

THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING ON STUDENT SPEAKING PROFICIENCY AT SM STELLA MARIS, TANJUNG ARU

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of digital storytelling (DST) on secondary school students' speaking proficiency in an ESL classroom. The research was driven by the need for engaging, technology-enhanced approaches that support Malaysian learners who frequently struggle with low confidence, limited vocabulary, and speaking anxiety. Using a qualitative case study design, the study involved 25 Form 4 students and collected data through semi-structured interviews and student reflective journals. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. The findings reveal that digital storytelling contributed positively to students' speaking development. Students reported improvements in confidence, fluency, vocabulary use, and pronunciation awareness. They also felt more motivated and less anxious when speaking, particularly when creating and presenting personally meaningful stories. The project fostered autonomous learning, as students took ownership of their scripts, recordings, and multimedia outputs. Despite these benefits, the study also identified challenges such as scriptwriting difficulty, technical issues, and time constraints. Overall, the study concludes that digital storytelling is an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing speaking proficiency in ESL learners. Its integration in classrooms promotes language development, learner engagement, motivation, and reflective practice. The findings offer valuable implications for English language teaching in Malaysia and suggest that DST can serve as a practical and meaningful addition to current instructional practices in secondary schools.

Keyword(s): *digital storytelling, speaking proficiency, English language learning*

INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, the landscape of language education has undergone significant changes, particularly in the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL). Language teaching has evolved from traditional grammar-based instruction to communicative and learner-centred approaches, reflecting the growing need to prepare students for real-world communication. One of the most influential changes in this field has been the integration of technology into language teaching and learning. In an increasingly digital world, technology not only enhances access to resources but also reshapes how students engage with language. Digital tools, especially multimedia platforms, have enabled learners to become active creators of content rather than

passive recipients. This shift aligns with broader educational goals to foster learner autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking skills essential for success in the 21st century (Robin, 2008; Kim, 2014).

Among the various innovations in digital pedagogy, digital storytelling (DST) has gained attention as a powerful tool for language learning. Digital storytelling refers to the use of digital tools to tell personal or academic stories by combining narrative with multimedia elements such as voice recordings, images, videos, and music. This method supports language development by providing learners with opportunities to plan, script, revise, and present stories in their own voices. The process naturally involves multiple stages of language use, including brainstorming, writing, speaking, and editing, making it particularly suitable for developing speaking skills in ESL learners (Ohler, 2013; Liu et al., 2018).

Speaking proficiency remains a core concern in Malaysian secondary schools, where students often struggle expressing themselves confidently in English (Juhana, 2012). Despite the national emphasis on communicative language teaching and the implementation of CEFR-aligned syllabi, many students still struggle with oral fluency, pronunciation, and idea development. As a result, students who possess sufficient grammatical knowledge and vocabulary still find it challenging to articulate their thoughts effectively. Even students who demonstrate adequate vocabulary and grammar knowledge may struggle to express their ideas clearly in spoken English due to anxiety, limited exposure on the language, and lack of communication practice (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017).

Digital storytelling offers an opportunity to create a safe, meaningful, and supporting environment in which students can experiment with spoken language (Robin, 2008). The ability to pre-record, edit, and revise their speech allows learners to minimise anxiety and take greater ownership of their learning. Unlike traditional oral presentations, which rely heavily on memorization and live delivery, digital storytelling enables multiple attempts, reducing performance pressure. This promotes gradual improvement in fluency and accuracy over time. Furthermore, the multimodal nature of DST encourages learners to consider how language, visuals, and sound interact to create meaning which is a critical awareness in today's media-rich communication environment (Walsh, 2011).

From a theoretical perspective, this study draws on constructivist and sociocultural learning theories. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs most effectively when it is socially constructed and mediated through tools and interaction. DST provides such mediation by enabling collaboration, sharing, and reflection. It also supports learner autonomy, as students make decisions regarding topic selection, scriptwriting, voice recording, and editing.

Previous studies have shown that digital storytelling can enhance vocabulary, motivation, and language awareness among ESL learners (Kim, 2014; Liu et al., 2018). However, there is comparatively less research that investigates how DST influences speaking proficiency, particularly in terms of confidence, fluency, and language awareness. In Malaysia, few qualitative studies have examined how students perceive their own progress when using digital storytelling as part of an ESL classrooms. Furthermore, while quantitative studies may demonstrate measurable improvement, they often overlook the personal and reflective growth learners experience during creative processes (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Robin, 2016).

This study addresses that gap by exploring how digital storytelling influences speaking performance from students' perspectives, using reflective journals and interviews as primary data sources. The research was conducted during a teaching practicum at a secondary school in Sabah. The participants were Form 4 students with low to intermediate proficiency in spoken English. Over several weeks, they were guided through the process of creating digital stories, from

planning and scriptwriting to voice recording and editing their own videos. Students also maintained reflective journals to document their thoughts and experiences throughout the project. Upon completion, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to gain deeper insights into their experiences. The goal was to understand how students perceived the impact of digital storytelling on their speaking skills and which aspects of the process contributed most to their development.

In the Malaysian education system, speaking proficiency is assessed through both formative and summative assessments. The CEFR-aligned Secondary School Standard Curriculum (KSSM) curriculum implemented under the emphasizes communicative competence, yet classroom realities often reveal a gap between curriculum aims and student performance. Many teachers face challenges balancing syllabus demands with limited time for speaking-focused activities. This study responds to that gap by introducing a feasible and engaging strategy that can be integrated into everyday classroom practice without sacrificing core curriculum goals.

This study aims to investigate how digital storytelling, as a pedagogical strategy, influences students' speaking proficiency in the ESL classroom. Specifically, it seeks to understand how learners experience and reflect on their speaking development through the lens of their own voices. In line with this aim, the study has two main objectives: (1) to evaluate the impact of digital storytelling on students' speaking proficiency, and (2) to determine the most effective ways to incorporate digital storytelling into English speaking lessons. To achieve these objectives, the following research questions have been formulated:

- i. How does digital storytelling affect ESL students' speaking proficiency in terms of confidence, fluency, and language awareness?
- ii. What are the students' perceptions of using digital storytelling as part of their English lessons?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist Learning Theory explains that learners develop their knowledge through meaningful experiences rather than just passively receiving information. In this view, learning becomes more effective when students are involved in tasks that requires them to explore, reflect, and make decisions. Hence, digital storytelling supports this idea because students are able to participate in multiple stages of creating a story—planning, writing, recording, and revising. These stages allow better understanding of language as it involves hands-on tasks.

Kim et al. (2023) found that students engage actively in the lesson through digital storytelling as they could create, share, and reflect on their stories. In a study by Lambert (2020), digital story telling provides a contextual platform where students could relate their lessons to real-life situations thus making the learning process more meaningful. Digital storytelling often involves collaborative task. Since digital storytelling often involves group work, it also reflects the social element of constructivism, where students learn by collaborating, exchange ideas, and supporting each other's progress.

Multimodal Learning Theory

Multimodal Learning Theory focuses on how students learn better when information is presented through different modes such as visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic channels. Digital storytelling naturally supports multimodal learning because students combine images, audio, music, narration, and sometimes movement. These features help cater to diverse learning styles and increase comprehension in the lesson.

According to Shin et al. (2020), students understand the content more effectively when learning materials include multiple modes of representation. Walsh (2011) also emphasised that utilising interactive media and digital appliances in storytelling enables students to engage with the lesson actively and help them interpret meaning beyond written text alone. Designing digital stories allow students to make creative choices on visuals, sound effects, and pacing. This aids the understanding on how meaning is constructed in digital environments, which is an important literacy skill in the 21st century.

Digital Storytelling and Speaking Proficiency

Previous research consistently shows that digital storytelling is beneficial for improving English speaking skills. Kim (2014) reported that students involved in digital storytelling activities showed significant improvement in oral proficiency compared to those who learned in a traditional way. The opportunity to record and re-record their voices helps students gain confidence and become aware of their pronunciation, fluency, and clarity in speaking English.

Robin (2016) explained that digital storytelling encourages oral practice in a low-pressure environment, allowing students to speak more naturally. As a result, the students also increased their confidence and fluency conversing in English.

Furthermore, Ohler (2013) stated that the oral practice is more valid and engaging to the students as they could actually personalise the learning experience. Students enhance their motivation and actively participate in the speaking activities because they could connect the language learning with their personal experiences through the narration of their own stories. Liu et al. (2018) found that DST activities encouraged students to monitor their speaking and revise their language use, thus improving their fluency and accuracy.

Effective Digital Storytelling Techniques

Studies have identified several key elements that make digital storytelling effective in the classroom. First, the combination of multimedia elements helps maintain students' attention and increase motivation. In research by Liu et al., (2018), applying media such as images, audios, and videos into storytelling activities brings a positive impact on students' engagement and language skills.

Second, collaborative storytelling has been shown to foster peer learning. Moradi and Chen (2019), stated in research that students who work together to plan and produce a story have more opportunities to negotiate meaning, practise oral language, and exchange feedback. Not only does this improve language skills but it also builds confidence and teamwork.

Third, utilising software and platforms to aid the creation and sharing of the digital storytelling has also been said to be an effective method. Storybird, Animoto, and VoiceThread are some of the examples of the platforms which enables students to combine the medias conveniently and make the storytelling process more fun and easily accessible (Hwang et al.,

2014). When students choose the media, sequence their story, and adjust their voice recordings, they become more autonomous and take ownership of their learning process.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore the impact of digital storytelling on students' speaking proficiency. The primary aim was to investigate how students experience and perceive the use of digital storytelling in developing their oral communication, particularly in terms of confidence, fluency, and language awareness. The qualitative design allowed for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon through the voices of the learners themselves, enabling the researcher to capture the complexity of their personal growth during the storytelling process.

Participants

The participants were 25 Form 4 students from a secondary school in Sabah, Malaysia. The class was selected based on convenience sampling, as the researcher was undertaking her practicum at the school. The students came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and were generally considered to have low to intermediate proficiency in spoken English. Most of them had limited opportunities to speak English outside of class and displayed reluctance in participating in oral activities before the intervention.

Participation in the project was voluntary, and ethical clearance was obtained from the school and the Faculty of Education and Sports Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Parental consent was also obtained for students under the age of 18.

Research Instruments

Two main instruments were used in this study:

1. Reflective Journals

Students were required to maintain reflective journals throughout the digital storytelling project, documenting their weekly experiences, challenges, and self-assessments. These journals provided insight into the learners' evolving perceptions and linguistic awareness. The entries were unstructured to encourage honesty and spontaneity, but students were occasionally guided by prompts such as "How did you feel recording your voice this week?"

2. Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the project with selected participants to further explore the impact of the experience. The interview questions were open-ended and designed to elicit elaborated responses about their speaking development, confidence level, and reflections on the storytelling experience. Interviews were conducted in a relaxed manner so that students could express themselves comfortably.

Research Procedures

The digital storytelling project was carried out over four weeks. The process was divided into several phases:

Week 1: Introduction to Digital Storytelling

- Students were introduced to the concept of digital storytelling.
- Sample videos were shown to help them understand the structure and purpose of digital storytelling.
- Students brainstormed ideas for their stories.

Week 2: Scriptwriting and Peer Review

- Students drafted their scripts based on their chosen topics.
- Peer review sessions were conducted where students gave feedback to classmates.
- The researcher guided students in revising their scripts, focusing clarity, vocabulary, and coherence.

Week 3: Recording and Editing

- Students record their voice narration.
- They selected visuals, music, and other multimedia elements.
- Basic video editing tools or mobile apps were used to produce the digital stories.
- The researcher assisted students facing technical difficulties.

Week 4: Presentation and Reflection

- Students presented their completed digital stories in class.
- They submitted their final reflective journals for analysis.
- Selected students were interviewed.

Data Collection

Data were collected from two sources: reflective journals and interview responses. Journals were submitted weekly, allowing the researcher to track changes in students' confidence and speaking experiences over time. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed. Collecting data from different sources helped strengthen the reliability of the findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using reflective thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase model: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

The researcher:

1. Read the journals and transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the content.
2. Generated initial codes by identifying meaningful statements.
3. Grouped similar codes into potential themes.
4. Reviewed and refined the themes to ensure accuracy.
5. Named and described each theme clearly.

6. Used the themes to write the findings and discussion.

To enhance credibility, peer debriefing was used. Another TESL student reviewed the coding and interpretation to reduce bias.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Reflective journals were not graded to ensure honest feedback. Students were also allowed to withdraw at any point without penalty. All data received were used solely for research purposes.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the data obtained from reflective journals and interview responses of Form 4 students from SM Stella Maris, Tanjung Aru. The study aimed to evaluate the impact of digital storytelling on students' speaking proficiency and determine the most effective ways to implement this teaching strategy. Thematic analysis was used to identify emerging patterns from the qualitative data. Two key themes emerged: (1) Enhanced Speaking Proficiency, and (2) Increased Engagement and Motivation.

Enhanced Speaking Proficiency

The first key finding of the study indicates a significant improvement in students' speaking performance after participating in the digital storytelling project. Students expressed that their fluency, confidence, and vocabulary range had improved over the course of the task. This aligns with the findings of Amaliah et al. (2022), who stated that digital storytelling creates an environment where students feel more confident in using English orally. Similarly, Rahayu et al. (2023) found that students improved their vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence structure through repeated speaking practices in storytelling tasks.

A student stated, *"I feel more fluent because I had to keep practicing before recording the story. I also learned new words when writing my script."* This reflects the learning process described by Liu et al. (2018), who emphasized the role of storytelling in promoting self-monitoring and language revision, which are essential for speaking development. Another student shared that the ability to re-record their story gave them more confidence, allowing them to focus on clear pronunciation and natural intonation.

These findings support the theory of Vygotsky (1978), who argued that language development is facilitated through socially mediated learning. In digital storytelling, students not only practiced speaking individually but also received guidance and peer support, promoting internalization of language forms. Additionally, the findings resonate with Kim (2014), who suggested that digital storytelling can foster learner autonomy and oral proficiency through planning, rehearsing, and producing spoken texts.

Increased Engagement and Motivation

The second theme highlighted that students were highly engaged and motivated throughout the digital storytelling process. Many students mentioned that creating their own stories made them feel excited about using English, as it gave them a sense of ownership over their learning.

According to Sahril et al. (2023), when students are given the opportunity to be creative and tell their own stories, they become more personally invested in the learning process.

One student shared, *"I enjoyed doing this because it was like making a mini movie. It was fun and made me want to do better."* This reflects the motivational power of storytelling emphasized by Robin (2016), who noted that digital storytelling combines cognitive, emotional, and social engagement—key factors in successful language learning. The combination of visuals, audio, and self-expression in a meaningful context resulted in increased learner engagement, which aligns with the multimodal learning theory (Shin et al., 2020).

Furthermore, students reported enjoying the collaborative aspects of the project. They appreciated sharing ideas with friends and learning from each other. This finding is consistent with Kim et al. (2023), who emphasized that collaborative storytelling fosters peer interaction, which supports language practice and critical thinking.

Challenges and Student Suggestions

Although the overall experience was positive, students also reported several challenges:

- ***Difficulty in Writing Scripts***
A few students found it difficult to write coherent scripts in English, especially when translating personal stories or ideas from their mother tongue.
- ***Technical Issues***
Others mentioned technical difficulties, such as unfamiliarity with editing tools or inconsistent internet access at home.
- ***Time Constraints***
Students needed extra time as they had to do multiple recording attempt which delayed the next step of their project.

Students suggested to allow more time for editing in class, provide workshops for script writing, and permitting group-based DST projects. These suggestions highlight the need for teachers scaffolding, especially when introducing new digital tools.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research that supports the use of digital storytelling as a tool for improving speaking skills. Moradi and Chen (2019) found that students participating in digital storytelling projects were more confident and articulate speakers. The current findings also complement those by Lambert (2020), who noted that digital storytelling provides a student-centered approach that encourages creativity and enhances communication skills.

However, this study also found that not all students equally enjoyed the digital storytelling process. A few students mentioned challenges related to technical issues, time constraints, or shyness during recording. This highlights the importance of providing adequate scaffolding and support to ensure all students benefit from the experience.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small and involved only one Form 4 class from one of an all-girls secondary school. Hence, the findings may not represent the experiences of students in other schools or different proficiency levels. This is due to the fact that the participants shared similar backgrounds and were taught by the same practicum teacher. A larger and more diverse sample might produce different insights.

Second, the study relied mainly on self-reported data from reflective journals and interviews. Although these methods provided rich insights, the responses may contain personal bias or may not fully reflect students' actual speaking performance. Some students may have written what they believed the teacher wanted to hear.

Third, the project was conducted over a short period of four weeks. This limited timeframe made it difficult to evaluate long-term impacts in speaking proficiency or the sustainability of the skills students developed.

Lastly, students' access to digital tools varied. Some students had difficulty with editing applications or lacked devices at home to proceed with the production of the story. These issues may have affected their overall experience with digital storytelling.

Implications of the Study

Despite its limitations, this study offers valuable implications for language educators. Digital storytelling can be an effective strategy for promoting speaking proficiency in ESL classrooms. Teachers should consider incorporating structured yet flexible storytelling projects to provide students with authentic speaking opportunities. It is recommended that future research explore the impact of digital storytelling on different language components (e.g., grammar, pronunciation, coherence) and include a wider demographic of students.

Moreover, studies combining qualitative and quantitative methods could offer deeper insights into the measurable progress students make in their speaking abilities. A longitudinal design could also help assess how the benefits of digital storytelling sustain over time.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could explore the long-term impact of digital storytelling on language proficiency, especially in different school contexts or among students of varying proficiency levels. Comparative studies involving traditional oral presentations versus DST could also offer valuable insights into which method is more effective in promoting language use and confidence.

Furthermore, future studies might consider incorporating quantitative measures, such as pre- and post-speaking tests or rubrics, to assess actual language improvement more objectively. Researchers could also investigate the role of teacher guidance, peer collaboration, or multilingual approaches in shaping students' experience with DST.

Lastly, further research can explore how digital storytelling influences other language skills, such as writing or listening, or how it supports learners with special needs or anxiety. With the growing relevance of multimedia learning, expanding studies in this area can contribute significantly to both language education and digital pedagogy.

In a nutshell, the integration of digital storytelling into the English language classroom presents a promising strategy for enhancing students' speaking skills and overall engagement. With careful planning and support, DST can empower learners to take charge of their learning,

connect emotionally with their content, and develop 21st-century skills that extend beyond the language classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the impact of digital storytelling (DST) on the speaking proficiency of Form 4 students in a Malaysian secondary school. Using data collected from reflective journals and semi-structured interviews, the findings revealed several key benefits of incorporating DST into English language lessons.

The study found a notable increase in students' confidence and fluency when speaking English. Firstly, through repeated practice, rehearsals, and the opportunity to edit their recordings, students overcame their initial fear of speaking and demonstrated greater ease in expressing themselves. Secondly, emotional expression played a key role in helping students communicate more naturally. Many felt more engaged and motivated when telling personal stories and using tone, music, and visuals to enhance their delivery. The project also fostered a strong sense of creativity and ownership, with students actively involved in choosing topics, writing scripts, and editing their own videos. In addition, they gained technical and digital skills while developing a deeper awareness of language use, especially in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Most importantly, students reflected positively on their personal growth, noting improvements in time management, self-expression, and self-confidence.

These findings suggest that DST is an effective tool not only for improving speaking proficiency, but also for enhancing motivation, digital literacy, and learner autonomy. Its use in the classroom can transform the traditional speaking task into a more engaging, student-centred, and meaningful learning experience.

However, this study also faced a few limitations. The sample size was small and limited to one class, which restricts the generalisability of the findings. Since the study relied on self-reported data (journals and interviews), some responses may be influenced by personal bias or memory recall. Additionally, the differences in students' technical skills could have affected their performance and overall experience of the project.

Beyond language development, this project nurtured students' digital literacy and soft skills, including time management, creativity, storytelling structure, and independent learning. Many participants expressed pride in completing a task that felt meaningful and creative. The process of revising recordings, curating visuals, and delivering a final product gave them a sense of achievement rarely experienced in conventional oral assessments. This demonstrates that DST does not only enhance speaking skills but also supports the holistic development of learners in a technology-integrated classroom.

Co-Author Contribution

The authors declare no conflict of interest. Author 1 conducted fieldwork, prepared the literature review, methodology, data entry, performed statistical analysis and interpret results. Author 2 oversaw writing, reviewed and edited.

Ethics Statement

The research followed all applicable ethical standards. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured.

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