



Emoji Story Prompts

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Short summary:

I struggle with designing and implementing interesting and effective classroom activities that are simple enough for my learners to approach and succeed in using their target language, English. As such, I have been exploring the simplest ways to evoke stories in the language classroom. Part of that exploration is described in my recent LLP playground (Johnson, 2025). In the review process I was inspired to create this game software in collaboration with ChatGPT. It is an extremely simple digital tool to prompt people to create stories.

Game information

Title: Emoji Story Prompt Generator

Publisher: I made this with help from ChatGPT. Specifically I prompted it to generate code, then I tested the code and playtested the game, and repeated this process iteratively providing further prompts for ChatGPT to revise the code.

Availability: It is available for free on [itch.io](#) and [github](#). It is also fully open-source and licensed as GPL-3.0

Technology requirements: Modern browser or python.

Cost: Free

Play time: 5 minutes or more

Player count: Solo or more

Other important details for classroom implementation:

This is a tool to aid in facilitating story creation. There are many possible ways in which it could be implemented. It could easily be used in creative writing classes, but I will primarily discuss using it for collaborative oral storytelling. Oral storytelling is a core communicative genre - part of conversation, entertainment, and education. Spoken stories help build connections between people by creating empathy because of how readily we make meaning from narrative. They are subjective and personal, where written forms become more concrete and detached. From a pedagogical point of view of collaborative learning in TESOL, the written mode is often the preferred mode for focus on form work, as evidenced by the tremendous amount of literature on collaborative writing (see for example Storch, 2019). However, I speculate that the oral



mode might allow learners to more readily modify their output as a result of the interaction with their peers due to the more fluctuating and tenuous nature of speech.

TEACHINGTIP

It is easy to play remotely through video or even text chat and the resulting emoji can easily be reproduced as they are simply text.

The game is a digital reimplementation of the mechanics from the commercial off the shelf game, Rory's Story Cubes (O'Connor, 2005). That game can also be used in very similar ways and also includes the physical component of the dice, which provide the inspiration and constraints for storytelling. As a set of nine dice, each with six faces, one set of Rory's Story Cubes has 54 abstract images which provide inspiration and constraint. The digital Emoji Story Prompt Generator uses most of the full set of over 3600 emoji (at the time of this writing), with a few subsets removed or made optional. This measure prevents less familiar images like Japanese Kanji from appearing unless explicitly allowed by the user. It is easy to play remotely through video or even text chat and the resulting emoji can easily be reproduced as they are simply text.

Why is the game important for play (for ludic literacy)?

1	<p>It encourages storytelling. Stories are innately human, but difficult for many people to create. The challenges are numerous, including limited productive knowledge of narrative structure and a high standard many people set for stories, probably influenced by the ubiquitous presence of masterful narratives in literature, the media, film, and television. For learners trying to produce a narrative in their target language, genre specific conventions in terms of vocabulary and grammar also pose a hurdle. These challenges can be addressed with pedagogical interventions modeling and scaffolding narrative elements, structure, as well as the linguistic conventions involved in the genre.</p>
2	<p>It simultaneously provides multimodal creative inspiration and constraints. The sometimes abstract images inspire numerous possible interpretations for narrative elements from the prompted set of emoji (👩‍❤️‍💋‍👨, 📸, 🎯, 🕒, 🍔, 💥, 🙌), as seen in the partial transcript below. Parentheticals are researcher notes.</p> <p>Father: Alright, what do we have Son: Ninja! F: Yeah there's a ninja, oh cool a coffin, fish, oh that could be like bacon, and... So... How about... What is this? (indicating 🕒) S: Is it a ... bakudan? F: A bomb? could be a bomb, sure S: Or a computer? F: Computer. S: Or tablet? F: Yeah could be any of those, okay. So, I think I've got an idea... Once upon a time there was a Ninja.</p>



The requirement for incorporating all of the nine images however constrains the story, as they must somehow be made to connect through the narrative. Later in the same game the following exchange shows how the use of that as a bomb is made to connect with fish, firefighter, and then coffin, and bacon.

S: Oh that's good. And... one person, took the fish,

F: Mhmm

S: So that the ninja put a bomb on the person that took on his house

F: The ninja took the, huh? Are you talking about the firefighter?

S: Yes.

F: So the fire fighter took the ninja's fish.

S: Mmm.

F: And then the ninja put the bomb

S: Yes.

F: On the fish? That's what you mean?

S: No. On the firefighter's home.

F: On the firefighter's house, oh okay. But... he's gonna blow up the fish then.

S: So he made a coffin of the fish.

F: Ok.

S: And he liked the fish so much he... osonae tte nante iu? (How do you say osonae?)

F: Oh he offered like, he offered something to him

S: The fish always eated bacon

F: The fish always ate bacon.

S: Yes.

F: So he offered bacon to it on its coffin.

The resulting narratives are more often than not absurd and unrealistic in the real world, but humorous due to the constraint of being required to find connections between the images.

Why is the game important as a teaching tool (for pedagogic literacy)?

1	It significantly lowers the hurdle to facilitating story-based activities in the classroom. There is no need to purchase physical games, one prompt can be displayed for use by multiple groups even without individual devices, and the reusability is considerably greater than that of the previously cited games. The game as outlined below is quite simple and encourages collaborative dialogue. In doing so, it decreases the complexity of implementing storytelling play and permits teachers more time to incorporate pedagogical interventions that might support learners' constructive peer interaction and construction of narratives, as mentioned above.
2	The resultant prompts are text which are easily reproducible through copy and paste, facilitating digital manipulation and reproduction. This can be helpful as a support or visual aid if the stories will be used in extension activities like retelling the stories to the same or new audiences. It also provides a useful reference for feedback if audio recordings are made for assessment or evaluation.
3	It is flexible, fast, and free software. That means it's easy to adopt and adapt.

How did you show and play the game on the day at the event?

First I explained the rules and guidelines for playing with the Emoji Prompt Generator, as given below.

The basic rules for creating a story are:

1. Use all 9 emoji to tell a story.



2. They can be used in any way to inspire or cue an element of the story.
3. Use them in any order.
4. Copy and paste them into the order you used them, to document the story.

The basic rules for creating a story together are:

5. The same as above except ...
6. Whoever has an idea starts.
7. Whoever has another idea continues.
8. Use 1 to 3 emoji in a single storytelling turn.
9. Story elements inspired by an emoji can be longer than a single sentence or event.
10. Let everyone participate.
11. Decide the story together.
12. Ask for clarification!
13. Ask for advice and opinions!

First I showed an example of the game being played. The demonstration was a game between myself and my Japanese-dominant bilingual son based on the following nine emoji 🧑‍🤝‍🧑 ❤️🐝📸👩‍🚒💻🥓👋. The dialog during play included several episodes which suggest how the quality of interactions emerging in the game might provide learning opportunities, shown in the extracts below. Extract 1 shows cumulative talk (Mercer, 1996) where players build on each other's contributions and me recasting a Japanese word that my son hesitated to produce in English.

(1) Example of a recast within a cumulative talk episode.

F: What is this?

S: Is it a ...bakudan?

F: A bomb? Could be a bomb, sure.

In Extract 2, I was uncertain of my son's intended meaning, and so I asked for clarification.

(2) Example of asking for clarification

F: A ninja took the, huh? Are you talking about the firefighter?

S: Yes.

F: So the firefighter took the ninja's fish?

In Extract 3, my son explicitly asks for a translation of the Japanese word osonae. I provide a parenthetical English translation for readers.

(3) Example of a request for help, specifically a translation.

S: osonae to nanteiu? (How do you say osonae?)

F: Oh he offered like, he offered something

Lastly, in Extract 4, my son makes an error with the past tense form of "eat", which I recast in full.

(4) Example of a recast incorporating a full reformulation.

S: The fish always eated bacon

F: The fish always ate bacon

S: Yes.

These interactive patterns show examples of corrective feedback and other learning opportunities within the coconstruction of the narrative. These could be reinforced through a later stage of retelling, providing the opportunity for modified output, that is, the incorporation of recast and translated language items.



Then I facilitated two sessions through the Discord server, one of which is recorded in the livestream recording of the symposium (York, 2025; 01:40:00-01:46:00).

References

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