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## Project-Based Learning for Collaborative Fiction Writing: A Problem-Solution Inquiry into Learners' Needs through Practitioner Research in Senior High School

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With the increasing need for fostering 21st-century skills, language educators are seeking effective ways to integrate creativity and collaboration into classroom practice. In the Japanese educational context in senior high school, the recent introduction of *sōgōteki na tankyū no jikan* (総合的な探究の時間) [Time for Integrated Inquiry] in the latest Course of Study has drawn attention to project-based learning (PBL) given their shared emphasis on creativity and learner autonomy. This study explored how a collaborative fiction writing project could promote creativity and active collaboration among senior high school students. Twenty first-year students participated in four fiction writing workshops interwoven into regular English lessons. Data on their needs and problem solution for creating collaborative fiction stories in English were collected through students' reflective responses, questionnaires, and semi-structured group interviews, and teacher journals. The findings revealed the figure of the practitioner who tried to meet students' needs and the figure of students who struggled to integrate their parts of the stories with their group members and devised their own solutions through collaborative interaction. This process not only enabled them to complete the project goals but also demonstrated the potential of this project to foster creativity and constructive collaboration in second-language classrooms.

21世紀型スキルの重要性が高まる中、言語教師は教室での実践において創造と協働を効果的に統合する方法を模索している。日本の高校の教育における文脈では、新学習指導要領に「総合的な探究の時間」が導入され、創造性や学習者の自律を重視するという共通点から、プロジェクト型学習 (PBL) への注目が高まっている。本研究では協働的なフィクションライティング・プロジェクトが高校生の創造力と積極的な協働性の向上にどのように寄与したかについて調査した。20名の高校1年生が、通常の英語授業に組み込まれた4回のフィクションライティング・ワークショップに参加した。英語で協働的にフィクションストーリーを創作する際の学習者のニーズや問題解決に関するデータは、振り返りの記述、質問紙、半構造化グループインタビュー、教師ジャーナルを通して収集された。研究の結果、生徒たちのニーズに応えようとする実践者の姿と、分担した物語の各部分をグループメンバーと一つに統合しようと奮闘し協働的なやり取りを通して自ら解決策を見出し生徒たちの姿が明らかになった。このプロセスは、生徒たちがプロジェクトの目標を完遂するだけでなく、本プロジェクトが第二言語を学ぶ教室において創造力と建設的な協働性を育む可能性を秘めていることを示した。

### Keywords

project-based learning, problem solution, creativity, collaboration, English education

プロジェクト型学習、問題解決、創造力、協働、英語教育

### Project-Based Learning and Creativity in English Education

With changes in society and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), the traditional approach of cramming knowledge in education is reaching its limits. Merely accumulating knowledge will not be enough to compete against AI. Instead, an attitude of applying knowledge across fields with creativity is required. Taking a creative approach to language teaching involves finding innovative methods to navigate and overcome the social and educational limitations. In practice, this involves responding with flexibility and creativity to the constraints that inevitably arise in educational settings, while ensuring that learning remains both effective and engaging. Thus, it would be important to set the themes and topics that are related to real society to elicit students' creativity and autonomy. Creativity and autonomy might not be elicited in classrooms where a one-size-fits-all approach is adopted.

As society evolves, the education system is gradually being transformed. In Japan, the latest Course of Study, *Gakushu Shido Yoryo* (学習指導要領) (MEXT, 2018), emphasizes the importance of integrated inquiry, alongside reforms in university entrance examinations. Recently, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of students entering university through recommendation-based admissions rather than paper-based tests. Thus, I believe that teachers need to strongly consider incorporating more dynamic and imaginative language activities across every subject, in order to better prepare students for a world where AI can accumulate knowledge more efficiently than humans. However, the main focus in English education in Japanese senior high schools remains on the grammar-based approach, with few teachers adopting more learner-centered approaches, like project-based learning (PBL), to foster students' creativity.

In this story of practice, I present a case study of practitioner research in which I incorporated collaborative PBL into senior high school English classes for the first time over a few months. My motivation for engaging in PBL comes from a desire to elicit students' creativity after watching the documentary, *"Most Likely To Succeed"* (Whiteley, 2015) which shows the importance of providing learners with an environment conducive to cooperative inquiry for their project goals. The film inspired me by showcasing students who became more autonomous and creative in learning. Consequently, I wanted to provide my students with similar opportunities through PBL which can develop in learners the skills necessary for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as problem-solving, communicative competence, cooperation, decision-making aptitude, and creativity (Bell, 2010; Torres et al., 2017). Thus, I decided to introduce the collaborative fiction writing project to foster active student engagement and help them develop future-ready 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills.

## Literature Review

### PBL, Learner Creativity, and Problem Solving

Dooly (2012) defined PBL as "founded on contextualized, learner-centered outcomes and social practices that emerge as the participants collaboratively move toward shared goals and output" (p. 78). Building on this definition, PBL can be understood as a collaborative and communicative instructional strategy in which teachers work alongside learners to create meaningful, real-world learning opportunities. Informed by students' real-life needs, PBL is strategic and often begins with expansive language goals that cannot be achieved in a single lesson but rather are intentionally built toward through daily learning objectives, tasks, and classroom routines that support project goals across a specified timeline (Skalet, 2020). In my practice, for instance, daily objectives focused on promoting fluency through output-based tasks first, followed by feedback aimed at improving linguistic accuracy, and a key language goal was for students to make full use of previously learned vocabulary and grammar to express their opinions in English.

It is also said that high-quality PBL involves six components: (a) authenticity, (b) collaboration, (c) reflection, (d) public product, (e) project management, and (f) intellectual challenge and accomplishment (PBLWorks, 2021). To determine **Authenticity**, it is important to consider conversations with learners to evaluate objectives, tasks, and success (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015). Regarding **Collaboration**, learners are responsible for both their own learning and that of their peers when engaging in pair and group work in the autonomy classroom (Little et al., 2017). The autonomous learners are the ones who can take charge of his or her learning (Holec, 1981), which is closely tied to collaboration because creativity rarely emerges in isolation; rather, it builds on prior work and ideas. As Pennycook (2007) points

out, creative language use and teaching often involve refashioning and recontextualizing the words and ideas of others, which highlights the essentially dialogic nature of language. In this sense, language provides the means for people to think and work together to create conversations, activities, relationships, and societies. Maybin (2011) similarly describes creativity as arising “like a spark between people through the synergy between utterance and response, and through the cumulative crisscrossing chains of utterances and responses which link people together” (p. 129). Extending this view, Philip (2013) emphasizes that creative activities flourish when supported by a “system of interactions” involving leaders at their institution, peers, colleagues, and other experts all working together to create the conditions to foster the “emergence of creativity” (p. 366). Taken together, these perspectives underscore the importance of creating environments in which students can interact meaningfully with each other to foster creativity and collaboration in PBL.

Regarding the **Reflection** component of PBL, it becomes a self-reflective process supported by collaborators, as it is informed by each student’s prior experiences and learning interests. Students reflect on their project engagement in terms of content, language, skills, strategy, process, and product (Stoller & Myers, 2020). One student wrote in the reflection stage as a moment to look back on how imagination and collaboration intertwined in their creative process, *“Since we created a story by predicting the future, we shared ideas using our imagination and tried to draw out each other’s opinions.”* This kind of reflection illustrates how students internalized both creativity and collaboration as essential aspects of their learning. Teachers can also learn a lot from students’ reflections to find out their problems they want to solve. Teachers can provide opportunities for all students to share problems during PBL and to think about the solutions together in reflection processes. Barnes (1976) sought to promote the incorporation of “school knowledge” into learners’ “action knowledge” via the exploratory talk required to complete problem-solving activities carried out in small groups (p. 81). Teachers can identify project strengths and weaknesses for the implications toward future projects through the reflective processes. Learners take an active role in the teaching and learning process as well as in decision making, adopting reflective practices that support both their own learning and that of their peers (Pedder & James, 2012).

As mentioned above, one of the benefits of PBL is to foster creativity (Stoller, 2006), but until relatively recently, it has been a less familiar construct in educational fields. In Japan, for instance, creativity has not traditionally been emphasized in English education, which has long prioritized grammatical accuracy and examination techniques. However, in recent years, creativity is now increasingly seen as having a central role to play in equipping teachers and students for essential 21st-century skills. Bruner (1977) defined creativity as “an act that produces effective surprise,” highlighting the value of novelty in creative activity. Fisher (2004) extended this idea by contrasting true creativity with mere repetition or minor variation, emphasizing that creativity requires doing or thinking of something new and effective. Anderson (2014) further stressed the importance of making connections and solving puzzles, which means that creativity emerges not only from interaction with others but also from linking ideas that are essential from a problem-solving perspective. According to Wertsch (1994), creativity arises from the interplay between what individuals wish to express and what language makes possible, allowing people to solve problems, sustain social relationships, and achieve their aims. Collectively, these accounts emphasize that creativity lies in generating novel and effective outcomes through new connections between ideas and actions, which makes it a crucial competence for problem-solving.

Jones (2012) further argued that the potential of language for creativity lies in its capacity for creative action, offering a way to reconcile the definitions of creativity as both a product

and a process. Referring to high-quality PBL components (PBLWorks, 2021), the product can be understood as **Public Product**, and the process can be **Project Management**. When creativity is viewed as a product, the focus might be on a task outcome such as a piece of student writing. When viewed as a process, the focus is on students' cognitive activity and decision-making when they produce something that would be described as creative (Jones, 2014). The process allows learners to have incidental language learning opportunities, such as writing fiction stories, through which they acquire new vocabulary used in daily conversation. For instance, one group in my class created a role-playing game (RPG)-style battle story. One student reflected that *"because our theme was RPG and fighting scenes, we often needed words we don't usually use."* This comment suggests that creative storytelling encouraged students to explore and internalize new vocabulary that emerged naturally from their narrative ideas, rather than through explicit instruction. In doing so, it creates conditions and environments for **Intellectual Challenge and Accomplishment**.

## Purpose of the Inquiry

As shown above, PBL offers numerous educational benefits, such as fostering student creativity and autonomy (Stoller, 2006). I intended to document my first experience of practitioner research on PBL as a form of reflective practice (Pollard, 2008). My motivation behind conducting PBL stemmed from the limitations of former English textbooks used in Japan, which might sometimes not fully support the creativity needed to encourage students to freely express their ideas and thoughts. The textbooks emphasized grammar rules, and the language activities they provided were sometimes out of context. Consequently, I sought to engage students in authentic problem-solving by presenting them with a driving question related to global issues of the near future, thereby providing opportunities for them to articulate ideas derived from their inquiry into the problems. Offering students opportunities for PBL aims to foster the autonomy and creativity necessary for today's challenging society.

My aim in this inquiry was to identify students' lacks, wants, and problems for the Collaborative Fiction Writing Project in English within the context of a senior high school. Students' lacks, wants, and problems were examined through the perspective of needs analysis (Macalister & Nation, 2020). This analysis involves reflective responses, allowing students to reflect on their problems and solutions (Brown, 1995), thereby focusing on the learning process of PBL. Additionally, a series of fiction writing workshops were conducted to provide students with guidance on creating fiction stories, such as developing compelling plots and characters. After each workshop, students collaborated and wrote reflective responses in their L1, capturing both positive and negative reactions about the workshop contents. The data was used to assess how students develop creativity and autonomy through these workshops and group work. At the end of the project, semi-structured group interviews were conducted in Japanese to confirm groups' responses focusing on how to solve problems during collaborative work, followed by a questionnaire with open-ended questions to explore the problem-solving process of PBL in more detail.

Considering PBL to be a powerful tool for practitioners to foster students' creativity and autonomy, this study mainly qualitatively explored how a pilot PBL-informed course design positively affected students' creativity and autonomy. By examining my practice, I formed the following research questions (RQs):

RQ 1. How did I meet students' lacks and wants that arose when they created their fiction stories and took the fiction writing workshops?

RQ 2. How did the learners try to solve the problems they faced during collaborative work?

## PBL in my School Context

This section provides an overview of the collaborative fiction writing project for 8 weeks. I worked at a private senior high school that is divided into two courses: music and general courses. While most students in the music course enroll in a music college, most students in the general course enter four-year universities. I primarily taught English to general course students, encompassing three classes with approximately 60 students per year. The participants were first-year high school students (N=20) in one class. Students were divided into groups of four and were responsible for different sections of the plot: (a) exposition, (b) rising action, (c) climax, (d) falling action, and (e) resolution, based on Freytag's Pyramid (Freytag, 1894). Firstly, all group members collaborated to determine the climax section that includes the core message of the story, after which four remaining sections of the plot were assigned to four members individually. Finally, they combined each story section to collaboratively create their final product of the whole fiction story. The theme for fiction writing was a society in the near future (say, 10 years later) where global problems intensify, and technological advancements continue to accelerate.

As many students were new to fiction writing, weekly workshops were implemented as scaffolding support. The fiction writing workshops were divided into four sessions, as shown in Table 1:

1. Explaining story types and eliciting students' ideas,
2. How to develop characters,
3. How to set a story, and
4. Introducing useful websites for fiction writing in English.

These workshops were interwoven into the regular English lessons, and thus participation from all students was expected.

**Table 1.** *Summary of Workshop Lessons for Fiction Writing*

Workshop Theme	Explanation of Workshop Lessons (Learning Style)
1. Explanation of Project & Story Types	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Showing a future concept YouTube video about Society 5.0</li> <li>- Explanation of PBL activities and goals (Whole)</li> <li>- Workshop about story type (Whole)</li> <li>- Introduction of Freytag's Pyramid (Whole)</li> <li>- Division of five groups (Group)</li> <li>- Idea sharing (Group)</li> <li>- 10-min Reflection using Forms (Individual)</li> <li>- Homework: Ideas about the climax scene (Whole)</li> </ul>
2. Developing Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discussion about ideas of climax (Group)</li> <li>- Workshop about how to develop characters including the caveat that real names should not be used (Whole)</li> <li>- Discussion about how to include characters in the climax scene (Group)</li> <li>- 10-min Reflection using Forms (Individual)</li> </ul>
3. Setting a Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Workshop about the plot of the story and key points to write five different sections of plots (e.g., exposition) (Whole)</li> <li>- Discussion about climax part, characters, and overall structure of the story (Group)</li> <li>- 10-min Reflection using Forms (Individual)</li> <li>- Homework: Writing a draft of the part each student is in charge of (Whole)</li> </ul>
4. Introducing Useful Websites for Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discussion to share and connect each story of the assigned part (Group)</li> <li>- Workshop on useful websites referencing flash fiction stories, translating, and revising fiction in English (Whole)</li> <li>- 10-min Reflection using Forms (Individual)</li> <li>- Homework: Presenting the deadline for work completion (whole)</li> </ul>

An example of scaffolding provided to introduce this completely new activity was a YouTube video, “20XX in Society 5.0 --Our future created through digital transformation--(90sec).” (The original long version of the video has been removed from YouTube, but a 90-second short version remains available: Keidanren, 2020.) Since it was related to our future society, I showed it in class to activate the learners’ intrinsic motivation for fiction writing. If the learning environment supports autonomy and offers the right level of challenge and abundant stimulation, students’ motivation and desire to learn are more likely to thrive (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Intrinsic motivation is in evidence whenever students’ natural curiosity and interest energize their learning.

## Research Design

I had my students devote the last 8 weeks of the school year to fiction production, workshops, and group discussions. Workshops and group discussion were held in one class per week when an assistant language teacher (ALT) visited the class. The discussion allowed the participants to share their insights through the workshops and ideas for story production.

The workshops and group discussions were followed by answering reflective questions for 10 minutes, using Google Forms. The questions were developed based on needs analysis (Macalister & Nation, 2020) and Keep, Problem, and Try (KPT) analysis (Cockburn, 2005). As for needs analysis, as a practitioner I asked students to fill in:

Question 1: What they knew about writing a fiction story before,

Question 2: What they found necessary in order to write a fiction story after taking the workshop, and

Question 3: What they wanted to learn about writing a fiction novel in the next workshop.

I intended to make these questions in order to elicit their lacks and wants when they made their fiction story.

In this practice, I also adopted KPT analysis because it encourages students to share and address problems collaboratively through group discussion. KPT was originally proposed by Cockburn (2005) in his workshop as the Keep/Try Reflection. Thus, in my practitioner role I asked students to fill in:

Question 4: As a group, what good points and efforts should be continued,

Question 5: As a group, what current problems and problems may arise in the future, and

Question 6: What they could do to further improve their good points or solve their problems.

I intended to make these questions to elicit students’ problems during group work and the way of solving them.

I, as a practitioner, wrote a journal based on the ALACT model (Korthagen et al., 2001; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005) after each workshop lesson. This model is an acronym derived from the first letters of the names of the five phases:

1. Action,
2. Looking back on the action,
3. Awareness of essential aspects,
4. Creating alternative methods of action, and
5. Trial.

To avoid superficial solutions and facilitate comprehensive reflection, eight specific questions from both teachers’ and students’ perspectives are suggested: thinking, feeling, wanting, and acting. Thus, I tried to reflect on these eight questions in the journal by noting down the teacher’s wants when I planned the activity and the teacher’s self-evaluation based

on student observations, teacher actions, and ideas for improvement. I had started using these eight reflective questions when I had conducted practitioner research while teaching English at a public junior high school. That earlier experience motivated me to connect my teaching intentions more closely with students' learning needs. The journal information was used to see how I met students' lacks and wants.

After each group completed making their collaborative fiction story, I conducted semi-structured group interviews with five groups in their L1. I asked them to reflect on their experiences during the collaboration process. Each interview lasted approximately 5 minutes (about 30 minutes in total) was audio-recorded and transcribed. The discussions mainly focused on their experiences during collaboration by asking interview questions including the challenges they faced while proceeding with the collaborative project and their solutions to these problems. I collected the transcribed data to confirm their solutions to their problems during group discussion, compared to their reflection after each workshop. In terms of ethics, students understood the purpose of this study and had built trust through my project, which aimed to cultivate the creativity necessary for their future.

Finally, I conducted a questionnaire at the end of the school year again in their L1, asking them to write down any requests they had regarding the workshops to make them better. Then, I asked them to explain how they wrote their fiction as a group and overcame any difficulties they had faced during the group work. I aimed to use this data to see how my fiction writing workshops met their needs for the lacks and wants, and reconfirm their problems and solutions elicited from their reflective responses retrieved from Google Forms and group interviews. Collecting data through students' reflections, my journal, semi-structured group interviews, and the students' questionnaire allowed me to explore my practitioner research with concrete written and spoken evidence of students' collaborative work. This approach enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of PBL process from both my perspective as a practitioner and my students' perspectives as learners.

## Analysis

For the data analysis of students' reflective responses, group interview data, and questionnaire, I employed reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). RTA offers a theoretically flexible and qualitative-consistent approach to exploring patterns of meaning in a dataset. Central to this approach is the recognition that themes are not pre-existing to be discovered but are actively generated by the researcher through interpretative engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

While Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined six phases of RTA, these phases are a guiding framework rather than a prescriptive sequence. Accordingly, my analytic process was recursive and iterative. I began by immersing myself in students' reflective responses, interview transcripts, and the questionnaire. I then generated inductive codes that captured both semantic and latent aspects of meaning by hand. Codes were collated into clusters, which I developed into candidate themes. Throughout the analysis, I moved fluidly between data, codes, and emerging patterns, refining and reshaping themes as needed. Some were merged, redefined, or discarded. My guiding principle was that themes should represent patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organizing concept, rather than simply summarizing topics of discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This recursive process culminated in a coherent thematic narrative that highlighted connections among autonomy, creativity, and other aspects of learner development. Finally, I translated all the Japanese data into English to report the results in the following findings and discussion section.

## Findings and Discussion

In this section, I present the key findings from the RTA analysis. I first describe my actions to students' lacks and wants, then move on to students' solutions to problems during collaboration, and finally discuss how students' collaboration contributed to developing their creativity and autonomy.

### My Actions to Students' Lacks and Wants

Table 2 below summarizes how I addressed students' lacks and wants, drawing on the reflective journals written after I conducted workshop sessions.

**Table 2.** *Students' Lacks and Wants for Writing Fiction from Students' Reflection after Workshops and my Action from Journals*

Workshop	Students' Lacks and Wants	My Action as a Practitioner
1. Explanation of Project & Story Types	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Vocabulary for fiction writing (Lacks and Wants)</li> <li>- Investigation of AI and the social impact of AI (Lacks and Wants)</li> <li>- Setting (theme, background, main character, and story) (Lacks and Wants)</li> <li>- Knowledge about what makes a story hard to predict (Wants)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Action ①: I asked ALT to pick up expressions that can be useful for fiction writing and the teaching time was included in the workshop.</li> <li>- Action ②: As an introduction to the first workshop, a concept video about Society 5.0 was shown.</li> <li>- Covered as action ④</li> <li>- <u>Not covered</u></li> </ul>
2. Developing Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Developing main and sub-characters (Lacks and Wants)</li> <li>- Setting the story (climax, rising action, and resolution) (Lacks)</li> <li>- Time for making the story (Lacks)</li> <li>- Vocabulary for fiction writing (Lacks and Wants)</li> <li>- Seeking information about AI and society (Wants)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Action ③: covered by the second workshop</li> <li>- Action ④: covered by the third workshop</li> <li>- Action ⑤: the time for output in the normal class between the workshops was newly set to be used for group discussion.</li> <li>- Covered as action ①</li> <li>- Covered as action ②</li> </ul>
3. Setting a Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Setting the story: climax, falling action, and resolution (Lacks and Wants)</li> <li>- Examples and basic ideas for making things relate to each other (Wants)</li> <li>- Vocabulary for fiction writing (Lacks and Wants)</li> <li>- The way of Paying off foreshadowing (Lacks)</li> <li>- Expressions that make the reader feel emotionally involved (Lacks)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Action ⑥: covered by the third workshop</li> <li>- Action ⑥: covered by the third workshop</li> <li>- Covered as action ①</li> <li>- <u>Not covered</u></li> <li>- <u>Not covered</u></li> </ul>

Workshop	Students' Lacks and Wants	My Action as a Practitioner
4. Useful Websites for Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Describing the main character and scenes to make the story interesting (Lacks)</li> <li>- Conversational expressions: dialogue and narration (Lacks and Wants)</li> <li>- Translating Japanese into English without relying too much on a translation tool (Lacks) and retaining the nuances of the Japanese language (Wants)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Action ⑦: covered by the second and third workshop</li> <li>- Action ⑧: covered by the fourth workshop but I should have given examples of expressions for references instead of just giving URLs of English fiction.</li> <li>- Action ⑨: covered by the fourth workshop but I should have shown how to translate Japanese into English on my own.</li> </ul>

It can be found that in some cases the workshops could not meet their lacks and wants such as providing a way of avoiding spoilers, paying off foreshadowing, and making the reader feel emotionally involved, which means that the workshop contents can be improved by adding these extra points. One of the students commented in the questionnaire that *"I wanted to first read short stories from abroad before moving on to production."* This means that although I introduced the URLs of fiction stories in the fourth workshop, it might have been more effective to provide them to students in the first workshop. Another student commented that *"If the teachers had first given feedback on students' writing and then shared it with the whole class, the students could have improved their work based on more specific advice."* This suggests that the ALT and I needed to provide timely and formative feedback before sharing their stories with the whole class, so that students can refine their work. As the interactions and language use in various contexts can help identify classroom needs (Little et al., 2017), it would be important to support students' active engagement in the classroom to convey their messages that would sometimes show their needs.

The students reported having lacks and wants to in vocabulary and various multiword expressions and phrases the most. The second most common lacks and wants were the way of story making such as the way of setting stories and developing characters. The third one was technical issues such as time management, foreshadowing, and the use of AI. In terms of vocabulary and multiword expressions and phrases, it could be assumed that students learned vocabulary that was necessary to make their story by themselves through using an online dictionary or AI translation, but I should have provided them with example useful expressions that uniquely appeared in story writing. For example, the opening line of one of the stories is *"Looks like a hermit. You're not a nerd."* However, since such conversational and character-revealing expressions are rarely introduced in textbooks, I assume that students found it difficult to express this idea naturally in English. In terms of technical issues, the workshops could not cover these, which means that adding these points to the new workshops will be improvable points for the future fiction writing project.

To deal with their needs, I noted down some suggestions in my journals for the improvement of the PBL activities. For example, many students reported a lack of time such as:

Because few students can fully concentrate on production near the test period, I wished that at least the idea-generation stage had been scheduled around a long vacation, when it was further away from the exam.

I realized the necessity of rescheduling the PBL implementation period to avoid overlapping with the preparation for the second semester final exam. Thus, it would be better to move the schedule earlier in the second semester. Although it would not be possible to address

all lacks and wants, it is valuable in future studies to investigate students' responses after applying these improvable points in the design of PBL and its workshops.

### ***Solutions to Problems During Collaboration***

The responses to RQ 2: "How did the learners try to solve the problems they faced during collaborative work?" are shown in Table 3 that is about students' problems during group discussion from students' reflections after the workshop and solutions retrieved from the questionnaire.

**Table 3.** *Students' Problems during Group Discussion from Reflection Responses and Students' Solutions from Questionnaire*

No.	Source	Students' Problems from Reflection	Students' Solutions from Questionnaire
1	Workshop 1 Reflection	My group cannot decide on a theme or direction for making our story.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Shared Structuring and Role Allocation:</b> Establishing a clear direction by first deciding on the overall structure of the story and then allocating individual roles.</li> <li>- <b>Ensuring Consistency and Coherence:</b> Preventing inconsistencies by confirming the story flow together and making final adjustments.</li> <li>- <b>Collaborative Creativity:</b> Enriching ideas by using imagination, predicting the future, and exchanging opinions with one another.</li> </ul>
2	Workshop 1 Reflection	The more ideas we got, the harder it was to reflect on all of them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Valuing and Integrating Diverse Contributions:</b> By respecting all members' opinions and incorporating diverse ideas, the group created a direction where multiple perspectives could coexist.</li> <li>- <b>Collaborative Elaboration of Ideas:</b> Members enriched the work by building on each other's ideas, reducing redundancy while adding depth.</li> </ul>
3	Workshop 1 Reflection	The story is broad and shallow.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Refocusing the Narrative:</b> Refining the story's direction through discussion to bring greater depth.</li> <li>- <b>Positive and Enjoyable Collaboration:</b> Fostering creativity improvement through enjoyable and engaging conversations.</li> </ul>
4	Workshop 2 Reflection	Digging too deep into the setting in too much detail made us lose the big picture.	<u>Not found</u>
5	Workshop 3 Reflection	It was difficult to set the ending part.	- <b>Using a Spoiler as a Narrative Device:</b> Incorporating a spoiler to give the ending distinctiveness and surprise.
6	Workshop 3 Reflection	It was difficult to connect major events together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Deliberate Efforts toward Coherence:</b> Through sustained reflection, the group worked to shape the story into one that was both dynamic and coherent.</li> <li>- <b>Imaginative Problem-Solving:</b> Using imagination to adjust and connect different parts of the story smoothly through discussion.</li> </ul>
7	Workshop 3 Reflection	There was not enough time for group discussion	<u>Not found</u>
8	Workshop 4 Reflection	It was difficult for my group to review, summarize, and revise the story.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Integrating Individual Contributions:</b> Each member brought their own work in Japanese, which was then combined into a single story in English.</li> <li>- <b>Revising for Coherence:</b> Adjustments and revisions were made during integration to ensure the story flowed smoothly.</li> <li>- <b>Mutual Review for Accuracy:</b> Members carefully read each other's work to check for errors and inconsistencies and made corrections as needed.</li> </ul>

9	Workshop 4 Reflection	It was difficult to see the way of connecting each individual story.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Collaborative Expansion of Ideas:</b> Starting from one member's idea, the group collectively developed it to create a sense of integration.</li> <li>- <b>Focusing on the Climax as a Unifying Point:</b> Concentrating on the climax as the key element to connect the entire story.</li> <li>- <b>Real-Time Flexible Collaboration Through Digital Tools:</b> Using Google Docs allowed the group to immediately identify discrepancies and inconsistencies and collaboratively adjust such as dividing difficult tasks and complementing on another's roles.</li> <li>- <b>Shared Structuring and Role Divisions:</b> The group first established the overall structure of the story, then created individual parts, connected them, and added what was needed.</li> </ul>
10	Workshop 4 Reflection	We felt impatient with the fact that the end of the story had not yet been decided.	<u>Not found</u>
11	Workshop 4 Reflection	We were unable to make a decision based on members' opinions.	<u>Not found</u>

Overall, these findings show that the students used a variety of solutions to deal with problems that arose during group discussions. Most students mentioned comments regarding cooperation such as *"elicited opinions," "contributed to the idea to expand it all together,"* and *"cooperative play."* It can be assumed that peer interactions had an impact on the motivation to create their story. One of the passionate students wrote down the descriptive explanation about overall solution with the whole process as follows:

First, everyone came up with an idea for a rough Japanese word. Then, everyone's ideas were attached together and divided into ascending to descending parts. Then, the roles were divided, and each person wrote a sentence in Japanese except for the climax. The Japanese sentences were read by all members, and we translated Japanese into English in chronological order. The climax was divided into four parts so that each member could finish it at home because it was difficult to find time for everyone to think about the climax together.

As shown above, the group discussion brought about some positive influence on their processes of making stories. To make collaborative fiction successful, supportive relationships with group members can be considered to play a key role. Another important point was reflection time which could be enhanced when students (a) individually or collaboratively develop the motivation to reflect on their previous learning and identify objectives for new learning, (b) when they analyze and evaluate problems they or their peers are experiencing and structure a way forward, and (c) when they act to bring about improvement (Stoller & Myers, 2020).

### ***Solutions to Problems During Collaboration from Group Interviews***

Since not every solution in the questionnaire could cover the problems students faced, the following summary of the group interviews digs into the missing solutions summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Remaining Students' Problems during Group Discussion and Students' Solutions from Group Interview

No.	Source	Students' Problems	Students' Solutions from Group Interview
4	Workshop 2 Reflection (Problem) G3 Interview (Solution)	Digging too deep into the setting in too much detail made us lose the big picture.	- <b>Systematic Organization of Ideas:</b> Writing ideas on large paper and then ordering and abstracting them. - <b>Collaborative Verification of Structure:</b> Building consensus and shared direction through collective review.
8	Workshop 3 Reflection (Problem)	There was not enough time for group discussion	<u>Not mentioned</u>
11	Workshop 4 Reflection (Problem) G4 Interview (Solution)	We felt impatient with the fact that the end of the story had not yet been decided.	- <b>Structuring the Climax with a Timeline:</b> Dividing the climax into four parts and setting a rough sequence to envision the ending. - <b>Enhancing Connectivity through Shared Knowledge:</b> Ensuring stronger connections across different parts of the story through reading each other's section.
12	Workshop 4 Reflection (Problem) G2 & G4 Interview (Solution)	We were unable to make a decision based on members' opinions.	- <b>Stepwise Consensus Building:</b> First agreeing on the overall plan and then discussing disagreements. - <b>Structuring Ideas with Narrative Tools:</b> Using Freytag's Pyramid to visualize and organize ideas, which helped them recompose the story. - <b>Establishing a Core Idea First:</b> Deciding on the central idea of the story together first, the group created sentences that maintained coherence with that idea.

As for No. 8 problem: *"There was not enough time for group discussion,"* I commented on my journals: *"Some groups were prepared to share their Google Docs to write on them simultaneously"* (4<sup>th</sup> Journal). As a solution, groups maximized limited discussion time by collaborating asynchronously online, allowing them to edit simultaneously and by preparing materials in advance, so that face-to-face meetings could focus on decision making. According to the students' responses during group interviews, I found solution 11: *"Dividing climax into four parts"* interesting because their solution was different from what I assumed in the original lesson plan. My plan was that students would make the climax first, and then divide into groups of four to be responsible for different sections of the plot: exposition, rising action, falling action, and resolution. They came up with a new idea: after completing their assigned sections, they decided to rewrite the climax and apply the same four-section division to that climax part as well.

The following examples are extra problem solutions extracted from the interview of Group 4. To address the problem of uncomfortable literal translation, their solution was that *"I looked up all the nuances and replaced them."* A member further explained *"When I translated Japanese literally, it felt a bit off from what I originally wanted to convey. So, I kept rewriting it in a way that everyone could understand, though I felt that some of the nuance was lost in the process."* For another issue of an absentee, Group 4's solution was that *"Not only did I take responsibility for my part, but I also took on other parts of the storyline."* I assume one person in Group 4 heavily contributed to making the story. It would be worth considering whether my support for project management is necessary. Another problem was that *"It*

*was difficult to decide on characters' names because in the workshop we were instructed not to use our real names" due to one of the workshop caveats about using real names even in a work of fiction. They overcame this problem as follows: "We translated the name and tried a back-translation to propose the name,"* which shows their unique solution idea that I had never mentioned in the workshops.

Csikszentmihalyi (2020) and Sawyer (2007) identified particular conditions for creativity in the second-language classroom. These include clear goals for the group learning tasks and all learners' equal and free participation and contribution. When the group members are co-constructing ideas and knowledge, learners and teachers need to share responsibility to support their language use. Group cohesion can be achieved through shared knowledge and ongoing feedback to each other, and there is a necessity of collaborative focus on transforming present understandings into new creative possibilities. The fiction topics that each group chose were quite varied, ranging from social issues such as environmental concerns to personal matters. In addressing these themes, students not only engaged in group research but also reflected on their own experiences. For instance, one group created a story centered on the challenges of high school friends' relationships. Such narratives invite readers into the students' imaginative world, offering insights into their daily and emotional lives. By the end of the project, every group created works of fiction of more than 3,000 words. I believe the reason this PBL approach worked well was that each member had a part they were responsible for, and the group cooperatively integrated different parts of the story. Because everyone took responsibility and contributed to the collective products, they were able to draw on abilities developed through personal experiences and learning. These processes contribute to students' development as creative and autonomous learners.

## Conclusion

This inquiry has demonstrated that the collaborative fiction writing project enabled students to develop their creativity and active engagement. The linguistic sophistication required in the fictional creation was a process that was mainly determined by their needs for vocabulary words, accuracy in their grammar, and expressions matching the contexts of their stories. As a student-centered methodology, the creative activity focuses on students' collaborative efforts that engage them in increasing their agency over their own language acquisition (Kavlu, 2017). The findings highlight the potential of PBL to foster 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, including collaboration, problem-solving, and creativity. This study also contributes to the understanding of how episodes of collective thinking (Chappell, 2014) can emerge in second language classrooms. For teachers, the findings suggest the importance of providing timely feedback, designing more flexible schedules, and scaffolding students' learning through needs-based workshops. I learned a lot about how students solved problems during collaborative fiction writing. As Little et al. (2017) mention, teaching is learning and learning involves teaching in the autonomy classroom. Writing journals on my practitioner research had two really positive effects for me:

1. I realized I should have done this or that.
2. I will make use of this experience or insight next time.

What I learned from experimenting with PBL will be invaluable for designing and managing the next creative project that my students and I do.

This study was limited to a small group of senior high school students in one context. Further research needs to examine how this collaborative fiction writing project can be adapted across different cultural contexts and educational settings. Ultimately, integrating

collaborative fiction writing into language education is not merely an active engagement, but also a powerful tool of equipping learners with the creativity and problem-solution needed for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Encouraging collaboration between the practitioner and students to review classroom needs expands what classroom engagement can be because we are all positioned as learners (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015) when we learn from each other. This means that it is necessary to have the attitude that future lessons will be created together through active collaboration between teachers and students.

## Review Process

This article was open peer-reviewed by Ellen Head and Hugh Nicoll of the Learner Development Journal Review Network. (*Contributors have the option of open or blind peer review.*)

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蕨知英は、山梨大学教職大学院の准教授である。以前は、国立音楽大学附属の高等学校で英語教師として勤務していた。公立中学校での勤務も合わせて、中等教育段階で合計して約12年間、英語を教えた経験がある。英国リーズ大学でTESOL(英語教授法)修士号を取得した。研究分野はタスク型教授法、プロジェクト型学習、実践研究、言語教師教育である。

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