

Collaborative Stop Motion Projects for Academic Writing

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Producing a stop motion animation (using students' iPhones and free application software) in class offers an opportunity for a considerable range of learning outcomes. In this paper we explain how teachers can set up and use this kind of project in university classes to foster both academic writing and collaborative learning. We describe the challenges and outcomes of such projects. Stop motion projects, as a basis for writing, motivate students as they become more engaged and responsible for their learning. In the projects described here, the writing outcomes were process essays. We found that in these essays the students wrote enthusiastically, at greater length, and with greater care for accurate expression, which in turn resulted in richer vocabulary and a sense of achievement.

ストップモーション・アニメ（スマートフォンと無料アプリを使用）を講義に導入することは様々な学習の成果をもたらす。本論ではストップモーション・アニメを使った講義を教員がどのように準備し実践し、いかに学生の学術的文章の構合力や協働して学ぶ力を養うかを解説する。また、この講義に関わる問題点、成果も明示する。ストップモーション・アニメの作成を文章作成の材料に利用すると、学生は積極的に課題に取り組むようになり、自主性が高まる。このストップモーション・アニメを使った講義においては、文章作成という成果物はアニメ作成過程についての作文である。本研究では、ストップモーション・アニメの導入により、学生が意欲的に作文に取り組み、しかも、長い文章を丁寧に正確に表現する努力をすることが示されている。これにより学生は語彙を広げ、強い達成感も体験している。

STOP MOTION is a technique in which everyday objects are photographed with minute changes to position, so that when the series of photographs are run together, there appears to be movement. Numerous stop motion animations that have been created with paper, drawings, and people can be found on the Internet. Because the examples provided in academic writing texts are often dry and difficult for our students to understand, we chose to undertake a stop motion project for the purpose of writing a process essay. In three classes of 90-minutes, students planned, created, and photographed stop motion projects, as well as wrote up their experiences in a stop motion process essay. In this paper, we describe the project and its outcomes.

Current Ideas in the Literature

It is increasingly evident that technology in the classroom is virtually unavoidable. For example, many published English language textbooks incorporate audio, video, and other online resources. In all these cases, nevertheless, teachers become the gatekeepers for the use of technology in the

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classroom. However, within these basic uses of technology, with teachers as the gatekeepers and students as consumers, learners can be deprived of the potential benefits of second language learning. One of the advantages of the stop motion project is that students are no longer passive consumers of technology, but active and creative users in their own right. Nonetheless, digital literacy is not the central goal. It is utilized as a means to an end in the development of English language and academic writing.

A second advantage of using the technology of stop motion is that it is not only a means to develop students' and teachers' digital literacy; it is also a means of sharing expertise. Although students often appear quite confident with mobile technology, there are many Japanese university students in Japan who could develop their basic digital literacy skills. On the other hand, in the case of students with more advanced digital literacy skills, there is an unfortunate danger that English teachers can become out of touch with their tech-savvy students (Blake, 2013). The stop motion project enables both teachers and students to become learners and teachers, sharing their areas of expertise with one another.

A third important point related to the use of stop motion for academic writing is the level of motivation it generates. Research suggests that authentic materials are directly related to an increase in student motivational levels, and that motivation itself is indeed an important factor in the EFL/ESL classroom (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, 2011; Murray, Gao, & Lamb, 2011). As many students have their own mobile phones (smartphones in particular), the students' own medium of communication then becomes the source for creating authentic materials. Students are asked to download, explore, and create with an app—a task approach that utilizes the very technology with which they are most comfortable. As Huang and Liaw (2005) stated, the technical function and capability of the technology is irrelevant if the students do not have a positive connection toward it. Moreover, as technology becomes more accessible, we are seeing research that shows a connection between technology and increased levels of student motivation (Genc Ilter, 2009).

Last but not least is the opportunity for creativity that stop motion projects can provide. As Bloom's revised taxonomy of learning suggests (Krathwohl, 2002), the highest level of learning is creating. Thus, the need for student-focused learning that encourages creativity is required if students are to experience this type of learning. Furthermore, because creativity is important, it has implications for how teachers design their academic programs and structure educational experiences in the classroom. The problem lies in finding and designing activities that are accessible and can be made relevant to the students' levels of expertise and English language proficiency. Technology, as a pedagogical element, could be seen by some as distracting or even time wasting. However, when technology is used with a creative element it can be an effective pedagogical tool for language development and academic writing.

Technical Aspects

Rapid changes in technology mean that innovative ways to teach academic writing are within both the teachers' and students' grasps. For this project, all that was required was one student in the group to have access to a smartphone. Free apps are available for both iPhones and Android-based smart phones. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the iPhone app called Stop Motion Studio (Cateater, LLC, 2013).

As mentioned above, this app is free and provides the necessary functions to create a successful stop motion video. It is easy to use, with language support in Japanese and English. In fact, in our experience, students were able to manipulate various settings with little explanation from the teacher. Moreover, only one student per group needs to download the app. By taking carefully arranged shots with minute changes in position, students can create a stop motion clip by playing the sequence of photos through the app itself. To provide some reference, a 1-minute stop motion clip can require as few as 200 photos or as many as 500, depending on the effect the students are trying to achieve. Students can also add voiceover and music.

The finished video can be uploaded to a YouTube, Dropbox, or Line account, sent by email, or downloaded to a computer via USB, giving teachers an array of choices as to how they wish to receive or present the material.

The final aspect of the technical process is to share the videos with the class. Viewing of these projects sometimes comes with unexpected technical difficulties, yet this also creates opportunities for teamwork. With so many choices available to share the content, students and teachers inevitably end up using a variety of methods to ensure that everyone's project is accessible for viewing. In some cases, students wound up sharing USB cords to connect their phones directly to the computer. They often acted as intermediaries between the teacher and other students when it came to monolingual operating systems, or when there was a general lack of knowledge about how to display and run the content. All of these conditions helped to create an authentic atmosphere of teamwork and were part and parcel of the technical aspects of this project.

The Project

The project took up a total class time of three 90-minute lessons. The first lesson included a warm-up session in which the students learned about the project. At this stage, the teachers clarified the timeline for the project and emphasized the necessity of getting organized. The students watched a few examples of stop motion animations on the Internet. YouTube offers many examples of stop motion animations, some professional and some amateur; both types can be informative, as well as inspiring for students, especially to those who are not familiar with stop motion. Although it is good to show students an assortment of the kinds of materials and media that can be used, for example, clay, paper, chalkboards, and food, it is perhaps wise not to overwhelm them at this stage. For homework, we encouraged the students to watch further examples and thereby glean ideas for their own production efforts. It is worth noting that once students have completed a project, teachers can show these

examples of student-produced stop motion animations to motivate and inform other classes during future projects. Once the students had an idea of what was expected, they formed groups, started discussing their ideas with their group members, and decided on a theme for their own stop motion animation. On one occasion the students were asked to link their theme to the textbook, and so were given more parameters. In other classes the theme was left entirely up to the students. During the preliminary discussion period, at least one student in each group downloaded the stop motion app. The next stage was to have the students storyboard their ideas. This means drawing rough sketches to show how the theme or story of the stop motion animation would develop (see Appendix A for a sample worksheet). The first homework assignment was to complete the planning and prepare to begin production of the animation in the next class. This also included the decision of what materials they needed to bring to the next class and which group member was responsible for which task.

In the second class the students produced their stop motion together in groups. This illustrated the most collaborative aspect of the project: The students needed to have planned together, decided tasks, and assigned responsibilities for materials, and then they needed to actually work cooperatively during the production process. While the stop motion production was underway, the teacher circulated from group to group and asked the students to explain what they were doing. The teacher helped or guided the groups as necessary. One student in the group was responsible for making brief notes about the steps in the production process as the work progressed.

By the third class students were expected to have completed their stop motion animations. Each group was also required to send their stop motion video file to the teacher before class so that it was ready for viewing. Each group introduced their stop motion animation to the class and everyone watched together. This, for the students, was one highlight of the project. The stop motion animations were

all short and often the students unanimously requested to watch them a second, or even third, time. At this point, an evaluation form asking for comments on various aspects of the animation—such as story, use of music, or graphics—could be used. After the viewing, and by referring to their group notes, either as a whole class or in their groups, the students generated a list of the steps required to produce a stop motion. The number of steps and the depth of detail at each step partly depended on the students' levels. The teachers were able to decide whether or not to push the students for more details. Next, depending on the level of the particular class or target structures, the teacher introduced the writing focus. For example, in a low-level class, transition words needed to describe the flow of the process were explained and further illustrated by looking at an example of a process essay. In an advanced class, creating an introduction that showed their specific project as being unique and therefore of interest to the reader was the main focus of the essay, as well as articulating their personal experiences about the project. Students then wrote an outline for their process essays; they were allowed to work individually or in groups as they wished. A final individually written stop motion process essay had to be completed by the following lesson. The final essays varied according to the particular classes and the various outcomes are described in the next section.

General Outcomes of the Stop Motion Project

As noted earlier, we used stop motion projects with students at three different levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. For all the classes, one of the most satisfying outcomes for both teachers and students was the students' level of creative engagement. Students became highly engaged not only with the production process itself, but also with their written work, resulting in high-quality essays. We felt that this was because they had experienced an interesting production process firsthand, and this consequently enabled and encouraged them to willingly dedicate time and effort to their writing. We observed that several groups of students were

willing to spend extra time out of class on improving their stop motion productions. Their essays showed a richer use of language and demonstrated greater depth than any previous writing or, as we were surprised to find, most subsequent essays submitted later in the academic year, which were not based on projects like this. A second general outcome was the cooperative nature of the group work, though there were exceptions, as described below. However, in general, we found that the collaborative nature of the stop motion project changed the class dynamics in a positive way. For example, some students who previously had shown a low level of motivation in class appeared more highly engaged. The students in each group found that they had to delegate tasks and share responsibilities in order to get the job done on time. Students drew on the particular skills of the individuals in their groups.

Beginner Classes

In the beginner 2nd-year English major writing class the average TOEIC score was 320. The general writing goal at this level is to work towards producing a three-paragraph essay. Using the stop motion production process as the basis for writing a process essay at this level was effective for several reasons. First, unlike the example in the students' textbook, the challenge of the stop motion task fully engaged the students' creativity and thus seemed to spur their motivation to write. The project included the planning and production of the stop motion animation and finished with the final draft of a process essay. After the students had written their first draft, their keen motivation to write well was evident at the writing conference stage. While the teachers guided them through their drafts or revisions, the students showed a marked eagerness to develop their ideas and express them in writing. Because the students and teachers knew and had experienced the production process together, they were able to fully and meaningfully engage in the feedback session at a level of mutual understanding. This shared experience seemed to facilitate the writing process. Furthermore, by relating the time

sequence of the production process with the organization of the essay, the students were able to readily use the required transition words appropriately. Finally, even though some of the stop motion animations produced by the lower level students were very short (for example, the shortest was only about 20 frames), the brevity did not hinder the students from completing the process essay.

Intermediate Classes

The intermediate writing class comprised 2nd-year English major students with an average TOEIC score of 500. These students had previously produced a stop motion animation in another general four-skills integrated English class and so were able to utilize this experience when learning about how to write a process essay. This neatly illustrates how a stop motion project can lend itself to cross-curriculum teaching and learning when collaboration occurs not only between students, but also between teachers.

The written outcome for the intermediate class was also a process essay; however, the lesson plan differed from the general outline described above because the plan needed to accommodate the writing skills of the intermediate students. The complexity of the task was gradually built up: from a structured lesson on how to describe a process to having students write from their own experience. This, the essay-writing became transparent and manageable for all students across the ability range in the class. During the first lesson, using a simple diagram illustrating an industrial process, students discussed the steps involved in the process of making crisps (potato chips). Next, transition words to link the steps in a process were introduced. The students then wrote a paragraph using transition words to describe the process illustrated in the diagram. In the second lesson, students were asked in groups to generate a list of the steps involved in producing a stop motion animation. Initially the students came up with only five steps, but through discussion the list expanded as more detailed thought and language emerged. At this stage, groups shared their lists on the whiteboard and a col-

laborative outline for an essay developed. After that, working with a partner from their stop motion production group, the students drafted a process essay about their own production experience. During the final lesson when the first draft had been completed, writing conferences were conducted to develop grammatical accuracy and linguistic complexity, and then the students wrote their final essays. Assessment was mainly based on an appropriate use of transition words in describing the process. Moreover, some of the language used to express the students' ideas showed their level of personal involvement in the task. Students wrote comments expressing how easy they had found making a stop motion animation, even though at first it had seemed complicated. One student was able to understand the point of view of the audience; he wrote that his group decided to use a tripod and that they took about 500 pictures to enable the audience to fully appreciate their work. The initial task of making the stop motion was a stimulating incentive for the students to develop their academic literacy. The final essays represented the written outcomes of the stop motion project.

Advanced Classes

In the advanced writing class, the students were 2nd-year English majors with an average TOEIC score of 750. The process essay was the first lengthy essay that the students produced during the academic year. As the students were generally strong writers, their goals were to focus on styles of introduction—"funnel" or "attention getting"—and to create a sense of uniqueness, something that would set their essays apart from all the others (see Appendix B for an example).

Another objective was to get the students to describe their specific experiences in creating the stop motion projects. For example, the projects started near the end of the first semester when the weather had turned humid. A few groups opted to do their projects outdoors and one project in particular called for a long flying sequence. When we viewed the final projects in class, most of the other students

asked to see this stop motion animation again. The group explained during class and from different perspectives in their writing how long they had debated and how many times they had tried to create the sensation of flying through stop motion video. In the end, it was decided that one student would jump to simulate flight. Unfortunately, this had to be done over 20 times in the heat of midday. The result was a very humorous attempt at flight and a very unhappy, but good-natured, student who had to endure the heat and humidity, all for the sake of collaboration and negotiation. This, however, led to a very unique experience that the students subsequently articulated through their process essays. The ability to express all of these experiences in English is another reason why the more advanced learners had a much different focus from the others.

Not all of the outcomes were positive, however. For instance, not all of the students contributed equally. Fortunately, however, this was limited to only one group, and in the end it turned into a rather positive experience for those students who had to bear the burden of the work. Conversely, many students spent more time than was required to finish the project, one group admitting to spending almost 20 hours creating their stop motion project, but one insisted, “It was one of the best projects I ever did in school and I hope we can do more.” Thus, almost all of the students contributed to the projects and gave positive feedback about the collaboration and the stop motion productions. Most importantly, the students successfully wrote personalized essays that reflected the uniqueness of their experiences and of their projects.

The Challenges

Challenges arose during the stop motion projects, as happens with any new class project. With beginner-level classes the kinds of issues that normally occur during the term, such as absenteeism and lack of preparation, impacted the class lessons and group work. Even the advanced class experienced challenges when it came to negotiating tasks and delegating responsibility. However, both teachers

and students were able to meet these challenges and find ways to work around them or absorb them as part of the learning experience. For example, absenteeism forced students to adjust when a group member did not attend class, increasing the workload for others. However, when students filled out a self-evaluation form at the end of the project, they generally took responsibility for their lack of participation. In fact, in one case, two students who had missed most of the classes approached the teacher and asked to be able to submit another stop motion animation. They made it during their lunch hour. In another case, the group created its stop motion animation and listed everyone’s name in the credits at the end, but crossed out the name of the student who had not helped due to being absent.

Another challenge was the issue of students coming to class unprepared. On the last day of the project, students were expected to attend class with their completed stop motion animation and the first draft of their process essay. About one-third of the class had done this, one-third had started but not finished their essays, and the remaining had little beyond their initial notes. For the teacher, having students at various stages of completion in their writing can be quite challenging to tackle in one class period. In our case, because this stop motion project had been team taught, the two teachers effectively grouped the students according to stage of completion and efficiently corrected first drafts so those students could write their final draft, or coached the others to at least finish the essay by the end of class. Students who had completed their essays then had the chance to exchange them with other students and fill out a feedback form on the essays they had read.

The advanced class also had issues with absenteeism and a lack of preparation, though this was limited. One student was frequently absent during the project, and even though her classmates were in contact with her, she neglected her tasks, causing the other two group members stress. One student indicated through her essay that she had lost confidence to work with others through this pro-

ject. However, in the end she said she realized that it was a lot like real life and took it as a positive experience. These students were able to reflect on the experience and incorporate the knowledge into their essays. Thus, the project, initially intended to serve as the basis for a process essay, actually proved to touch on a broader range of skills that went beyond the written page.

Conclusion

In this paper we focused on using stop motion projects as a context for developing academic writing, in particular, for writing a process essay. Stop motion is a flexible resource that can be adapted for numerous language teaching goals. For instance, one of us has also used stop motion as a basis for teaching storytelling in oral presentations in general English classes, and another teacher has used stop motion to explore the steps of a process essay for an advanced reading course. Even though the technology the students used to produce their final stop motion animations was sophisticated, the relatively easy and accessible method of producing the animations helped to give students an immense sense of achievement. One salient feature of the stop motion projects was the almost universal enthusiasm of the students. It was intriguing to observe the relationship between the use of technology in the classroom and the level of student engagement and productivity. This relationship between particular uses of technology and learning may well prove a useful area for future research. Without doubt, the three university educators who were involved in doing the stop motion projects described in this paper would recommend similar projects to other teachers.

Bio Data

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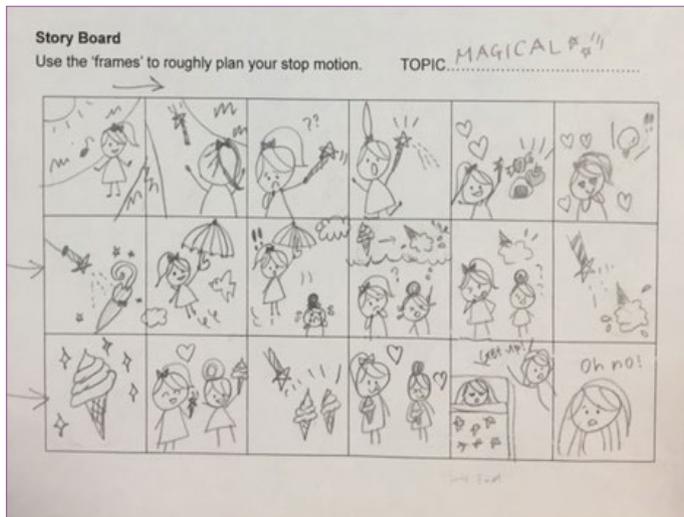
Sarah Holland is an assistant professor at Meikai University. She has been teaching for many years, using modern technology in the language classroom for a few years, and is ready to try out innovative teaching ideas every day. <sarahjaneholland@yahoo.co.uk>

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Appendix A

Storyboard



Appendix B

Sample Introduction

The Little Witch

Once upon a time, there was a little girl called Yuri. One day she found a magical wand that an old witch had dropped. When she picked it up, she turned into a little witch. She was able to fly in the sky and to make the trees and flowers blossom. Unfortunately, when her grandmother entered her room to wake her, she realized that it was just a dream and that she was still an ordinary girl. As she left her room however, she did not notice the wand, which she had used in her dreams, beside her pillow. This is the plot, and a bit of a spoiler, of our stop motion project. We all love fantasy movies or anime, thus, we believe that we can use stop motion to express what we have never experienced in real life, such as flying, or having the ability to make the flowers bloom. In order to create a stop motion animation, there are three main steps in the process. (1) pre-production: creating a script, (2) filming, and (3) post production; editing.