and staff participants and to compare this data with the data collected in 2009; (3) to develop improved teaching delivery methods, including better methods of training students in appropriate technology use, focusing on whether technical issues ever overrode the educational goals and if so why; (4) examine assessment requirements and feedback methods to assess their value and impact; (5) assess student engagement in this learning task: and, finally, (6) review whether this new teaching and learning strategy encouraged student motivation, promoting more ownership of the task and thereby enhancing learning outcomes. Consequently this paper is focused on introducing the project and providing some preliminary insights based on data collected through student surveys and interviews.

2 Digital stories in context

While drawing on age-old storytelling techniques, digital storytelling “takes the ancient art of oral storytelling and engages a palette of technical tools to weave personal tales using images, graphics, music and sound mixed together with the author’s own story voice” (Porter, 2004, p. 1). Carolyn Miller notes that one of the great strengths of this “new form of storytelling” is that it is more malleable, nonlinear and non-chronological, than more traditional modes of storytelling and that as the user is more active in the creation they become more engaged and motivated (Miller, 2008, p. 19).

There is a plethora of material available which explores the ‘how to’ of Digital Story making in the classroom. Stress is placed on the primacy of the story element and how important it is to not let the technology override the story content (cf. Ackerley & Coccetta, 2007; Flintoff, 2010, Frazel, 2010; Handler Miller, 2008; Lamber, 2006). There are a number of possible strategies: Banaszewski (2002) recommends using an outline with questions that prompt students to think about the topic – followed by pair discussion, to which visual images are added, peer coaching through the production phase, story coaching to provide more positive class dynamics. There are also a great number of websites that provide helpful information about Digital Story production (see the References below for website details), however, research on the impact of digital stories in language teaching, and more particularly in Japanese language teaching, is still limited, although Osaka Gakuin University and Nara Kyoiku University have been exploring the potential of digital media (cf. Susono, 2006, 2009; Wan, Tanimoto, & Templeton, 20098).

3 Target course

At ANU, the introductory and intermediate language core is divided into two streams, one for speaking and listening and the other for reading and writing. *JPNS2012 Spoken Japanese 3* is the first semester of the intermediate speaking and listening core. The goal of the course is to improve student command of modern spoken Japanese as they progress from the introductory to the intermediate level. As effective communication requires an understanding of how language functions in context, the course uses a functional approach to help students learn the listening and oral skills needed to understand and participate in a variety of everyday conversations in Japanese. The course uses the McGraw-Hill textbook *Yookoso! Continuing with Contemporary Japanese* written by Yasuhiko Tohsaku, and its accompanying *Workbook* (Tohsaku, 2006). A secondary course goal is to provide students with the opportunity to learn about and reflect on aspects of Japanese culture and society, which influence language usage and understanding.

In 2009, a digital story assessment item, in which students were asked to create a personal story in Japanese about their relationship with Japan and their study of Japanese was introduced in both the 1st Semester *JPNS2012 Spoken Japanese 3* and 2nd Semester *JPNS2013 Spoken Japanese 4* courses, however, in 2010 this assessment item was only included in the first semester course as two digital stories in one year proved too arduous and too repetitious for both staff and students.

3.1 Target course structure and assessment

Students taking the thirteen-week, *JPNS2013 Spoken Japanese 3* have five hours of class per week, made up of one lecture (80–90 students), two conversational tutorials (15 students), one grammar seminar (30 students) and one multi-media class (15 students). The lecture works with the textbook to provide an overall introduction to the function(s) and introduces new grammatical points and the socio/cultural background needed in various situations. The conversational tutorials include some pattern drilling but mainly focus on student production encouraging them to speak as much as possible. The grammar seminar works through the workbook that accompanies the main text and provides on-the-spot feedback to student questions. The multimedia class focuses on listening activities, pronunciation and intonation activities, such as voice recording, and the production of the digital story.

The course assessment is made up of the following components:

Mid-Semester Exam (Written + Aural)	20%
Final Exam (Written + Aural)	35%
Oral Test: Paired Skit	15%
• Topic & Script = 5%	
• Skit Presentation = 7%	
• Questions and Answers following Presentation = 3%	
Homework Assignments	10%

Digital Story Telling Project	15%
• Digital Story Script (in-class reading & draft) = 5%	
• Digital Story Movie File Submission = 10%	
Workbook/Worksheet Completion, Participation & Attendance	5%

Thus while 55% of the course assessment is based on exams, at 30% oral assessment is a large component of this course. Each semester students are required to participate in two types of oral assessment, one a group activity – the paired skit performance – and the other – the digital story – an individual activity. It goes without saying that certain institutional constraints, such as student numbers, class size and course requirements, inevitably impact on the functionality of the course and any activities embedded in the program.

3.2 *Digital story course requirements assessment*

The goal of the digital story, a 15% assessment item, was to create a 3-5 minute digital story movie entitled *Nihon to Watashi: Japan and Myself*. While the assessment item is introduced in the weekly lecture, most of the teaching around this task is carried out in the multimedia. Students work in the following stages throughout the 13-week semester:

1. In Week 2, the weekly lecture introduces students to the project, showing examples of past digital stories and discussing the project requirements and educational goals, while the language lab class introduced students to the voice recording software. (The introduction of important activities is avoided in Week 1, as there is still quite a lot of student movement, and new enrolments).
2. In Week 3, students are divided into groups of four to practice merging image and voice recordings. Students were given 10 images of Japan, and asked to select four and to each record a few sentences to link the images into a story. Their creation is then exported as a movie file and played to the whole group. The teacher provides on-the-spot feedback (both linguistic and cultural) to each group as they work and also when the short movies are shown at the end of the class.
3. Students then have until the end of Week 5 to complete their draft storyboard. This story draft is read out in front of the whole class while projecting their selected images and then submitted on the same day for marking. With 90 students in the course, two weeks were needed to give everyone a time slot in which to read out their story.
4. Drafts were marked with grammatical errors highlighted in one colour, inappropriate expressions in another and a number of overall comments provided – such as ‘the images do not really match the story’, or ‘you are giving a travel log and not telling a story’, or ‘you need to rethink your structure and introduce a climax’. The marked drafts were returned to students in Week 7 following the two-week mid-semester break.
5. Final digital storyboards were due in Week 8. These final scripts were again marked – although in less detail.
6. The completed digital story was due in Week 10.
7. In Week 12 a ‘Digital Story Film Night’ is held, at which staff and students are able to watch the most highly rated digital stories. The ratings are based on both staff and student selections – with the students voting on the course learning management site.

4 The pilot study findings

As an overall response, the digital story has provided an enriching oral production activity. For many it has provided a tool to present a very personal, creative and emotional response, a task many had initially thought beyond their Japanese language ability. To provide an example, one student’s digital story told us about her dream of becoming a great animator like her hero, Miyazaki Hayao. Using pictures from her high school Japanese language class and her favourite anime characters, she told about her love of Japanese popular culture and how the Japanese

language fascinated her. She created an animated self, which she superimposed over the pictures of her past and images of her future as she told us about her dream of studying animation in Japan after finishing university. The digital story format allowed her to merge her own animated drawings with photographs from her past and with pictures of Miyazaki himself, and gave her a wonderful stage to explore her creativity. Another student used maps as well as photographs to tell about the small town in Greece where he was born. Using a series of images of goats, he humorously told us that all anyone thought about in that town was ‘goats’ – goat cheese, goat milk and looking after goats. But somehow that was not enough for him. He wanted to explore the world and then one day, his father announced that they were moving to Australia. Now, although thankfully removed from all the goats, he was faced with the problems of learning English and of fitting in with another culture. Difficult though this transition was, all these experiences stimulated an interest in languages when led to an interest in Japan. He concluded his digital story with a number of images of his own feet – in the shallows of the sea, on a log, and yet another on a stretch of grass. These images provided a simple, yet clever metaphor for his dreams of travelling the world and experiencing many other cultures. So for him also, the digital story provided a wonderful foil for his creative expression.

For others, however, a great deal of encouragement was required to get them to successfully incorporate more personal shadings. Many students were daunted by the task of including emotional responses, and tended to provide a list of factual statements with no indication as to why particular events were important to them. With this group, feedback focussed on encouraging them to go beyond mere statements of fact. That is to not simply say ‘I went to Japan and rode on the bullet train and it was interesting’, but to try and focus on the ‘why’ or ‘how’ that occasion was interesting. When students successfully focused on the ‘why’, the stories they created had much more impact and were more highly rated, both by their fellow students and by the staff during the marking.

The students were required to do a lot of work on their digital stories outside of class time, which had the positive impact of increasing the amount of time they spent on their Japanese. Furthermore, it provided a means of encouraging students to speak in their own voice rather than the voice of the textbook. On the downside, those students who were less committed to their Japanese study or who had more time constraints (due to other courses or part-time employment) found it an arduous task. Quite a number of students complained about their inability to be creative and their difficulties in expressing their inner feeling in their own native language let alone a second language.

5 Student surveys and pilot interview study

The ongoing research project is continuing to gather quantitative data, however, this paper, will only present the results of the 2011 online student survey and three in-depth student interviews that were undertaken by participants out of the classroom in October 2010. Two of the students participated in the 2010 Digital Story, while one participated in 2009. The interviews provided general feedback on the pros and cons of the project, and how this assessment item fitted into the course as a whole. Their responses are summarised below.

5.1 2010 interviews: *Story topic*

When asked if the digital story topic should be set or free, all three respondents felt that freedom of choice for the topic was best. Student B felt that students might be more passionate about the project if they could tell their own story. However, that said they all felt that as some students found it hard to come up with a topic, and so some topic suggestions should be provided. Student A felt that the better stories were those in which the creator used a specific instance, which created a focal point in their story. He understood that the goal was to make the story personal and emotional but found it hard to condense his relationship with Japan into 4 minutes – it needed a novel. In retrospect he felt that it would have been better to focus on a particular anecdote. Student A also

thought that there was a problem with ‘truthfulness’ - arguing that the requirement of telling a ‘real’ story prevented him from inventing interesting events or anecdotes that helped tell the story. He stressed that he knew what he was supposed to do but not what to do. He knew it was not just a summary of events but found it hard to get an angle on the topic.

Student B noted that for many students the digital story was really just another speech activity. She felt that some people were just not used to the digital medium and that for many there did not seem to be a point to it, and so they just added any old image and sound. They could just as easily have read their story out as a speech. She argued that if we wanted students to focus on the digital element then we needed to give a clear mark for it. Watching everyone’s stories on the Movie Night, she felt that you could really see which stories had really engaged with the digital aspect and those that had just ignored it. In retrospect she felt that more guidance about the potential of the digital aspect would improve student output.

5.2 2010 interviews: *Integration into the course*

Student A noted that the staged assessment associated with the digital story worked well, with the Week 2 image and voice recording activity successfully introducing students to the software and how to merge image and voice. However, he felt that we had drawn the project out for too long – using 10 of the 13 Week Semester. He argued that participating students would have been more focused on the project if it had been due in Week 6 or 7.

He also felt that the Digital Story was a good ice-breaker activity, as it required a certain amount of group activity when the script drafts were read aloud to the group for feedback, however, it did not require the intensive group work of the paired oral skit (the other major oral assessment item of the semester). Using the Digital Story as the first oral assessment item provided a good way of getting to know the other students without having to commit to the pairing required of the oral (when you really did not want to be paired with someone you did not get on with).

5.3 2010 interviews: *Feedback and assessment*

Student A argued that feedback was very important to the process, and liked the fact that the scripts had to be read aloud to the group for peer feedback. However, he argued that reading the script aloud to the whole class was a bit daunting and that it would perhaps be better if there were two points in the project where students read their script aloud to a student group of perhaps only four students: firstly, in Week 4 or 5 before it was submitted for marking and then again in Week 7 or 8 before the final draft was due. This would allow both teacher and peer feedback and allow for more brainstorming of ideas and possible changes. Student A also suggested that 5–10 minutes of each Language Lab class in Weeks 3–7 be set aside as time in which students could ask the teacher for feedback on their own story and any content or technical difficulties they were having.

Student C argued that there was insufficient clarity in the marking processes. Students needed a better breakdown of how the draft storyboard and the final Digital Story were to be marked. She suggested a division that included a mark for images, a mark for grammatical accuracy and a mark for the overall content and impact of the story. Student A felt that students needed a bit more feedback on what was being assessed, and that the focus was more on expression and content than grammatical accuracy. Some students did not understand the different weightings of the various stages and when they did well in the draft storyboard expected to do better in their final digital story. These disparities led to student dissatisfaction.

5.4 2010 interviews: *Technology and technical support*

All three students found the technology relatively straightforward to use, although it should be noted that Student B is enrolled in a combined degree studying digital media. As the class was held in Mac Labs, the only software introduced in class was GarageBand and a short introduction to iMovie. Student A felt that GarageBand was a good software package to use as the default pro-

gram, arguing that it was relatively straightforward for importing images, recording voice, editing voice recordings and adding background music. He felt that iMovie, though perhaps creating a more professional product, was a bit too complicated and that introducing two software packages in class would take up too much time that should rather be spend on the content of the stories.

Student A argued that the preparatory activity in which students selected a number of images of Japan and practiced voice recording together with image export should be used not just to introduce the technology but also to focus students on the importance of story development. This would allow the teacher to discuss the role of adjectives and other expressions in making a tale more interesting, and the importance of explaining the ‘why’ behind what was said.

5.5 2011 survey results

In 2011 an online survey was carried out to collate student responses to the digital story module. Of the 80 enrolments in the course, 46 responded to the survey. On the positive side, the majority of respondents thought that the module was “a good idea” or “was fun” and noted that it encouraged them to try and express more personal thoughts in Japanese, which was something that to date, they had not been asked to do in much of their language learning at university. It provided “good practice in writing outside the box” and provided an interesting way of assessing speaking ability. However, more than half the respondents stressed the need for more assistance with pronunciation and intonation, and complained that the differing levels of technical skill caused problems, with comments such as, “the nature of technology and people’s varying levels of skill make it stressful”. Another major complaint was the short time period in which the module had to be completed. This made it difficult not only for the students, but for the staff to provide sufficient timely feedback. This in turn made it difficult for students to incorporate teacher feedback into their work. Another common response was the need for more clarity around marking criteria, with a number of respondents finding it particularly difficult to understand what was meant by “emotional impact” which was one of the marking criteria: “I think the ‘impact/imagination’ criteria for the assessment should be taken out of the assessment, as this course should be solely about learning the Japanese language and its culture”.

6 Response to the pilot survey

Through an analysis of pilot study data gathered through student interviews held in 2010 and a 2011 student survey, this paper has explored the impact of this teaching and learning activity within the course as a whole, as well as, the importance of staged assessment, feedback and technical support.

The 2010 student interview responses showed that topic selection was clearly a big issue, as all three students noted that they had found it hard to come up with an idea. As a result in 2011 in-class brainstorming sessions were included in Week 2 or 3 to help students come up with an idea and outline for their story. This proved successful. Another negative with regard to the topic was that by restricting the topic to “Japan and Myself”, there was a tendency among some students to create a travel log rather than a ‘story’ about their relationship with Japan exploring what Japan meant to them. In 2011, the topic was free, with the hope of providing more flexibility and thus stimulating creativity, although some suggestions were provided for those found it difficult to decide on a topic. The lack of a focusing topic in 2011, however, led to a large increase in complaints about ‘creativity’ and the difficulty of coming up with an interesting topic within the time constraints of the assessment task.

The role of the digital story project as a course icebreaker was an interesting finding coming out of the 2010 interviews. As Spoken Japanese 3 is made up of a mixture of second year students who have progressed from first year, and first year students who have entered the program via the placement test, and some international students, it is important to provide icebreaker activities and the digital story has served as a good group activity to facilitate better student interaction.

There were continuing problems with regard to ongoing feedback, as even in 2011 when a lot more class time was spent discussing the assessment criteria, some students still did not understand the different weightings of the various stages of the project. Some students who did moderately well in the draft storyboard expected to do better in their final digital story and were dissatisfied with their results. This was partly due to insufficient information, and partly due to multiple markers who were not as consistent as they should have been. Clearer marking criteria for less experienced markers and more detailed assessment and project information in the course outline should help alleviate this in the future.

With regard to technology, the 2011 cohort has proven the least technically minded of the three groups who have completed this task, highlighting the need to reassess how technology is introduced. Although the university library provides a number of specific software training courses for both students and staff, the students proved reluctant to complete them (largely due to time constraints). From 2011, better links to online software tutorials have been made available on the course site. In 2011, in an attempt to embed the technology into the language learning, the in-class software explanations were all provided only in Japanese, with an accompanying worksheet, and this prove a daunting task for many. Interestingly few students viewed these activities as true 'language' activities and wanted to get onto the 'real' language activities. In 2012, we will encourage students who are worried about the technical aspects of the task to undertake the library training courses. We also plan to spend less class time explaining the technology, allowing us more time to focus on the content of the narrative and the storytelling techniques. Voice recording software is used from Week 1 and so students should be able to merge their voice recordings with images without too much difficulty. We also plan to place each student in a small study group, and to encourage the group to meet together to help each other with the digital stories.

In the future, more research needs to be undertaken to produce quantitative data and a more comprehensive framing review of the discourse in this area both in terms of digital story production and Japanese language teaching. A detailed linguistic analysis of the student story scripts that examines their use of adjectives and other expressions that express their emotional responses is also important. Further, it will also be interesting to examine how the digital stories reflect the students' cultural awareness and interest in Japan and things Japanese.

Finally, it is clearly necessary to engage the students more in the benefits of using the digital medium to present their story and to stress that it is not just another speech presentation. More time needs to be spent showing that the inclusion of image and music, allows them to create a story that has a very different impact on their audience, and further, that it allows them to create a 'product' that can be saved, transported and kept as an example of their work.

7 Concluding remarks

The primary aim of this paper has been to present the ANU Japanese language Digital Story project and to discuss something of the successes and the failures in the three years of running this assessment task. A secondary aim has been to explore the appeal of these stories and to examine their value in foreign language teaching as an alternative to the individual oral/aural presentations or tests.

The digital story task has successfully provided an interesting mode of student expression, which has challenged students to incorporate their own interests, opinions and emotions, and as such is a very useful teaching and learning tool. Digital stories have undoubtedly enriched our teaching practice and provided students with an exciting new tool for expressing their own thoughts and feelings and thereby deepening their learning opportunities. The completed digital story has provided students with an artefact that they can show to fellow students and teachers, which has, in retrospect, proved a great motivator. Many who at the time found the task very difficult, have in retrospect, felt a great sense of achievement. Our biggest goal for the future lies in the balance. The perfect balance between in-class requirements and home preparation, and between content and technology, is still proving a little elusive and is something that must be reviewed in the future.

Notes

¹ A number of the 2009 and 2010 digital stories are available for viewing on YouTube, at <http://www.youtube.com/user/CHayesANUCAP>.

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