



## Ludic Language Pedagogy Special Issue Article: The Ludic You Love

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# Rory's Story Cubes: an analog storytelling game engine

Mark L. W. Johnson\* (<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1162-800X>)

University of Kochi

### Item Details

#### Keywords:

Analog games  
Collaborative storytelling  
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Learning opportunities  
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### Key points

- **Name of ludic object:** Rory's Story Cubes
- **Type/genre/theme:** Storytelling dice game
- **Intended audience age** 🧑: Any
- **Intended audience proficiency** 💬: A1+
- **Typical time to play** ⏳: 10-15 minutes
- **Number of players** 👤: 2+
- **Language dependence:** None (abstract iconic imagery)

### Microblog synopsis

I used Rory's Story Cubes to inspire and constrain language learners' collaborative storytelling. My learners had many learning opportunities through peer interaction. How would you use them in your context?  
#CollaborativeStorytelling #PeerInteraction

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\* Corresponding author. Email address: johnson\_mark@cc.u-kochi.ac.jp (Mr. Mark Johnson [he/him])



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# 1. Introduction

Stories are innately human. We connect with characters and feel the dramatic tension rise as we follow their journeys through the narrative. They are also an important focus for language learners as a core communicative genre. Personally, I have loved and played storytelling games, especially roleplaying games since I was a small child. Remembering how much I learned about creative problem solving and aspects of language such as vocabulary, vivid description, and narrative structure, I wanted to find a way to incorporate storytelling games into my English classes. When I first came upon this thought, I wanted to use Dungeons and Dragons or similar tabletop role-playing games, like those I had played for years. Those games have potential in some language learning contexts, a point which has been argued and illustrated to some extent in recent years (P. Johnson, 2021; Reed, 2022; Schneider, 2023; Smith, 2024; Torres-Rodriguez & Martínez-Granada, 2022; Zamboni, 2024). However, after learning about the pedagogical potential of collaborative peer interaction, I began to see value in a much simpler type of storytelling game which has received less attention in ludic language pedagogy research. These games focus entirely on the production and narration of stories as opposed to role-playing. Rory's Story Cubes (O'Connor, 2005) is one example.

## 2. Dice as an analog storytelling game engine

Rory's Story Cubes is a commercial, off-the-shelf product available in a number of thematic versions (see Figure 1). It is usually sold alongside board games in stores, but it is not in itself a game. The product contains nine (or fewer) dice-like cubes (see Figure 2). Each face is engraved with an image, such as a key, a book, or an airplane. Similar products exist from other makers as well, generally following the same basic design concept. Each edition of the game comes with slightly different suggestions for playing with the dice. Most of them involve the creative production of narratives. As such, the product can best be described as a set of ludic objects which can be used in or for narrative games. I think it is useful to think of it as an analog storytelling game engine.

**Figure 1**

*Three versions of Rory's Story Cubes*





## 2.2 Analog versus digital

Physical dice are a common and well-known ludic object. The randomness they provide produces variety in experience outside of the control of the players. However, randomness can be produced digitally as well. In fact, I recreated the basic experience of using story cubes in a digital format (M. L. W. Johnson, 2025b). Using generative AI to assist with programming, I created a browser-playable online random emoji generator which simulates the basic experience.

After playing and observing play in both modalities, some differences between the analog and digital experiences became apparent. With physical dice, the objects are manipulated naturally with the hands. Players will pick them up, move them around the table, line them up, sort them into groups, re-arrange them, and also notice the other faces of the dice which are not in play. This capacity for physical manipulation may be an advantage in terms of creative thinking.

### TEACHING TIP

Physical manipulation of objects like story dice may stimulate creative thinking.

The digital experience however offers accessibility. A student I taught in the past had extremely limited dexterity, unable to manipulate cards or dice. She was able to use a smartphone though. As such, the digital version may enable access for students like her through all of the concomitant advantages that come along with browser software and touch-based interfaces. Furthermore, being on-line, it is easily used along with computer mediated communication (CMC) to facilitate the game experience when players are physically distant but connected through the internet or other networking. Finally, assuming internet accessible devices are available, the digital version is free for an unlimited number of people to use, where the physical product is limited by the cost of purchasing each set of dice.

### TEACHING TIP

Consider the accessibility needs of your learners. Digital interfaces may provide accessibility features for learners with limited dexterity.

This section discussed the game engine in a general sense including possible alternatives to the physical format. In the following section I will narrow the discussion to the context of the language classroom.

## 3. Storytelling in the language classroom

Narrative activities are a staple of language curricula. They range from free-topic written composition to orally recounting personal experiences. Much research on various aspects of language pedagogy has involved such activities using some form of visual prompt, representing a narrative in full or only in part (Boers, 2018; de Jong & Vercellotti, 2016; Duff et al., 2008; Hanaoka, 2007; Qin, 2024; Qiu, 2022; Sanchez & Jarvis, 2008; Tavakoli & Foster, 2011; Trebits, 2016). Learners attempt to compose or tell a story in full based on the prompt. Games employing Rory's Story Cubes very much fall in this vein of activity.


Narrative tasks require speakers to logically order a series of events and represent that series linguistically. They require appropriate vocabulary knowledge and at least minimal knowledge of narrative grammar and discourse features. These linguistic features can be scaled according to the learner's level. Beginners might line up simple past tense utterances like, "A man went shopping. He bought a bag. He found a cat in the bag. The cat jumped out."

Even in such an example, the narrative structure requires an understanding of the difference between the use of the indefinite and definite articles throughout the series of events as information is revealed. Of course, on the upper end of the level spectrum, learners could be asked to produce a long form narrative, eliciting features such as foreshadowing, point of view, and dramatic pacing.

### 3.1 Collaborative storytelling as collaborative learning

Although a great number of pedagogical possibilities for using Rory's Story Cubes exist, the way in which I have explored their use in the greatest detail is through the lens of collaborative learning, especially collaborative dialogue (Swain, 1997). According to Swain, collaborative dialogue is language or knowledge of language coconstructed between two or more speakers (Swain, 1997, p. 115). During such dialogue, the speakers may test their ideas of how the target language works and notice gaps in their own or their interlocutors' speaking ability, such as errors in grammar or lexis, thus offering opportunities for improving language awareness (Schmidt, 1990; Swain, 1985, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). The advantages of collaborative dialogue further enhance the language development opportunities provided by the story dice. In my MA dissertation (M. L. W. Johnson, 2025a) I investigated these opportunities in detail, and I will present the game rules I used in that project along with some transcripts of student interaction during the game.

One rule was conceived to introduce interdependence, which has been identified as a factor in successful collaborative learning situations (Sato, 2013; Sato & Viveros, 2016). This was Rule for teamwork number 2 from Figure 3 below, which limits one person to using no more than three dice in a given storytelling turn. This prevents one person from dominating the task and encourages contributions from other members. On the other hand, because not all members may exhibit the same willingness to speak, there were also conditions to support participation in a more passive manner. Rules for teamwork 1, 3, and 4 (Figure 3) recommend voluntary contributions as opposed to forcing players to speak up at any given time.

 **TEACHING TIP**  
Include rules for interdependence to help promote collaborative learning.

**Figure 3**

*How to play Rory's Story Cubes, from (M. L. W. Johnson, 2025a)*

Basic rules for making a story

1. Roll 9 dice
2. You must use all of the dice to make a story from beginning to end.
3. You can use the dice in any order.
4. Place the dice in the order that you use them to keep a record of the story.
5. You can use the picture on the dice as it is, or use anything that it relates to.

Rules for teamwork

1. Whoever has an idea goes first.
2. One person can use one to three dice in a single storytelling turn.
3. Whoever has an idea to continue the story with different dice continues from there.
4. Let people who want to participate join in.
5. The story elements from the dice can be longer than a single sentence or event.
6. Don't change the story much once it's been told<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> One of the reviewers of the article suggested, and I agree after using these rules, it would be better to make this rule more specific. One possible revision could be: "Once the way a cube has been used in the story is decided, it cannot be changed."

7. If you want to check what happened in the story so far, it's okay to ask each other.
8. If you get stuck trying to continue the story, it's good to ask your teammates for their opinions and advice.

So, what does this look like in practice? The quality of interaction seems to vary a lot depending on the participants and grouping. The following interaction (Figure 4) occurs early on in a game, when the players were taking stock of what the dice showed, how they might be interpreted, and some preliminary ideas for how those could be strung together into a story. The participant, Ria, was one of the most proactive players from my class. Rei, on the other hand, fell on the side of a minimal contributor. It should be noted that the rule for interdependence discussed above did help Rei to participate and one of her contributions involving resurrecting a character ultimately shaped the resulting story.

#### Figure 4

Early stages of assessing the dice and suggesting narrative, data from (M. L. W. Johnson, 2025a)

Turn	Participant	Speech	Translation
41	Runa	え これ何？	Eh, what is this?
42	Ria	薬一緒やん	Medicine is the same, isn't it.
43	Runa	薬一緒やん	Medicine is the same, isn't it.
44	Ria	同じ	Same
45	Runa	おまめ	Beans
46	Ria	大豆？	Soy beans?
47	Ria	そら豆	Lima beans?
48	Runa	これは	This is...
49	Ria	えまって、海賊できるくね。	Eh, just a sec, we could do pirates, yeah?
50	Runa	ほんまや	Oh true
51	Ria	夜明けに海賊が	At dawn, pirates...
52	Runa	夜明けが	At dawn!?!
53	Ria	これ何？ これ？	This? What is this?
54	Runa	むち	A whip
55	Rei	むい	Mui (partial pronunciation of whip in Japanese)
56	Ria	むちで大豆を取って。	They take soy beans with the whip.
57	Runa	ちょっと、むちで叩かれたのをふせいで	kinda, they ward off getting hit by the whip and...
58	Ria	んで、そいつが怒って、音楽聞きながら薬飲んでおわり	and then that guy gets angry, they take medicine while they listen to music, the end.
59	Instructor	Remember, English English	
60	Ria	これは、え、え、これって英語で何て言うが？	This, eh, eh, how do you say this in English?

The participants had a variety of ideas for how to interpret the dice, as different types of beans or to use a symbol to represent pirates for example. They often ask quick questions, but do not wait for answers, quickly accept each other's ideas, and suggest ways to connect them. There is not a lot of criticism, but alternatives are proposed. Most of the deeper discussion occurred around how to express their ideas in English, which will be discussed next.

## 3.2 Learning opportunities in peer interaction

In this section, I will introduce and discuss a few of the learning opportunities that were apparent in the data from my dissertation. There were instances of speakers addressing a variety of linguistic features including pronunciation, discourse, and morphology. The two most common areas that emerged in the data were grammar and vocabulary.

Many of the episodes related to vocabulary occurred during the process of deciding how to use the dice and interpreting their meaning for the story. Some of these were ultimately abandoned as narrative elements, but the learning opportunities may still have been of value. The following episode in Figure 5 is such an example. The speakers try to make sense of the meaning of the words comprising “shooting star”, but are confounded by the incongruence between “shooting” and the Japanese word *ながれる* which literally translates to “streaming” or “flowing”. While the episode ends without a resolution as to the meaning, the fact that the game created this opportunity is still of interest pedagogically. If this had been observed by the instructor, a simple explanation could have been offered leading to deeper understanding of cross-linguistic transfer issues.

**Figure 5**

*Shooting star episode, data from (M. L. W. Johnson, 2025a)*

Turn	Participant	Speech	Translation
132	Mari	shooting... <i>ながれるか</i> shooting?	shooting... streaming is "shooting"?
133	Noa	<i>うん</i>	No
134	Mari	<i>流れ星で</i>	In shooting star,
135	Noa	<i>うん</i>	Right
136	Mari	shooting starやろう	It's shooting star, right?
137	Noa	<i>うん</i>	Yes.
138	Mari	starは星やろう?	Star is "star" right?
139	Noa	<i>うん</i>	Yes.
140	Mari	shooting <i>ながれる</i> ?	Shooting is streaming?
141	Noa	<i>mmm</i>	<i>mmm</i>
145	Mari	<i>むずい</i>	Difficult
146	Mari	<i>変えろう</i>	Let's change it.

*Some turns removed for readability*

Following the conceptual co-construction of the story, I asked all of the groups to also retell their story in full to me. This served as a slightly different context for learning opportunities. Since the story elements had all been previously decided, and most of them approximated in English, the retelling phase of the activity provided space for the realization of grammar and discourse that sometimes did not appear in the initial co-construction of the story, which largely occurred in the students' L1. Accordingly, some of the language learning opportunities were quite elliptical and brief, appearing as short recasts or rephrasing of other speakers' utterances. Some of these are seen in Figure 6 below.

### **TEACHING TIP**

Create an opportunity for re-telling the story. Retelling not only introduces repetition and practice, but may provide for

the realization of grammar and discourse structures that do not appear during the initial co-construction of stories.

In the research project this data comes from, there was very limited feedback from the instructor during gameplay. Turn 142 above is representative of the typical extent of teacher mediation. This was due to part of the research design which aimed to explore peer interaction. In a normal teaching context, I would have intervened much more frequently, offering help when the students failed to resolve their discussions of language or came to incorrect conclusions. Peer corrective feedback as seen in Figure 6 can certainly be valuable for learning (Iwashita & Dao, 2021), but I think it is best when complemented by teacher feedback.

**Figure 6**

*Homecoming episode, data from (M. L. W. Johnson, 2025a)*

Turn	Participant	Speech	Translation
141	Ria	ビームして 帰った	They beamed home
142	Instructor	Can you say it in English?	
143	Runa	えっと he come back	Uh, he come back
144	Ria	come back elephant	
145	Rei	elephant	
146	Runa	elephant on	
147	Ria	ride ride elephant	
148	Runa	oh	
149	Ria	でgo home	and then go home
150	Runa	to come back	

To summarize, when language learners play with Story Cubes following the ruleset that I introduced in Figure 3, they go through a few phases. First, they explore the possibilities offered by the dice and their collaborative ability to tie those together into a story in their L2. My learners did this primarily in their L1, Japanese. As such, the learning opportunities therein differed considerably from those that followed in the next phase. When they ultimately tried to weave a cohesive English narrative, their feedback was much briefer and less exploratory. Finally, I think the data helps make the teacher's value clear. Teachers not only set-up the rules and situation to optimize productive learning, but also should be observing and giving feedback throughout and following the activity for best results.

## 4. Conclusion: The ludic I love

I love using story dice in collaborative storytelling activities for learning. First and foremost, the activity is simple and easy to execute. Furthermore, the combination of creativity, challenge, teamwork, and peer learning meet many of the conditions of an excellent learning activity in my eyes. I love observing students puzzle over how to link the images on the dice into a coherent narrative. I am consistently impressed and amused by the often ridiculous yet satisfying narratives that students construct during the game. The interaction during the game creates an excellent and engaging base for learning, which can then be further exploited by follow-up activities such as retelling, writing, summarizing, or comparing the stories produced.

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