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A Case Study of Digital Storytelling in Improving EFL Students' Vocabularies and Speaking Skills

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ABSTRACT
Within an increasingly digital educational landscape, digital storytelling is a learning method that helps students develop creative competencies to address significant problems and is also useful for incorporating story components into EFL students' classroom speaking activities. This study investigates the effectiveness of digital storytelling as a pedagogical method for improving vocabulary development and speaking proficiency among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at an Islamic college. Using a case study design, the research included 17 students who registered for the English course during the 2026-2027 academic year. Throughout the study, participants participated in observations, wrote the conclusion, practiced key storytelling vocabulary, and delivered presentations of the results using the digital storytelling method. The instruments used in this research were interviews, supported by classroom observations. The findings show that digital storytelling significantly strengthens students' confidence, supports vocabulary retention, and improves speaking skills, while also reducing anxiety associated with communicating in English. Students stated that the approach reshaped their learning experience by fostering creativity and self-expression beyond conventional, grammar-centered instruction. Overall, the study positions digital storytelling as a valuable educational tool that fosters an engaging learning environment, accommodates diverse learning preferences, and promotes a more meaningful connection to the language. These findings underscore the need for further empirical research to determine how digital storytelling influences language learning outcomes in other skills, including reading, listening, and writing, and to assess its effects across different age groups and educational settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Today's world is driven by rapidly evolving technology and information. In the digital era, students are confronted with an abundance of information from various sources, and large volumes of data are readily available through the internet, social media, and other digital platforms (Xu & Zhou, 2022). Computers, artificial intelligence tools, digital cameras, editing software, and other technologies are increasingly within reach in classrooms, making it easier for learners and teachers to produce digital stories than before. In the past, access to information was limited and repeatedly regulated by educational authorities such as schools and libraries. By contrast, the digital revolution has made information exceptionally easy to obtain, to the point that it can be retrieved instantaneously (Mindel, 2022). This indicates that students are now encountering substantial, diverse sets of information that may include inaccurate, biased, or even entirely false material. As a result, students must be able to sift out the information that is relevant to the topic they are studying. This involves assessing the trustworthiness of information sources, recognizing potential bias, and differentiating factual claims from evaluative opinions. Without critical thinking abilities, students can feel inundated and struggle to determine what is relevant versus what is irrelevant (Kogila et al., 2020).

Critical thinking involves independent reasoning and the ability to develop well-supported judgments by drawing on multiple perspectives, since it is classified as a higher-order thinking skill in Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956; Syahputra et al., 2024, p. 202). It encompasses problem-solving, decision-making, and creative thinking. Therefore, it has recently surfaced as a fundamental topic receiving attention for its key role in guiding how learners learn and think. Besides that, critical thinking is among the core competencies students are required to have in the 21st century. In modern education, critical and analytical reasoning has gained further value, largely owing to key developments in the access, process, and use of information (Benek & Akçay, 2022). According to Indrašienė et al. (2021), Critical thinking comprises the skill of systematically analyzing, assessing, and synthesizing information from multiple sources. Analytical thinking, in turn, refers to the ability to decompose problems into smaller parts, analyze each component, and determine how those parts connect (Indrašienė et al., 2021). Moreover, the growth of educational technology has likewise influenced how teachers teach and how students learn (Syahputra, 2023, p. 262) . Learning is no longer limited to text or lectures; digital storytelling, interactive media, and technology-based educational applications have been instrumental in delivering more engaging learning experiences (Nair & Yunus, 2021; Rosyid et al., 2025).

In recent years, storytelling has been a widely used educational method for transmitting knowledge from one generation to another. In the past few years, substantial changes have occurred in the processes used to create stories, in the range of media employed to communicate the message, and in the intended audience (Mejila & Ubaub, 2026; Smeda et al., 2014). In general, storytelling is a strong pedagogical strategy that can improve learning outcomes in both general education and scientific and technical education (Nuroh et al., 2025; Wu & Chen, 2020). Stories have long been used to pass down traditions, cultural heritage, and history to future generations. Even today, people continue to tell stories through new digital media tools. Therefore, incorporating technology into education has altered conventional teaching methods in the digital era, especially by supporting the language development of 21st-century learners. Furthermore, Storytelling is an oral activity that may enrich narrative delivery through body movement and facial gestures, aiming to capture the audience's attention by evoking a multisensory stirring of emotion around the event described in the story(Ramalingam et al., 2022, p. 24) .

Regarding to the phenomenom above, digital storytelling is one of learning methods for the students in developing creative competencies to solve significant issues, serves as a useful method on story aspects as part of class speaking activities (Hidayati, 2019), for enhancing reading interest of Indonesian people (Y.-T. Chen et al., 2023), increases students' engagement in learning by combining

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personal storie with curricular content (Wu & Chen, 2020), and encourages critical and creative thinking (Ramalia, 2023). In Indonesian education, speaking skills are among the essential competencies of the 21st century and fundamental competencies in teaching English as a foreign language (Syahputra, 2026, p. 41). Students were actively encouraged and provided with incentives to participate in public speaking across a wide range of occasions, using a variety of speaking activities intentionally designed not only to strengthen their rhetorical abilities but also to meet the full requirements specified in the English course.

Actually, some researchers found that implementing digital storytelling in higher education students can improve their speaking skills, reading comprehension, creativity, and critical thinking abilities (H. Chen & Chuang, 2021; Hidayat et al., 2024; Ramalingam et al., 2022; Sapan, 2024; Tymoshchuk, 2025). The rapid progress of technology has contributed to the emergence of contemporary digital storytelling, which was further shaped at the Center for Digital Storytelling in California during the 1990s, established by Dana Atchley, Joe Lambert, and Nina Mullen (Aboo Bakar, 2019; Mirza, 2020). Moreover, the digital storytelling class fosters greater collaboration, confidence, and enjoyment among students throughout reading activities. In addition, it has pedagogical value for fostering students' involvement with literary texts, interpretive processes, and digital literacy in EFL literature classrooms (Agnes Widyaningrum et al., 2026). Also, according to the findings from Ismayilli et al. (2026), digital storytelling is an effective alternative to conventional presentation methods in foreign language classes. It offers a dynamic, student-centered learning environment that fosters creativity and collaboration (Ismayilli et al., 2026) .

Nonetheless, despite the expanding evidence base supporting the effectiveness of digital storytelling, empirical research remains relatively sparse in clarifying how specific digital storytelling methods support EFL students' vocabulary development and speaking abilities in classroom contexts. This gap indicates the need for research into how digital storytelling methods influence students' vocabulary development and speaking skills.

METHOD

This study used a case study design to examine EFL students' needs and expectations regarding the effects of the digital storytelling method implementation on the students' vocabulary development and speaking skills among Islamic college students at STAIN Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh. A case study is one of qualitative research design, qualitative approach was selected to support an in-depth understanding of students' perspectives, because it allows researchers to obtain detailed, context-rich insights into complex phenomena (Cohen et al., 2007). Moreover, A case study is a structured investigative approach intended to support the systematic assessment of both underlying causes and effects associated with a particular setting or circumstance under examination (L. Cohen et al., 2007) .

The participants in this study were 17 students enrolled in the English course class in the academic year of 2026-2027. They were from the Ilmu Al-Qur'an and Tafsir (IAT) Department at the Faculty of Dakwah and Komunikasi Islam, STAIN Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh. The sampling method used in this research was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, commonly described as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, is a form of non-probability sampling that is frequently applied in qualitative research (Adeoye, 2023). Before collecting data for this research, the researcher provided digital storytelling materials and their scripts; the participants then observed, wrote the conclusion, and some essential vocabulary of the storytelling, and presented the results.

Semi-structured interviews were also used in this research to obtain data on students'

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responses to the teacher's digital storytelling method implementation and its effects on their vocabulary development and speaking skills. This study employed the case study design described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) for data analysis. In carrying out the analytical process, the researcher systematically implemented the procedural steps, including data reduction, data display, and the formulation of conclusions, along with validation (Miles et al., 2014). To address the research questions, the researcher sought convergent evidence and drew on a range of credible sources to substantiate the findings. In addition, the researcher compared and verified the data collected through interviews and classroom observations. Finally, the researcher will remove irrelevant data to sharpen the focus on solving the research problems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Observation in Digital Storytelling Class

In the class, the researcher observes that the students strongly believe digital storytelling is an effective pedagogical method for improving their vocabulary and speaking skills. In addition, the teachers reported that digital storytelling enables students to replay stories multiple times, thereby helping them learn vocabulary and become familiar with new Indonesian words. Digital storytelling also motivated students to participate joyfully and learn independently during class. As stated in the following interview answers:

"*I once felt shy about speaking English because I was scared of getting things wrong, especially with vocabulary. However, since I practiced stories using this method a lot, I started feeling more confident. Now I am not afraid to say the wrong thing anymore, because I am used to practicing it*." (Student 3)

"*Speaking English used to make me feel really uncomfortable because I was afraid of making mistakes. But after practicing digital storytelling a lot, I have built up confidence, and now I actually enjoy speaking without hesitating*." (Student 1)

"*In the past, I was often very nervous when speaking English, constantly afraid of making mistakes. However, with regular practice in storytelling, I now feel far more confident. Expressing myself has become much easier*." (Student 13)

Implementing digital storytelling changed students' learning approach, providing more opportunities for self-expression and creativity than traditional methods focused on grammar exercises and reading comprehension. By narrating their experiences above, students engaged in purposeful language practice while strengthening their vocabulary, speaking skills, and creative thinking. It was similar to research findings from Azqiya (2025), who found that the implementation of digital storytelling substantially strengthened students' speaking abilities, including fluency, pronunciation, and confidence. It also created an engaging, interactive learning environment that helped learners reduce their anxiety about speaking English. In addition, students showed higher levels of motivation, engagement, and creativity during storytelling tasks. This approach promoted active participation and enhanced students' capacity to structure ideas coherently. Furthermore, students improved their use of contextual vocabulary, their grammatical accuracy, and their pronunciation (Azqiya, 2025). Furthermore, digital storytelling enhanced students' knowledge retention, increased their motivation to engage actively, and made them more willing to express themselves than traditional classroom

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presentations did. In particular, many students stated that digital stories made lessons more enjoyable, decreased their speaking anxiety, and created a more comfortable space for self-expression (Ismayilli et al., 2026) .

Students' Perceptions on Using Digital Storytelling method in improving their vocabularies and speaking skills

By engaging directly in storytelling, students are afforded opportunities to rehearse and evaluate their language skills in real time. This practical method not only helps them become more at ease with the language but also improves their vocabularies and makes speaking English feel more natural and enjoyable (Usmani et al., 2025) . As one student explained, they shared:

"*I think this is a wonderful opportunity for people who feel shy and find it difficult to speak. They get the chance to hear their own voice and pronunciation through the digital story*." (Student 5)
"*As digital storytelling combines music and visuals, my interest grew*." (Student 3)
"*We can back up our topic using pictures and music while we present it*." (Student 2, 4, 8, and 12)
"*It supports using technology more effectively and getting even more value from developing it*." (Student 6)
"*In our speaking lessons, we sometimes worked on our preparation spontaneously during recess. However, in digital story activities, we arrive prepared and know what we have researched. I think this also affected our efficiency*." (Student 7, 9, ands 10)
"*I think it can also help students improve their vocabulary and their English course, not only their speaking skills*." (Student 11)

The data presented above indicate that digital storytelling made the largest contribution to students' personal development. In this area, students stated that the levels of anxiety and excitement that had previously affected them negatively declined. In contrast, their interest, motivation, and self-confidence increased, and they improved their use of technology as a result of this activity. Similarly, Fu et al. (2022) and Mirza (2020) noted that digital storytelling strengthens students' motivation, confidence, and creativity while also developing their speaking abilities (Fu et al., 2022; Mirza, 2020). When the teacher began using and selecting digital storytelling, they required students to incorporate multiple multimedia elements, such as images, animations, music, and sound into their learning stories. These features, as implemented in the students' work, appeared highly appealing and informative for the students, thereby supporting engagement with the learning process (Gürsoy, 2021). Meanwhile, the use of media in the classroom is also expected to help students develop diverse learning styles and to make the learning process more engaging and enjoyable. Digital storytelling is presented as a new framework for conveying stories that replaces traditional storytelling. Through multimedia technology, digital storytelling is a mode of storytelling that allows students to create their own stories in their own words and to record their voices or videos based on the digital images they have. The findings of this study indicate that digital storytelling improves students' speaking skills more than picture-cued storytelling (Elyani et al., 2022).

On the other hand, students who were interviewed widely support the view that digital stories create a more effective learning setting, facilitated by opportunities for visual and audio presentation. Therefore, the digital storytelling process also affects the learning environment. Adara and Haqiyyah (2020) found that a learning environment integrating digital storytelling contributed to students' greater enjoyment of language learning and fostered higher levels of creativity in their language-related activities. The findings indicated that digital storytelling strengthens learners' computer-use competencies, a capability that has become increasingly relevant in the current education system(Adara & Haqiyyah, 2021).

Furthermore, the visual and audio-visual components of story media embedded in digital storytelling have the strongest impact on learners' vocabulary acquisition and speaking skills, meaning they most effectively support learners in developing, consolidating, and expanding their word knowledge (Mejila

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& Ubaub, 2026; Nair & Yunus, 2021). In addition, some students believe that digital stories make the course more enjoyable and offer shy learners a chance to express themselves. Students also report that digital stories enable them to speak more fluently and address pronunciation and vocabulary mistakes. They also noted that repeatedly hearing their own work while preparing and presenting helps them to identify and rectify errors more effectively, ensuring they arrive in class prepared. The findings were supported by the study conducted by Akdoğan (2023) and Maya et al. (2022). Their results showed that the participants viewed digital storytelling as substantially more engaging, more captivating, and more motivating for enhancing vocabulary development. Consequently, EFL teachers are strongly advised to provide suitable digital storytelling experiences for their learners, with the specific aim of teaching vocabulary and thereby strengthening learners' vocabulary development (Akdoğan, 2023; Maya et al., 2022), and also encouraging favorable attitudes toward studying English (Yazıcı Demirci & Ersanlı, 2026). Additionally, Windy Astuti and Chakim (2023) revealed that digital storytelling, as an alternative teaching strategy, effectively improved students' speaking skills. In conclusion, the use of digital storytelling positively affects secondary EFL students' speaking ability (Windy Astuti & Chakim, 2023).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The EFL students view digital storytelling as a practical method for improving vocabulary and speaking skills. Teachers stated that it facilitates students' revisiting of the narratives, thereby encouraging vocabulary expansion in English. Interviews also showed that students' confidence increased, indicating that repeated practice reduced their anxiety when speaking English. By introducing digital storytelling, learning methods have been transformed, fostering self-expression and creativity beyond traditional, grammar-focused instruction. Some studies on digital storytelling have found improvements in vocabulary development and speaking skills, including fluency and pronunciation, as well as higher motivation and engagement. Students noted that this method made learning more enjoyable and more encouraging, ultimately strengthening their readiness to communicate and to express themselves.

Moreover, Digital storytelling enhances students' language competencies by providing a feasible and interactive method for rehearsal and evaluation, thereby leading to a broader vocabulary, reduced anxiety, and increased confidence. Learners also indicated improved speaking abilities, increased creativity, and heightened motivation, primarily attributable to the multimedia elements that foster an engaging learning environment. Incorporating digital storytelling accommodates different learning styles and supports vocabulary development and the improvement of speaking skills, thereby making language learning more enjoyable and more effective for all students, especially those who are shy. Overall, this method is considered a meaningful advance over traditional storytelling methods, with positive effects on both personal growth and educational outcomes. To acquire more reliable and generalizable data, it is recommended that future studies be designed with larger sample sizes, extended durations, and additional skills.

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