

ENGAGING SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN EFL SPEAKING CLASSROOM THROUGH DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Navila Nuril Azqiya


Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Banyuwangi, 68416, Indonesia

Corresponding author, email: vilav667@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research aims to improve secondary school students' speaking skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning through the use of Digital Storytelling. The research employs a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, involving 10 eighth grade students in a junior high school in Banyuwangi. Over four weeks, students participated in various stages of learning, including creating, presenting, and reflecting on digital stories. The data were collected from observation, interviews, and speaking tests. The qualitative data gathered from observation and interviewed were analyzed thematically where as data from speaking test were statistically analyzed. The findings reveal that implementing Digital Storytelling significantly enhanced students' speaking skills, such as fluency, pronunciation, and confidence. This method also fostered an engaging and interactive learning environment, helping students overcome their anxiety when speaking English. Moreover, students exhibited increased motivation, engagement, and creativity in storytelling. The process encouraged active participation and improved their ability to organize ideas coherently. Additionally, students demonstrated improvement in contextual vocabulary usage, grammar accuracy, and pronunciation. The results suggest that Digital Storytelling is an effective and innovative approach for enhancing students' speaking skills in EFL classrooms, making learning more meaningful and enjoyable.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling, EFL, speaking skills, interactive learning, Classroom Action Research, Student Engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and 21st-century education, communication skills play a vital role in human interaction and knowledge transfer (LeFebvre & Allen, 2024). Effective communication is essential not only for social interactions but also for academic and professional success. In an educational setting, communication is a two way process where both teachers and students influence learning outcomes (Hunt & Cooper, 2010). Speaking, as a core component of communication, allows individuals to express thoughts, emotions, and ideas, fostering relationships and personal development (Burns & Seidlhofer, 2019; Rao, 2018). For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, developing speaking proficiency is crucial to achieving

fluency and confidence in using the language in real-life contexts.

However, speaking is a complex skill that requires more than just linguistic knowledge. It involves pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and interactional competence (Sadiku, 2015). Despite its importance, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills for EFL students to develop, particularly in non-native English-speaking environments where opportunities for authentic communication are limited (Guebba, 2021). Fu et al. (2022) argue that conventional EFL teaching methods, which focus heavily on memorization and repetitive exercises, do not adequately prepare students for real-life communication. Instead, effective speaking instruction should provide interactive and meaningful learning experiences that encourage students to use language spontaneously.

Observations in the research setting reveal several challenges affecting students' speaking abilities. Many students struggle with limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, and a lack of confidence in expressing themselves in English. These difficulties contribute to low speaking performance and hinder students from participating actively in classroom discussions. Additionally, traditional teaching methods in EFL classrooms often prioritize grammar and reading comprehension over speaking practice, further limiting students' opportunities to develop oral proficiency (Kristiawan et al., 2022). Hamad et al. (2019) highlight that teacher-centered pedagogy, where teachers dominate classroom discussions, prevents students from practicing speaking skills effectively. Other factors, such as large class sizes, time constraints, and an examination-oriented syllabus, also contribute to students' lack of speaking practice (Fu et al., 2021). As a result, there is an urgent need for more interactive and communicative teaching approaches to enhance EFL learners' speaking skills.

One innovative approach that has gained recognition in language learning is digital storytelling (DST). DST integrates multimedia elements such as text, images, audio, and video, allowing students to create and narrate their own stories in an engaging and meaningful way (Robin, 2016). Research suggests that digital storytelling enhances student motivation, confidence, and creativity while improving speaking skills (Mirza, 2020; Fu et al., 2022). Yang et al. (2020) found that DST helps students improve pronunciation, fluency, and organizational skills in storytelling. By incorporating technology, DST provides learners with opportunities to practice speaking in a non-threatening environment, reducing anxiety and increasing self-expression (Robin, 2016).

Moreover, DST aligns with constructivist learning principles, where students actively construct knowledge through experience (Robin, 2016). In a DST-based classroom, students select story topics, conduct research, script narratives, and use multimedia tools to bring their stories to life. This hands-on learning approach not only enhances language proficiency but also develops 21st-century skills such as digital literacy, collaboration, and critical thinking (Yang et al., 2020). Therefore, integrating digital storytelling in EFL classrooms presents a promising solution to addressing students' speaking difficulties while making language learning more engaging and effective.

Studies on students' perceptions of digital storytelling (DST) have been widely documented. Smeda et al. (2014) found that integrating DST in secondary schools enhances student engagement, achievement, and motivation. Fu et al. (2021) reported that

DST tools positively impact speaking competence and help students achieve effective communication. Yang et al. (2022) highlighted DST's role in developing EFL students into proficient speakers and creative thinkers. Similarly, Leong et al. (2019) demonstrated that DST supports vocabulary learning and increases motivation in

language learning. Kim & Li (2021) emphasized DST's flexibility as a pedagogical tool to engage students, while Liu et al. (2018) found that it enhances motivation in speaking. Sembiring & Simanjutak (2023) and Chubko et al. (2020) confirmed its effectiveness in improving vocabulary knowledge and creating an authentic learning environment. Furthermore, DST serves as a multimodal tool that reduces language barriers and allows students to reflect on their learning through collected resources. Given these findings, this study aims to address the issue of limited opportunities for students to develop communicative competence in speaking by exploring DST as a potential solution.

Speaking is a fundamental skill in language learning that plays a crucial role in communication and personal interaction (Guebba, 2021; Richards, 2008). Mastering speaking skills enables learners to express their ideas effectively, build social relationships, and engage in academic and professional conversations. However, many EFL learners face challenges in acquiring speaking skills due to insufficient exposure to authentic English-speaking environments (Brown, 2001; Thornbury, 2005). Classroom

based learning often focuses more on grammar and writing, leaving students with limited opportunities to practice spoken communication. Additionally, the fear of making mistakes and receiving negative feedback further inhibits students from actively participating in speaking exercises. Therefore, it is essential to implement teaching strategies that emphasize oral communication, interactive participation, and confidence

building among students.

Storytelling has been recognized as a powerful educational tool for language learning, as it fosters engagement, creativity, and linguistic development (Robin, 2008; Ellis & Brewster, 2014). It provides a structured yet flexible approach to practicing language skills by encouraging students to organize their thoughts and develop coherent narratives (Wright, 2008; Cameron, 2001). Storytelling allows learners to immerse themselves in a meaningful language experience, reinforcing vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation accuracy, and syntactic structures. Moreover, storytelling enhances listening comprehension and cultural awareness by exposing students to diverse perspectives and real-life contexts. Studies have shown that incorporating storytelling in language classrooms improves students' speaking fluency and confidence, making it an effective pedagogical strategy for EFL learners.

With the advancement of technology, traditional storytelling has evolved into digital storytelling, which integrates multimedia elements such as text, images, audio, and video (Fu et al., 2022; Sadik, 2008). Digital storytelling enhances students' learning experiences by providing interactive and multimodal approaches to language acquisition (Robin, 2016; Yang & Wu, 2012). Through digital storytelling, students can create their own narratives using digital tools, allowing them to develop digital literacy skills alongside language proficiency. Additionally, digital storytelling fosters collaborative learning, as students can work in groups to design, script, and present their stories. Research suggests that digital storytelling increases student motivation, engagement, and retention of language skills by making learning more dynamic and enjoyable.

Several studies have demonstrated that digital storytelling positively impacts EFL learners by enhancing their speaking abilities, vocabulary retention, and pronunciation accuracy (Yang et al., 2020; Hafner & Miller, 2011). Digital storytelling allows students to practice spoken language in a non-threatening and supportive environment, reducing anxiety and increasing their willingness to communicate. By integrating visual and auditory elements, digital storytelling aids in comprehension and reinforces language structures more effectively than traditional

methods (Niemi et al., 2014; Hung et al., 2012). Furthermore, digital storytelling promotes self-expression and creativity, enabling students to personalize their learning experiences while developing essential communication skills. The incorporation of technology into storytelling also prepares students for the digital era, equipping them with technical competencies that are valuable in academic and professional settings.

Despite its numerous benefits, the implementation of digital storytelling in EFL classrooms presents several challenges, including limited access to technology, the need for teacher training, and time constraints in curriculum planning (Kajder, 2006; Kearney, 2011). Not all schools have the necessary technological infrastructure to support digital storytelling projects, and teachers may require additional training to effectively integrate digital tools into language instruction (Ohler, 2008; Razmi et al., 2014). Moreover, the process of creating digital stories involves multiple stages, including scripting, editing, and presenting, which can be time-consuming within a structured curriculum. To address these challenges, educators must find a balance between digital storytelling activities and traditional speaking exercises while ensuring that students receive adequate support in using technology for language learning.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design based on the model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). CAR is an iterative process that involves planning, acting, observing, and reflecting to improve teaching and learning practices. This research was conducted over four weeks and consisted of multiple cycles, with each cycle focusing on the integration of digital storytelling into EFL speaking lessons. This approach allows for continuous assessment and refinement of instructional methods to maximize student engagement and learning outcomes.

Participants

The participants of this study were eighth-grade students from a junior high school in Banyuwangi, Indonesia. A total of 10 students participated, comprising 7 female and 3 male students, aged between 14 and 15 years old. These students were selected based on their willingness to participate and their varied proficiency levels in English speaking skills. Eight students spoke Javanese daily, while two spoke Madurese. Their English proficiency varied widely, especially in speaking. Although most had learned English since kindergarten, some lacked structured lessons in primary school due to policies making English a non-compulsory subject. As a result, only a few students could communicate in English, while most struggled with fluency, and some had no proficiency at all, highlighting a significant gap in language acquisition.

Data Collection Method

This study employed observation, interviews, and speaking tests to collect data. Observation, a key research method in social sciences (O'Leary, 2020), allowed the researcher to actively engage in the classroom, implementing digital storytelling (DST) by guiding students through narrative development, digital tool usage, and presentations with feedback sessions. Semi-structured interviews, as described by Cohen et al. (2017), were conducted with the English teacher and students of class VIII C to explore students' speaking challenges and experiences with DST. Additionally, a speaking test based on Hughes (2002) assessed students' proficiency before and after the DST intervention. Students retold personal narratives, evaluated using a five-criteria rating scale from Brown (2004)—grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and pronunciation—while also considering verbal, non-

verbal, and DST-related skills to measure its impact on speaking ability.

Data Analysis Method

To identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) in research data. This method aims to provide deep insights into the experiences, views, and meanings generated by individuals in a particular context. Thematic analysis prioritizes flexibility, allowing the researcher to explore the data from multiple perspectives, without being bound to a rigid theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). is used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) in research data, offering deep insights into participants' experiences and meanings. This flexible method begins with data collection, followed by six key steps: familiarization with data through reading and reviewing transcripts, generating initial codes to identify relevant elements, grouping codes into broader themes, reviewing and refining themes for accuracy, defining and naming themes to encapsulate key findings, and compiling a report with supporting data. Critical reflection is essential to ensure unbiased interpretation. Ethical considerations include selecting fair methods, obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and transparently reporting results while respecting participants' privacy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines the effectiveness of digital storytelling in enhancing students' speaking ability by comparing their performance before and after the intervention. The assessment includes verbal aspects (content relevance, vocabulary use, grammar accuracy, pronunciation, fluency), non-verbal aspects (facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, intonation, confidence), affective aspects (participation, focus, enthusiasm, attitude, confidence), and digital storytelling skills (theme selection, creativity, coherence, technology use, emotional impact).

The research involved 10 students who voluntarily participated over four weeks, with a total of eight sessions. Speaking tests were conducted before and after the intervention to measure progress. The pre-test results showed an average score of 60.2, indicating initial speaking proficiency, while the post-test results revealed an increase to 75.4, demonstrating notable improvement after using digital storytelling as a learning method.

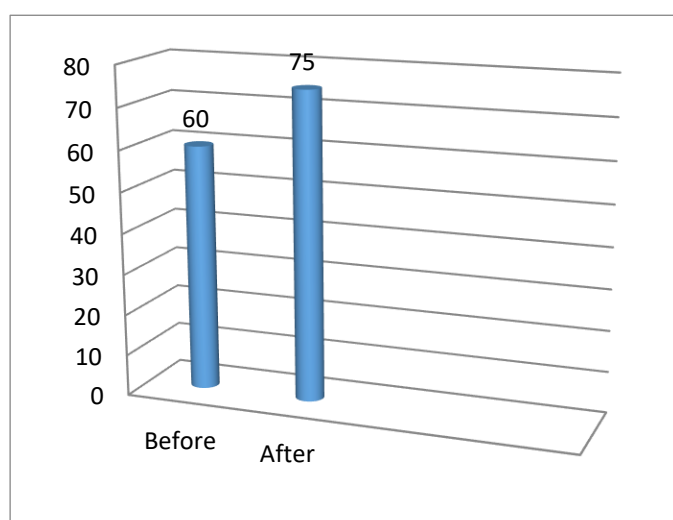
Table 1. The comparison of mean scores of speaking achievement before and after the implementation digital storytelling

No.	Name	Speaking score (before using digital storytelling project)	Speaking score (after using digital storytelling project)
1.	AANP	63	74,75
2.	BR	55,5	75
3.	DNA	67,75	76,25
4.	HM	52, 5	75,75
5.	LI	64	75,25
6.	RMH	49,75	74,75

7.	SM	64,5	74,5
8.	SM	61,75	77, 5
9.	MAG	59,25	75,75
10.	MNM	66	74,5
Total		60,2	75, 4

The difference in average score of 15.2 points indicates a significant improvement. This finding shows that the application of digital storytelling has a significant positive impact on students' speaking ability, especially in terms of vocabulary mastery, clarity of pronunciation, fluency, and confidence in telling stories.

Diagram 1 The speaking score before and after the implementation of digital storytelling project



Digital Storytelling as an Engaging and Interactive Learning Method

Digital storytelling enhances student engagement by integrating technology and storytelling, making learning more dynamic and enjoyable. Students describe the method as interactive, exciting, and far from traditional learning, fostering curiosity and enthusiasm. One student reflected on their journey, saying:

*"I used to be really shy to speak English, afraid of being wrong. **But because I often practiced stories using this method, I became more confident.** Now I'm no longer afraid of saying the wrong thing because I'm used to practicing." (Student A, 30-11-2024).*

*"At first, I was really insecure when speaking English, afraid of being laughed at if I got it wrong. **But because I often practice telling stories in class, I became confident.** I don't feel as nervous as I used to." (Student B, 30-11-2024)*

*"I used to feel very nervous about speaking English, always worried about making mistakes. **But after practicing storytelling regularly, I***

feel much more confident. It's easier to express myself now." (Student C, 30-11-2024)

"Speaking English used to make me feel really uncomfortable because I was scared of being wrong. But through constant practice with storytelling, I've gained confidence and now I enjoy speaking without hesitation." (Student D, 30-11-2024)

These responses confirm that digital storytelling transforms the classroom experience, making lessons immersive, enjoyable, and motivating for students.

Enhancing Fluency Through Practical Storytelling Activities

By engaging directly in storytelling, students gain opportunities to practice and experiment with their language skills in real-time. This hands-on approach not only helps them become more comfortable with the language but also makes speaking English feel more natural and enjoyable. One student shared their experience, stating:

"Learning to speak directly while telling a story really makes a difference. I became more fluent in speaking because I often practice and try it directly. So it feels better to speak English." (Student A, 30-11-2024).

"I feel like speaking English is easier now, because I've been practicing stories a lot. I used to be confused about speaking, but now I am more fluent because I often practice and practice continuously." (Student B, 30-11-2024).

"Regularly practicing storytelling has helped me speak English more fluently. I used to struggle to find the right words, but now I can speak more smoothly and with less hesitation." (Student E, 30-11-2024)

This statement highlights from three students the transformative impact of digital storytelling on students' fluency and seven student responded with a different answer. Students not only become more fluent but also develop a positive association with speaking English, making it an enjoyable and fulfilling activity. This underscores the effectiveness of digital storytelling in bridging the gap between theoretical language knowledge and practical communication skills.

Reducing Anxiety in Speaking Through Frequent Storytelling Practice

Digital storytelling has played a crucial role in helping students manage their anxiety when speaking English in front of others. By regularly engaging in storytelling activities, students gradually build their confidence and become more relaxed in public speaking scenarios. This method allows them to practice in a supportive and familiar environment, making the experience less intimidating over time. As four students expressed:

"At first I was really nervous when I had to speak in front of my friends. But because I often tell stories using this method, I gradually became more relaxed. Now I'm not too nervous anymore when I have to speak in front of many people." (Student A, 30-11-2024).

"After talking in front of my friends, I became more comfortable and not afraid anymore when I have to talk in front of the class. I used to feel anxious, but now it's normal." (Student B, 30-11-2024).

"Speaking in front of others used to make me really anxious. But after practicing storytelling, I feel much more relaxed and can talk in front of my classmates without feeling so nervous anymore." (Student C, 30-11-2024)

"I used to feel scared when I had to speak in front of the class, but this method helped me get used to it. Now, I feel more comfortable and less

worried about speaking in public." (Student D, 30-11-2024)

This reflection underscores the impact of digital storytelling on reducing students' fear of speaking English in public, the activities help students acclimate to the process of verbal expression, creating a safe space to make mistakes and improve. By fostering a gradual progression from nervousness to comfort, digital storytelling empowers students to face public speaking challenges with confidence and enthusiasm.

Building Skills and Creativity Through Technology in Digital Storytelling By incorporating technology into digital storytelling, students are given the chance to explore creative tools while enhancing their language skills. This integration allows them to combine visual, audio, and textual elements, fostering a more dynamic and engaging learning experience. While the process may initially feel challenging due to unfamiliarity with the tools, the hands-on approach encourages exploration and gradual mastery of the digital platforms. One student reflected on their experience, stating:

"At first, using the new technology for digital storytelling was confusing because I wasn't familiar with the applications and tools. It took me some time to explore and understand how to combine visuals, audio, and text effectively. But with continuous practice and help from the teacher, I started to enjoy the process. Now, I feel more confident and realize that these tools make creating and sharing stories much more engaging and creative." (Student A, 30-11-2024).

Similarly, other students shared their thoughts:

"When we started using technology for digital storytelling, I was a bit lost because the tools were new to me. But after experimenting and practicing, I learned how to use them, and now I enjoy creating stories with these features." (Student B, 30-11-2024). *"At first, I struggled to understand how to use the technology for digital storytelling because there were so many steps. After some practice and support from my teacher, I began to feel more comfortable and realized how fun and creative the process could be."* (Student C, 30-11-2024).

These statements emphasize how digital storytelling can transform students' engagement with technology, students not only become proficient in using digital platforms but also develop a deeper understanding of how to convey their ideas creatively. This process fosters problem-solving skills, encourages active participation, and nurtures a positive attitude toward learning with technology.

Challenges in Implementing Digital Storytelling

Despite its effectiveness, digital storytelling presented several challenges during implementation. Limited access to technological devices and unstable internet connectivity hindered students' ability to start and complete their projects efficiently. Additionally, differences in technological proficiency created disparities in progress, as some students required more time and teacher assistance to navigate digital tools. Many students also struggled to align their creative ideas with appropriate visual elements, necessitating repeated explanations and guidance. Time management was another issue, as the process of planning, designing, and revising often exceeded the allocated class time, leading to delays and increased pressure on students. Furthermore, while digital storytelling improved students' confidence, some still faced difficulties in delivering their stories fluently, often due to nerves or hesitation in using English. These challenges highlight the need for sufficient technological resources, structured training, better time allocation, and continuous teacher support to ensure a smoother and more effective integration of digital storytelling in EFL classrooms.

Discussion

The implementation of digital storytelling (DS) introduced a shift in students' learning approach, offering greater opportunities for self-expression and creativity compared to traditional methods focused on grammar exercises and reading comprehension. By narrating personal stories, students engaged in meaningful language practice while enhancing their creative thinking. Research by Lin et al. (2023) highlights that storytelling fosters both linguistic and cognitive development, which was evident in this study as students gained confidence in their speaking abilities. Pre-treatment assessments showed students struggling with fluency and nervousness, but after participating in DS activities, they demonstrated noticeable improvements in their ability to communicate ideas more fluidly. The iterative nature of DS, supported by continuous feedback, helped refine students' speaking skills in a low-pressure environment, aligning with findings from Arias and Dominguez (2023) and Park & Kim (2023) on the benefits of repeated storytelling practice.

Teachers observed that DS allowed for more personalized learning experiences, as students selected themes that resonated with them, fostering a sense of ownership over their learning. This autonomy contributed to higher motivation and engagement, reinforcing findings from Hernandez and Ortega (2024) that DS empowers students to take control of their learning. Similarly, Yang et al. (2023) noted that student-driven storytelling enhances motivation and a sense of accomplishment. However, challenges remained, particularly regarding access to technology and varying levels of digital literacy among students. Limited resources in some schools hindered students' ability to fully engage with DS, a challenge also noted by Zhang et al. (2024). Additionally, disparities in students' technological proficiency required teachers to provide extra support, emphasizing the need for structured training and access to digital tools.

Despite these challenges, DS has shown significant potential in enhancing language learning by fostering engagement, creativity, and fluency. The combination of storytelling and technology not only motivates students but also helps develop essential 21st-century skills such as digital literacy and critical thinking (Rahman et al., 2024). However, for DS to be successfully integrated into classrooms, sufficient resources, professional development for teachers, and technological support are necessary, as emphasized by Sharma and Patel (2023) and Huang and Lin (2024). Addressing these barriers will ensure that DS can be fully leveraged as an effective tool for improving students' speaking skills and overall language proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant role of digital storytelling (DS) in enhancing students' speaking skills and engagement in English learning. By integrating narrative techniques with digital tools, DS fosters creativity, confidence, and collaboration while improving fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and overall communication. The students' average speaking score increased from 60.2 to 75.4, demonstrating clear progress in both verbal and non-verbal aspects of speaking. Consistent with Lin et al. (2023) and Arias & Dominguez (2023), this research confirms that storytelling enhances fluency, reduces anxiety, and encourages creative expression.

Additionally, DS creates a dynamic learning environment by incorporating multimedia elements, increasing student motivation and active participation (Hernandez & Ortega, 2024). However, challenges such as limited technology access, varying digital literacy levels, and time constraints require adequate resources and teacher training for optimal implementation (Zhang et al., 2024). Overall, DS proves to be a transformative tool in language learning, equipping students with essential 21st-century skills while making English learning more engaging and effective.

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