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## FOSTERING SPEAKING DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNER CONFIDENCE THROUGH DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL EFL CONTEXTS

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**Abstract:** *Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most essential skills in English, as it enables learners to communicate with people from different parts of the world. However, despite its importance, many students in Indonesia still experience difficulties in developing their speaking ability. These challenges are often caused by limited exposure to authentic English use, low confidence, fear of making mistakes, and a lack of engaging speaking activities in the classroom. To address this issue, this study explores the use of Digital Storytelling (DST) as an alternative instructional media used for teaching in middle-school English-speaking classes. DST allows students to combine spoken language with visuals, narration, and personal expression, creating a more meaningful and supportive environment for oral communication. This study employed qualitative approaches. Qualitative data were obtained through interviews to gain deeper insights into students' perceptions and experiences. The findings indicate that the use of DST has a positive impact on students' speaking ability. Not only did it improve students' speaking performance, but it also increased their motivation to speak, enhanced their confidence, and encouraged greater creativity and self-expression. Overall, the study suggests that DST holds strong potential as an effective pedagogical tool for improving English speaking skills in the Indonesian EFL context.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, digital environments have become increasingly prevalent in the teaching and learning process. One example of technology integration in education is Digital Storytelling (DST), which allows teachers to utilize digital media meaningfully in the classroom. In this context, EFL teachers' innovative ways of incorporating DST into classroom instruction play a pivotal role in supporting the learning process of Generation Z students, who, as digital natives, exhibit distinct learning preferences characterized by their affinity for visual, interactive, and technology-enhanced learning experiences (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Moreover, DST has been recognized as a powerful instructional tool that supports students in developing knowledge while completing learning tasks (Robin, 2008). Research has demonstrated that digital storytelling significantly improves students' self-confidence and motivation in EFL contexts, making it an effective tool for supporting language skill development (Hava, 2021). DST has emerged as a contemporary instructional

approach developed in response to the rapid advancement of digital technology in education. This approach is designed not only to enhance students' enthusiasm for learning but also to reduce the anxiety often associated with speaking in a foreign language (Alemi, Givi, & Rezanejad, 2022). By integrating storytelling skills with digital multimedia elements such as images, audio, narration, and visual effects, DST functions as a highly multimodal approach that enables students to express meaning through multiple modes of communication (Chen, 2024). This multimodality supports diverse learning styles and provides students with greater opportunities to develop their speaking ability in a supportive and engaging environment.

**When** DST is used as a platform for creating and presenting digital stories, students are able to develop key aspects of speaking more accurately, including pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary use, and grammar (Tatli, Saylan, & Kokoç, 2022). The process of designing and narrating their own stories fosters a positive emotional atmosphere in the classroom, encouraging excitement, creativity, and active participation (Schmoelz, 2018). **In addition**, digital storytelling's ability to personalize students' learning experiences enables them to connect their personal experiences with literacy knowledge, allowing them to construct stories that are meaningful, authentic, and socially relevant (Smeda, Dakich, & Sharda, 2014; Gregori-Signes, 2014).

**Given the rapid advancement of educational technology**, it is essential for teachers to adopt effective teaching approaches and implement innovative learning practices. A wide range of technology-based methods and media have been increasingly integrated into language teaching. While these tools offer significant potential, **the excessive use of digital applications may sometimes lead to confusion for both teachers and students. In certain cases**, technology-enhanced instruction places too much emphasis on the tools or their features rather than on meaningful learning processes (Li, Sun, & Jee, 2019). **As a result**, classroom interaction—particularly peer interaction—may become limited, with learning activities focusing mainly on task completion or technical aspects of the applications (Moser, Wei, & Brenner, 2021). This overreliance on technology can reduce opportunities for exploration, meaningful discussion, and clear explanation of learning content. **Without sufficient interaction and engagement, especially in speaking classes**, students often struggle to express their ideas and convey their stories effectively. These challenges may stem from inadequate preparation, limited opportunities to practice, and low self-confidence, which are recognized as significant anxiety-provoking factors in EFL speaking contexts (Hanifa, 2018; Brooks & Wilson, 2014).

Despite the growing use of DST in educational settings, studies examining its influence on EFL students' speaking ability remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how DST can be utilized as an instructional strategy in EFL speaking classrooms to enhance students' speaking skills and foster greater engagement. By integrating technology with meaningful interaction and creative expression, DST is expected to support students in developing both their communicative competence and confidence in speaking English. Accordingly, this study seeks to examine whether the use of DST can improve junior high school students' speaking skills. In addition, it explores students' attitudes toward collaborative learning when DST is implemented in the speaking classroom. Specifically, the study focuses on how students respond to the learning process, interact with their peers, and

engage in collaborative speaking activities through DST in an EFL context.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the use of DST in an EFL speaking classroom. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of students' speaking development and their attitudes toward collaborative learning through DST (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Tisdell, Merriam, & Stuckey-Peyrot, 2016). The participants were selected using purposive sampling (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015), involving one class of junior high school students from a private secondary school in Indonesia. The class consisted of 25 students, whose overall English proficiency was categorized as pre-intermediate, based on their English report card scores from the previous semester. To ensure confidentiality and ethical considerations, all participants were assigned pseudonyms throughout the research process (Saunders, Kitzinger, & Kitzinger, 2015).

The study was conducted over a six-week period. In the first week, an initial speaking test was administered as a diagnostic tool to identify students' baseline speaking ability. The purpose of this assessment was not to generate statistical comparison but to obtain a descriptive profile of students' strengths and weaknesses across key speaking aspects. The evaluation focused on pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and comprehension. Harris's Oral Rating Scale was used as a guiding framework to structure the observation and ensure systematic assessment of students' performance. The results of this initial assessment served as a reference point for analyzing students' speaking development throughout the Digital Storytelling (DST) implementation. Rather than emphasizing numerical score differences, the analysis concentrated on observable changes in speaking behavior, performance quality, and students' reflective responses over time.

From the second to the fifth week, students were divided into small groups and engaged in collaborative Digital Storytelling (DST) activities. During this phase, all groups utilized the same digital media platform to ensure consistency in the learning process. The activities included story planning, script drafting, multimedia integration (such as images, narration, and background audio), and oral presentation of the final digital story. Throughout the process, the researcher acted as a facilitator by providing ongoing feedback and guidance to support students' speaking performance, language use, and collaborative interaction. The feedback focused on clarity of expression, pronunciation, organization of ideas, and group participation rather than on numerical scoring. In the sixth week, a final speaking performance task was conducted to observe students' speaking development after the DST implementation. Instead of functioning as a statistical post-test, this assessment served as a reflective and comparative observation of students' progress in relation to their initial speaking performance. The evaluation continued to refer to Harris's Oral Rating Scale as an analytical framework to maintain consistency in describing speaking aspects.

Following the final speaking task, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward learning speaking collaboratively through DST (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). The interviews allowed participants to express their thoughts in depth and provided insight into how DST influenced their confidence, motivation, and engagement. Data were collected through classroom observations of speaking performance and interview transcripts. The speaking observations

were analyzed descriptively to identify patterns of development across key speaking aspects, while the interview data generated rich, interpretative insights into students' collaborative learning experiences and emotional responses throughout the six-week intervention.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of Digital Storytelling (DST) positively influenced junior high school students' speaking ability and their attitudes toward collaborative learning in the EFL classroom. The improvement observed across speaking components—pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and content organization—indicates that DST functioned not merely as a technological tool, but as a meaningful pedagogical approach that integrated planning, rehearsal, interaction, and self-reflection (Robin, 2008; Sadik, 2008).

### Pronunciation Development

One noticeable improvement was found in students' pronunciation. At first, many students struggled with basic word pronunciation and intonation. Their speech was often unclear, and they tended to speak softly due to fear of mispronouncing words. After participating in DST activities, students demonstrated clearer pronunciation and better control of stress and intonation. The repeated process of recording narration allowed students to practice and self-monitor their pronunciation before presenting their stories. This finding is consistent with the increase in students moving from the *poor* to *average* and *good* levels in the post-test.

One student shared:

*"When I recorded my voice, I listened again and realized my pronunciation was wrong. I tried again until it sounded better."* (Student 7)

Another student noted:

*"I was not confident before, but recording helped me practice many times, so I was more sure when speaking."* (Student 12)

These responses indicate that DST provided a low-anxiety environment that encouraged students to improve pronunciation through practice and repetition. In terms of pronunciation, the improvement can be associated with the iterative recording process embedded in DST activities (Gregori-Signes, 2014). The opportunity to record, replay, and revise narration enabled students to self-monitor their speech, which aligns with the concept of autonomous language learning. Unlike traditional spontaneous speaking tasks, DST provided a lower-anxiety environment where students could practice repeatedly before public presentation (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). This supports the idea that reduced performance pressure enhances learners' willingness to take risks in speaking.

### Fluency Improvement

In terms of fluency, students initially spoke with frequent pauses and hesitation. Before using DST, many students struggled to maintain continuous speech and often stopped mid-sentence. This lack of fluency contributed to their low speaking scores. After the DST implementation, students' speech became more fluid and organized. Although pauses were still present, they were less frequent and more natural. The storytelling format helped students structure their ideas, which supported smoother speech delivery.

A student explained:

*"Before, I didn't know what to say next, so I stopped a lot. When I made a story, I already knew the order, so speaking was easier."* (Student 3)

Another student stated:

*"Working in a group helped me practice speaking many times before presenting."* (Student 19)

This suggests that DST supports fluency by combining planning, rehearsal, and meaningful speaking practice. The development of fluency appears closely related to structured storytelling and collaborative rehearsal. The narrative format encouraged students to organize ideas logically before speaking, reducing hesitation and disorganized delivery (Newton & Nation, 2020). As indicated by students' reflections, knowing the sequence of events beforehand helped them maintain continuity in speech. This suggests that fluency improvement was not solely the result of repetition, but also of improved cognitive organization and preparation.

### **Vocabulary Use**

Students also showed improvement in vocabulary use. Prior to the treatment, students relied on limited and repetitive vocabulary. Their spoken responses were often simple and lacked descriptive language. Through DST, students were encouraged to create stories that required specific vocabulary related to events, emotions, and actions. As a result, students began to use more varied and context-appropriate vocabulary in the post-test.

One student mentioned:

*"I learned new words because I wanted my story to be interesting."* (Student 10)

Another student added:

*"My friends helped me choose better words when we discussed the story."* (Student 21)

These findings indicate that collaborative DST activities supported vocabulary development through peer interaction and contextual learning. Vocabulary growth was fostered through contextualized and purposeful language use (Nation, 2018). Because students aimed to create meaningful and engaging stories, they were motivated to search for more appropriate and descriptive words. Peer discussion during the collaborative process further enriched lexical choices. This finding reinforces the sociocultural perspective that language development occurs through interaction and shared meaning-making.

### **Grammatical Accuracy**

Regarding grammatical accuracy, errors were common previously, particularly in verb tense usage and sentence structure. While grammar was not explicitly taught during the DST activities, students became more aware of grammatical forms when preparing their scripts. During the post-test, students produced more complete and understandable sentences, although minor grammatical errors remained. This improvement suggests that DST indirectly supports grammar development by integrating speaking with planning and revision.

A student reflected:

*"When we wrote the script, the teacher corrected some sentences, so I knew how to say it better."* (Student 5)

Although grammar was not the primary instructional focus, improvements in grammatical accuracy were observed during the post-test. Script drafting and teacher feedback played an important role in raising students' awareness of sentence structure and tense usage. This

suggests that DST supports incidental grammar learning by embedding language form within meaningful communicative tasks rather than isolated drills (Ellis, 2001).

### **Comprehension and Content Organization**

Students' comprehension and ability to convey meaning also improved. Previously, some students misunderstood prompts and responded briefly or irrelevantly. After engaging in DST, students demonstrated better understanding of speaking tasks and clearer organization of ideas. The narrative structure of storytelling helped students present their ideas in a logical sequence, which enhanced overall comprehensibility.

One student stated:

*"I liked telling stories because I could explain my experience step by step."* (Student 14)

The enhancement of comprehension and content organization highlights the role of narrative structure in supporting communicative clarity (Lisenbee & Ford, 2018). Storytelling naturally requires a beginning, middle, and end, which helped students convey ideas more coherently (Smeda, Dakich, & Sharda, 2014). As a result, students' speech became not only more accurate but also more comprehensible and logically structured.

### **Students' Attitudes toward Collaborative Learning through DST**

Interview data revealed positive attitudes toward collaborative learning. Students reported feeling more motivated, confident, and engaged when working in groups. Collaboration reduced speaking anxiety and encouraged mutual support.

One student shared:

*"I was shy before, but my friends helped me, so I was not afraid to speak."* (Student 2)

Another student commented:

*"Making digital stories was fun. I felt proud when we finished our story."* (Student 18)

These findings indicate that DST not only improved speaking skills but also fostered positive emotional responses, confidence, and active participation. Beyond linguistic development, the findings strongly indicate positive changes in students' attitudes toward collaborative learning. Students reported increased motivation, reduced anxiety, and greater confidence in speaking (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019). Working in groups created a supportive learning atmosphere in which peers provided assistance and encouragement (Slavin, 2014). This collaborative dynamic appears to have mitigated fear of making mistakes—one of the major barriers to speaking identified in the introduction of this study.

Importantly, these findings directly address the research objectives. First, the qualitative evidence suggests that DST contributed to measurable improvement in junior high school students' speaking skills. Second, students demonstrated positive attitudes toward collaborative learning through DST, describing the experience as enjoyable, meaningful, and confidence-building. Overall, DST is effective not simply because it integrates technology, but because it combines multimodal expression, structured planning, rehearsal opportunities, and social interaction. By balancing technological engagement with meaningful communication, DST offers a promising instructional strategy for enhancing speaking ability in the Indonesian EFL context.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to investigate the use of Digital Storytelling (DST) as an instructional strategy to enhance junior high school students' speaking skills and to explore their attitudes

toward collaborative learning in an Indonesian EFL classroom. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that DST contributed positively to students' speaking development across several components, including pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, and content organization. The shift in students' speaking levels demonstrates meaningful improvement. The number of students categorized at the poor level decreased significantly, while those achieving good and excellent levels increased. These findings indicate that DST provided structured opportunities for planning, rehearsal, and self-monitoring, which supported students in producing clearer and more organized speech.

In addition to linguistic improvement, DST fostered positive attitudes toward speaking and collaborative learning. Students reported increased motivation, reduced anxiety, and greater confidence when speaking English. The collaborative nature of DST allowed peer support and meaningful interaction, creating a supportive learning environment that encouraged active participation and creative expression. Overall, this study suggests that Digital Storytelling is not merely a technology-based activity, but a pedagogically meaningful approach that integrates multimodal expression, structured preparation, and social interaction. Therefore, DST holds strong potential as an effective instructional strategy for improving speaking skills in the Indonesian EFL context. Future studies may consider involving larger samples or employing mixed-method designs to further examine the long-term impact of DST on language development.

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