



ORIGINAL ARTICLES

Trio-ethnographic Reflection on Using Digital Storytelling to Enhance Learners' Engagement

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Article history

Received: 31 August, 2024

Accepted: 10 December, 2024

Published: 20 April, 2025

Keywords

Trio-ethnography, digital storytelling, peer-to-peer learning, engagement, teaching and learning

ABSTRACT

The teaching and learning process in the digital landscape is evolving beyond traditional one-way knowledge delivery. Using trio-ethnography, a combination of duoethnography and photography (Le et al., 2021), we sought to explore how to integrate digital storytelling (DST) into teaching and learning processes to engage learners. Central to our paper are our narratives via three lenses: educators, learners, and a storytelling expert. In the three circles of the indigenous approach (Lavallée, 2009), we share our narrative inquiries. The sharing circles were a mixture of offline meetings, our co-emerging conversations in verbal format, and online meetings to clarify the written format of our dialogues. Three themes emerged: elements of digital storytelling, peer-to-peer learning, and level of engagement. We found that educators are not the primary source for integrating digital tools. Inquiry-based peer to peer learning (P2PL) determines the efficacy of learners' meaning-making and engagement. Aiming for explicit learning outcomes, educators would flexibly modify activities for diverse learning styles. In addition, empathy is the catalyst for lecturer-student intellectual relationships, enabling appropriate learner-experience design approaches. Furthermore, we hope to contribute to the trio-ethnographic methodology by using visual communication through sharing circles to articulate our meaning-making and illustrate our trusted connections.

1. INTRODUCTION

Software and applications for DST are rapidly evolving, and the popularity of platforms is volatile and regionally differentiated. It requires creative ongoing improvement processes to utilize the cycle of experimentation and experience in order to build an engaging and dynamic learning environment (Reich, 2023). In his contemporary educational research, an inclusive design thinking playbook, Reich (2023) also argued that positive changes in learning science, new technologies and innovative theories depend on their adoption by classroom educators. Educators worldwide face the perpetual challenge to design meaningful activities to enhance engagement and foster active learning (Hyun et al., 2017). DST can harness a motivational self-system proposed by Dörnyei (2009) by exploring factors that are beneficial for second language learners. However, there is limited literature on DST, and it has not been systematically studied (De Jager et al., 2017).

In Vietnamese state funded universities, there is a strong emphasis on assessment and limited time for learning English. Students, especially those whose major is not English, typically lack the context to develop their speaking

skills. Vietnamese students, specifically those who learn English as a foreign language, tend to lack confidence, fear making mistakes while speaking, and do not have enough vocabulary (Vo et al., 2018). Moreover, in the second-tier universities, English is still being taught in traditional ways and students face challenges due to limited facilities and lower proficiency in technology. Our research project aims to explore how to use DST in a second-tier university as a mode of engagement in an English language class.

Using trio-ethnography, our findings emerge from our back-and-forth conversations and photographs, reflecting multiple facets of our narrative experiences (Le et al., 2021). Our practices are non-hierarchical; in which we share our stories without judgment or criticism. In this trust-based space, three themes emerged during our dialogical narratives: elements of digital storytelling, peer-to-peer learning, and level of engagement. This action research indicates fresh approaches for educators to improve learning experience via small changes and manageable steps.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Personal stories can reveal complexities (Barone, 2009) and redefine established knowledge and practices (Barton & Papen, 2010). Narrative ethnographers use creative storytelling to reach, interact, and engage with a diverse audience (Brown et al., 2005; Christensen, 2012; Davey & Benjaminsen, 2021). Storytelling has become a powerful tool to enhance creativity and create joyful learning experiences to engage learners via multiple interactive channels (Perry, 2020).

The presentation of stories through electronic technology is known as digital storytelling (DST). DST was initially developed in the 1990s by Lambert and Dana Atchley as a tool for fostering community interaction, development, and empowerment (De Jager et al., 2017). It is “the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling” (Robin, 2008, p. 222). A digital story blends visual and aural features (Lambert & Hessler, 2018). It combines a strong reflective, emotional and personal component (Lambert & Hessler, 2018). Weaving images, music, narrative, and voice together, it offers deep dimensions and vivid colors to characters, situations, experiences, and insights (Razmi et al., 2014).

Elements of digital storytelling (DST)

Lambert (2010) indicates seven elements of DST, as in the table below:

Table 1. Center for Digital Storytelling's Seven Elements of DST

1. Point of view	What is the main point of the story, and what is the perspective of the author?
2. A dramatic question	A critical question that keeps the viewer's attention and will be answered by the end of the story.
3. Emotional content	Serious issues that come alive in a personal and powerful way and connect the story to the audience.
4. The gift of your voice	A way to personalize the story to help the audience understand the context.
5. The power of the soundtrack	Music or other sounds that support and embellish the storyline.
6. Economy	Using just enough content to tell the story without overloading the viewer.
7. Pacing	The rhythm of the story and how slowly or quickly it progresses.

DST includes four main phases, namely (a) pre-production (b) production (c) post-production, and (d) distribution (Kearney, 2013). Each phase included specific steps to encourage students to become more actively engaged in the learning process (Moradi & Chen, 2019). However, several challenges arise when applying DST in a language classroom, including lack of facilities, legal issues, students' limited proficiency in technology, and assessment criteria (Duong & Pham, 2023).

Peer-to-peer learning (P2PL)

Peer learning encompasses various teaching activities centered around the concept of collaborative, horizontally-based interactions (Rousiley et al., 2024). Rather than transmitting the information from teachers to students, Freire (2010) suggests organizing learning around mutual, communicative interactions toward authentic and open dialogue. P2PL, in the context of digital storytelling, indicates a collaborative learning process wherein students work together,

share knowledge and extend competence. This approach engages students in a creative learning process that fosters a number of abilities, including critical thinking, communication, and digital literacy (Robin, 2008). Several studies have been conducted to explore the efficacy of P2PL in DST. Huang et al. (2017) discover that collaborative DST activities improve students' problem-solving and critical thinking abilities. To enhance the teacher's presence in the student learning process, Peters and Agullana (2022) also suggest integrating social activities before introducing academic content to establish relationships between both peers and the instructor, which develops trust among peers. Nair and Yunus (2021) confirm that digital storytelling significantly enhances the communication between students in the class, especially for speaking skills and vocabulary learning. The process of building and creating stories, and adding visual and sound effects stimulates the students' interest in the classroom activities and therefore enhances their English speaking skills (Fitri et al., 2022).

Level of engagement (LoE)

Yeh and Mitric (2019) conducted research using Instagram as a platform for students studying English as a second language learners to perform their DST. The result of this study indicates that DST significantly enhances learners' motivation and engagement in the lesson. The students were asked to use Instagram to present their stories through posts in the role of an artist in their fields. Since the students were allowed to discover their field of interests at their own pace, their confidence level was significantly raised and the engagement was noted through conversations they built up on their platform. Robin (2008, p. 223) presents a convergence of elements in digital storytelling in education in the figure below:



Figure 1. The convergence of digital storytelling in education (Robin, 2008)

This project researches DST in the Vietnamese context where students struggle to learn English and teachers seek inspiration to create a comfortable yet creative learning environment. We define DST as using digital tools to tell a story and present it through both digital platforms and interactive performance in class. It evolved into a hybrid digital and live action presentation. This research illustrates how elements of DST are applied in classroom settings. It also inspires educators to creatively apply DST to enhance the learning experience.

Even though collaboration work and interaction are beneficial in learning a second language, there is limited research about the relationship between young learners' level of engagement (LoE) and their interaction patterns (Agurtzane & Kopinska, 2020). Active participation in a collaborative DST task would reduce negative emotions and attitudes, as well as encourage greater engagement among groups with complex relationships (Fachter et al., 2021).

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study uses trio-ethnography, a combination of duo-ethnography and photography (Le et al., 2022). Duo-ethnography engages the researcher in a multi-dialogic process (Sawyer & Liggett, 2012). This dialogical and peer exploratory approach generates multiple layers of meaning of narratives shared by researchers and enables researchers to scrutinize and re-conceptualize existing beliefs (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). In addition, photography is a visual method of inquiry, which promotes critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs (Wang & Burris, 1997). It positions participants both as participants and co-researchers (Shaw, 2021) to reflect on their community issues (Wang & Burris, 1997). In trio-ethnography, multiple diverse voices are validated by means of Indigenous ‘sharing circles,’ a mode of discourse and inquiry in which researchers and participants are connected, transformed, and enlightened (Lavallée, 2009).

Inspired by the work of Le et al. (2022, p. 11) on trio-ethnography: “the importance of trio-ethnography is the number of voices, not the number of researchers”, we practice creatively by weaving the diverse voices of five researchers: two pairs of educator-learner and one story telling expert. Two researchers are Vietnamese educators, one has been teaching English as a second language for non-majored students in a public university, the other taught communicative English in an international program in Vietnam. Two other researchers are students; one is a Marketing student who learns English as a prerequisite to graduate, and one is a student majoring in Japanese language. The last researcher is a performance storyteller and British lecturer who has lived and worked in Vietnam for many years.

Ethnography was chosen to provide an approach embracing students as both researchers and participants. The three-lens approach explores multidimensional and subjective challenges that students face in digital storytelling. Photovoice allows researchers to share their experience economically (Wang & Burris, 1997) and photos were reused from digital stories that students posted on their social media (e.g. Facebook, Youtube, TikTok).

The students were informed they would be observed and photographs taken of their storyboards and artifacts. They were offered the opportunity not to participate but none withdrew. The observer role allowed for real-time assessment of the experimental group’s behavior, complementing the participants’ narratives and providing a holistic view of the project outcomes. The data collection drew heavily on one participant’s narrative as a representative voice of the experimental group. While this limits the breadth of perspective, it provides an in-depth, qualitative understanding of the group’s experience with DST and P2PL.

Our research project focused on using DST in teaching English in Vietnam. The project ran from September 2022 to April 2023. After the two meetings in early September 2022 to get to know each other, brainstorm ideas and discuss methodology, we observed two classes using DST in two periods. We set the ground rules of sharing circles: equality of status, critical thinking, and proactive listening. Each lens led one circle, starting with educators, then learners, and storyteller. The circle’s leader would start, moderate and write a discussion summary. With proactive listening, other researchers naturally formed dialogue. Data in sharing circles were audio-recorded. Then each author transcribed their own contributions to the circles.

Period I was in October with a Halloween theme. In December, we observed a further class in period II with the Christmas theme. During the observation, we took notes and photos, with the agreement of all students. After each observation, each member in our research team had one week to reflect and transcribe his/her ideas in the sharing circles with their own lens. Then we convened our sharing circles, in which we shared our thoughts and observations, clarified our ideas, asked questions about problems within the intervention, and gave feedback. The sharing was conducted in a comfortable environment wherein honest thoughts were facilitated and appreciated. The sharing circles were a mixture of offline meetings and online meetings. First, the research team met offline to share their own ideas and react to other ideas, naturally forming co-emerging conversations in verbal format. Then all ideas were transcribed into a Google doc, shared file. Finally, we conducted an online meeting to clarify the written format of our dialogues. In these trust-based spaces we explored an understanding of ourselves as educators and individuals and our perspectives on professional practice and social change more broadly. Three themes emerged during our dialogical narratives: *elements of digital storytelling*, *peer-to-peer learning*, and *level of engagement*. The research process was illustrated by the following table:

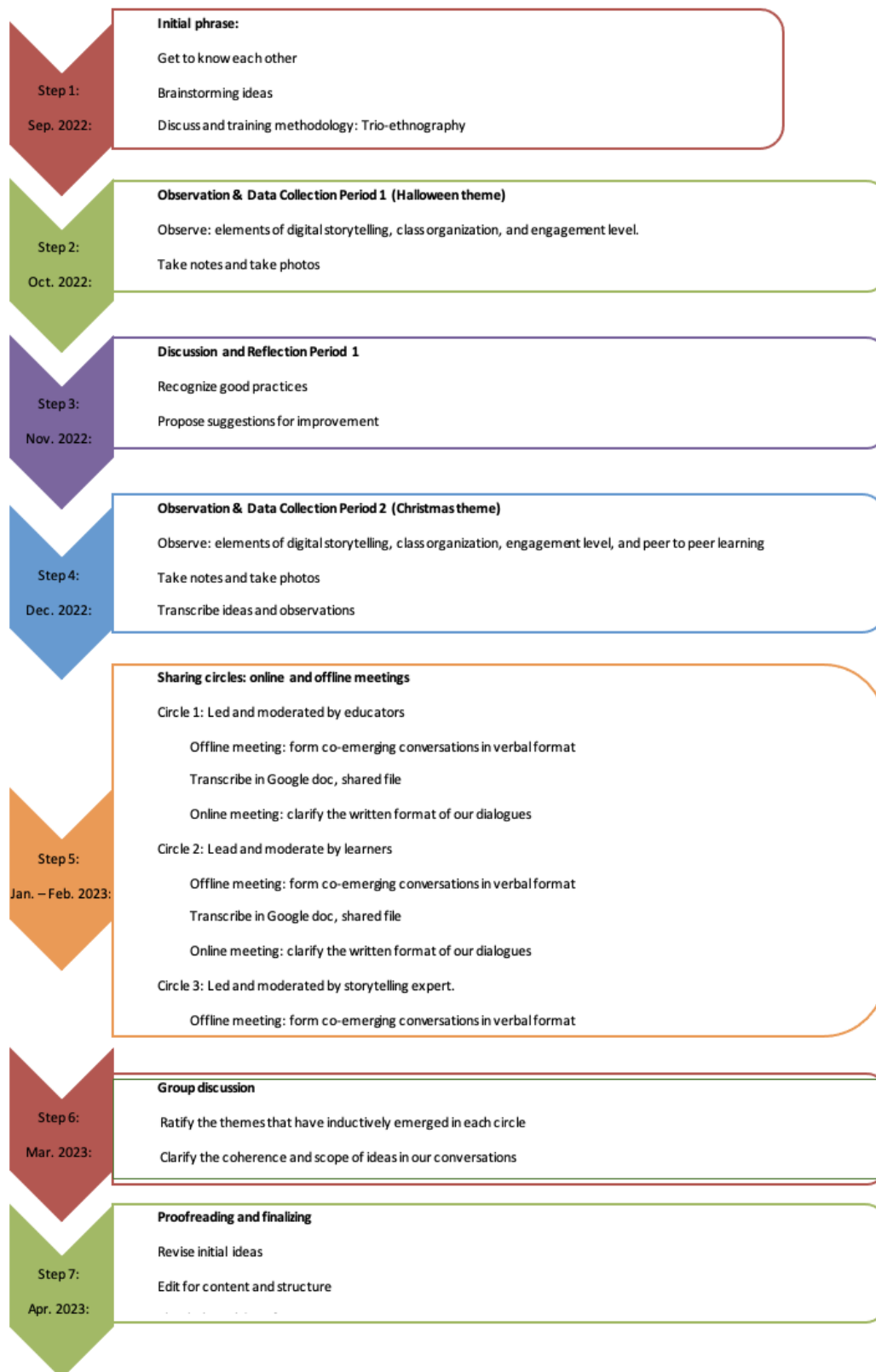


Figure 2. The research process

In reporting the data, we use A, B, C, ... to de-identify the authors. Whilst some contributions reveal the role of the speaker, the overall aim of anonymisation is to minimize assumptions founded in identity or roles during the reading of the text.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Trio-ethnographic reflection on using digital storytelling (DST) to enhance learners' engagement

Circle 1: Elements of DST

A: Gen Z are all digital natives. In my teaching experience, students are motivated to engage with DST when they can reference popular trends on platforms such as TikTok, Facebook and Instagram. Creative content in TikTok connects users who share common interests or experiences, and opens a space for self-expression (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022). My students are animated in class when they discuss their favourite influencers and memes. They share with me that they felt touched when the stories reflected their own experiences. They also associate with the emerging issues of their generation. For instance, the stories usually start with hot dramas and memes that everyone will talk about all day long on all social media platforms.

Figure 3 is the Padlet I used as a platform for my students to share their video clips to introduce their team. As passionate TikTok viewers, my students know what makes catchy video clips. They enjoy making their team introduction in the TikTok format, which is similar to candy - quick, convenient, and easy to consume. However, creating a more extended video clip with deeper messages would be like making a meal. It's more complicated, requiring more knowledge and techniques.

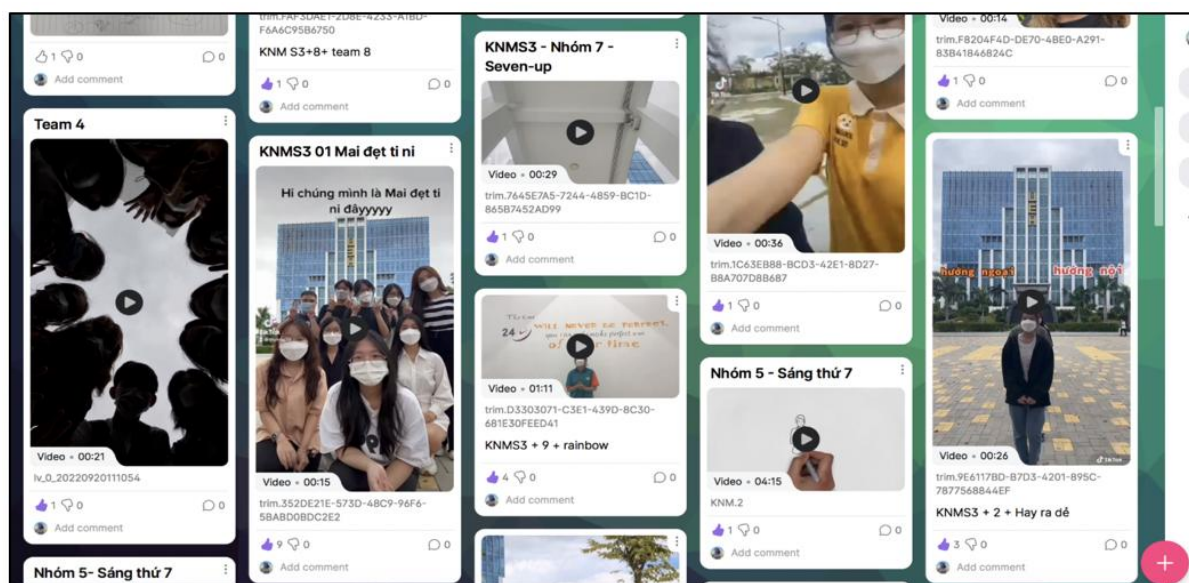


Figure 3. Joy Garden Padlet: Each team introduced themselves to the class through a TikTok clip identified by team name and slogan

B: I share A's opinion that students in my class have a lot of fun while creating their stories. Not only did they show passion in preparing the props and the video but they also made efforts to speak English. I also noticed that their confidence was significantly enhanced. Before writing, students discuss whether they want to be a character in the story or the storyteller. Then they set up a clear standpoint at the beginning of the writing process. They personalize the story by adding their own emotions. Related to seven different elements of DST as mentioned by Lambert (2010), students do have specific considerations related to the standpoint, emotional content, and the power of the soundtrack. The soundtrack is the project's highlight as students utilized available soundtracks on the given website and became frustrated as they had to pay extra fees for the Soundtracks they wanted. Some other groups were more creative as they used their voices to create the sound effects themselves. Thanks to the sound effects and the plots, students captivate the attention of the audience.

While writing Halloween stories some students confused their audience with the complexity of their story. I think this resulted from their dependence on English language translation tools. Some pre-intermediate level students used Google Translate to convert their stories from Vietnamese to English. Even though the story sounded natural and persuasive in their mother tongue, they struggled to convey all the details into English. This highlights the risk that digital tools can be an obstacle that impedes students' improvement in their language proficiency.

D: I observed B's class using a DST exercise as a means to improve their use of English. They worked in groups of four or five. The storytelling project promoted their interest and enthusiasm, and all the groups produced lively stories. The project proved to have value beyond the immediate goal of learning English, and the students appreciated its novelty. The most obvious drawback was that technical challenges used up too much time, both in creating and presenting the stories (Figure 3). One group took several minutes to properly connect their laptop to the projector. Several groups encountered problems with the volume and quality of the soundtrack.

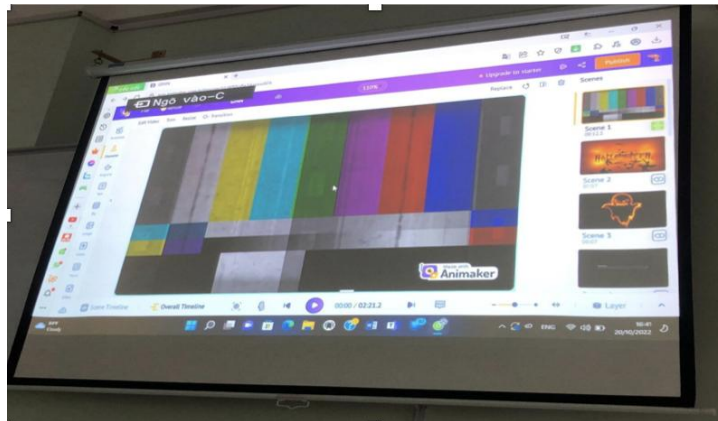


Figure 4. Technical issues: common challenges of most public universities in Vietnam

The colour column screen appears when the internet connection is lost or the signal is not available

One group had a member deliver the dialogue live over their animation. That prompted me to suggest that the project could be improved by stipulating that the groups create digital visuals and produce a live soundtrack. This would increase the use of English as the dialogue would need to be spoken. It would also reduce vulnerability to technical issues related to sounds and introduce a helpful playfulness as group members would also have to produce live sound effects.

A few weeks later, I observed a second class doing the same exercise, but with the live soundtrack stipulation. The technical problems were much reduced, and the engagement of both 'actors' and the audience were much higher.

E: I'm not confident in presenting in English in front of a whole class, but DST offers more opportunities for me to practice speaking skills. I can record my voice then my team members add it into the video clip. Sometimes, I enjoyed the beauty of the voices from other members in my class. And yes, my team and I faced numerous challenges with technical problems, during the DST production process and showing our video clips in class. Since we usually used Canva or CapCut to prepare our presentations or short video clips, we did spend time learning a new platform, Animaker, for this project. There are limitations on the characters, sound effects or animations etc. that we can use for free in this tool. My teams, and possibly other teams, were not willing to pay money to have extra features to make our video clips fancier. During the presentation, we couldn't show our video clip smoothly because of an unstable internet connection, insufficient connectors, and over amplified sound effects.

Discussion summary

In this circle, three main things are acknowledged. Firstly, during the DST process, the primary requirement was that students present their story in English. However, it became clear that the interest of their audience was dependent on their scripting and storytelling skills. It is clear that support for both scripting and presenting techniques can enhance the benefits of the project. According to Kim and Lee (2018), students need to identify stories that merit telling, then storyboard the digital story, mapping out each image, technique and element of their story with consideration of effects, transitions, and sound. Secondly, we found that Gen Z students are more knowledgeable and capable than older educators in choosing and using digital tools. Hence, the educators just need to introduce basic

tools and clearly explain the assessment criteria, then grant students freedom to choose the tools and technology that best fit the requirements and their competence. Finally, the digital element was an effective means to arouse engagement and support language use, however the didactic gains were impaired by technical difficulties. Technology is both an essential element of DST and a factor that can curve the quality and effectiveness of the final result. It aligns with Moradi and Chen (2019) argument: technology has significant educational promise with appropriate application, and its effectiveness depends on technology itself and on its users.

Circle 2: Peer-to-peer learning (P2PL)

E: I joined as a student attending teacher B's class. I have picked up more practical knowledge from my classmates. First, the preparation for the project. We had to determine the content, analyze, edit, cast, rehearse, and prepare the sound and essential items. Second, learning pronunciation, presentation, role-playing, and character coordination. We had fun and formed our storyboard together (Figure 5).

However, I realize that our pronunciation is the most important issue. Our pronunciation is not standard, and our English level is not good to understand what other friends say. That can be frustrating, and my classmates were unable to understand the plot, so they could not interact with the presenting group.

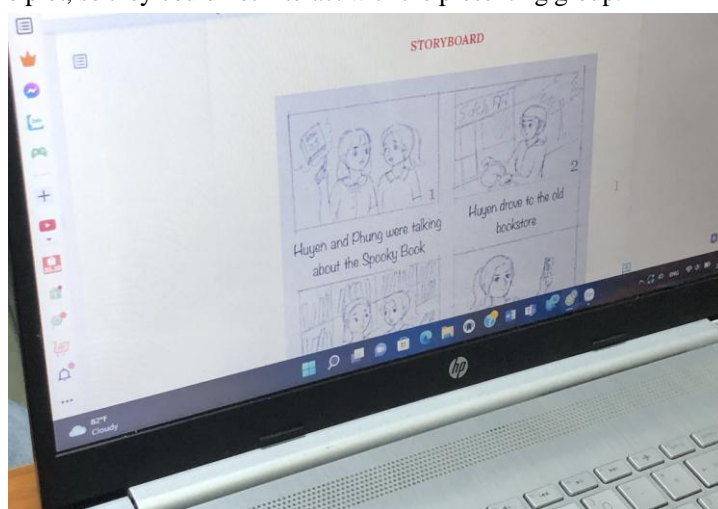


Figure 5. Students sketched storyboards in preparation for the digital story

C: I observed that P2PL fostered greater ease and collaboration among students compared to passive listening to the teacher. They actively shared their knowledge, exchanged their ideas, and provided feedback, enriching everyone's learning experience.

However, its effectiveness diminished when scaled up to large-sized classrooms. During the session, I noticed that while one group presented, others were often distracted, preparing their own presentations or engaging in side conversations. On some occasions, the presenting group did not introduce their work effectively thus failing to engage their peers.

I was impressed with the use of learner-centered techniques, deviating from traditional teaching practices in Vietnam. This approach encourages students to actively make sense of new knowledge by connecting it to prior learning and engaging in discussions. A key element is balancing teacher-directed instruction ("putting in") and learner-centered activities ("drawing out"). In B's class, I observed a ratio of approximately 80 percent "drawing out" and 20 percent "putting in" due to the time constraint. However, I believe an increased percentage of "putting in" could enhance outcomes. For instance, summarizing main points and providing constructive feedback after each group presentation would have helped some students follow along more effectively. This would ensure that students benefit from the structure and guidance of teacher-directed activities while also fostering autonomy and active participation in their learning (Abdullaeva, 2023).

B: I have tried to use the pedagogic techniques that C mentioned, but there are some challenges to balance "putting in" and "drawing out". In the processes of writing and editing, the students had discussions to make stories meaningful to the audience. They cooperated and frequently conducted lively conversations about making their stories meaningful

and delivering a moral lesson to the audience. This is considered an advantage of DST as other skills (problem-solving, group work) are integrated into the learning process (Thang et al., 2014). However, when stories were presented to the whole class, some students were distracted by electronic devices. Some students were finishing their presentations; some did not want to be bothered by others' stories and sought entertainment on phones or laptops.

A: I feel you B. It's tough to control numerous distractions in a large classroom. Let me share with you my teaching experiences. I usually divide the groups into diverse roles: presenters, friends, and judges. After each team presentation, the Friend team will give feedback about good things that the team has done, while the Judge team will challenge the team with critical questions and suggestions for improvement. Thus students can learn from different roles and lenses, not only how to tell intriguing DST but also how to listen and to generate constructive criticism.

I agree with C that P2PL is two-way or more, and feedback plays an important role for improvement. Feedback is not only from the lecturer but also from classmates. As an educator, my role, and our role B, possibly, is to be a good planner, organizer, and moderator to nurture the learning loop. There are many sources and ways of learning in a class. Sometimes, the teachers will summarize the main points, but sometimes, one team can do it, and sometimes, there is no single summarization for all.

D: In order to sustain motivation when I invite feedback, I suggest that the respondent first mentions something that could be improved and secondly mentions something they felt to be good. The groups were all busy and interactive, but almost all of their discourse was in their native language. It might be helpful to include a more ludic element during the process - such as, for example, five-minute periods in which all discourse must be exclusively in English, assisted only by gesture - thus creating a "guess what I am saying" game. Additionally, one could introduce an exclusively English Q and A session.

E: To be honest, our teacher's assignments were at first confusing to all of us. We used to believe that it would be simpler if the teacher just taught and provided us with materials to review for tests. However, as I worked on the project with teammates, I understood how important it was for me to communicate well with them in order to discuss the outline, tools, and character design. It was important for us to fully understand the phrases and match them with photos frame by frame in order for the entire story to make sense.

Before the presentation day, we had to memorize and understand the lines to deliver them naturally. Even though some of my classmates were not paying attention on the day of the presentation, most of us tried our best and felt amazed afterwards. Personally, I felt boosted and motivated to do better next time. While other groups were performing, I made notes on their positive and negative points so that I wouldn't make the same mistakes and perform better. I also learned new words and expressions from their story, which was exciting. This experience was incredible and really beneficial to my English abilities: I needed to immerse myself in English in a variety of ways, including using digital media, practicing lines, and creating and revising scripts (Figure 5). Overall, to me, this experience highlights the concept of P2PL (Figure 6).

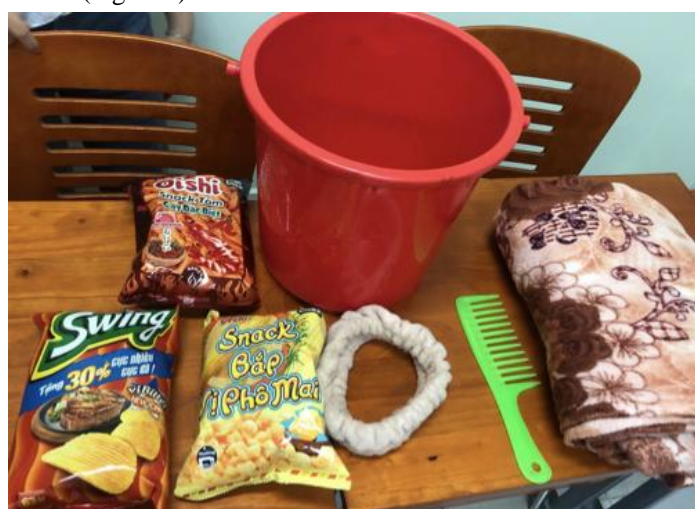


Figure 6. Performance tools gathered by team members to demonstrate their performance. Props included snacks, a comb, a blanket, a bucket and a hair band

While C made some valid observations, I still believe that P2PL is dependent on students actively seeking and absorbing knowledge, as well as being eager to learn from one another. I believe that students are responsible for their own learning. Do they try to learn and remember new things? Unfortunately, some students may struggle to apply storytelling in their presentations, which can lead to confusion. This can make them too preoccupied with their own presentation and not pay attention to others. Additionally, students who struggle with English may have difficulty fully understanding presentations, which can frustrate the audience and lead them to lose patience and interest. However, if a group prepares well for their presentation, they are more likely to listen to and learn from other groups.

C: Thank you, E, for providing me with valuable insights into peer-to-peer learning. Reading through your notes, I got a more thorough understanding of the relevance of peer motivation in providing a supportive and engaging learning environment. According to Raffone and Monti (2019), peer motivation is important in P2PL because it can help create a supportive and engaging learning environment. When learners are working together and supporting each other, they are more likely to feel motivated and invested in the learning process. I was impressed with your proactive approach to note-taking and your team's dedication to deliver a terrific performance. I encourage you to build on this momentum and strive for even greater success in the future.

Discussion Summary

Our findings highlight how DST facilitates collaboration and transforms classroom dynamics. Student E reflected that teamwork underscored the importance of effective communication, challenging the notion that teacher-led methods are always preferable. This shift aligns with Staley and Freeman (2017) assertion that DST can redefine teacher-student relationships through proactive engagement. However, to achieve the full potential of language learning, both teacher-led instruction and student-based activities are required. In the Vietnamese context active peer participation is the driver of benefits from P2PL.

Peer assessment is also found to play a significant role, supporting Tatli et al. (2018) findings on the benefits of collaborative feedback. Participant A's role-based assessments allowed students to explore storytelling, active listening, and constructive criticism. This structured feedback approach appears effective in East Asian educational settings, where traditional hierarchies can influence learning dynamics.

In conclusion, while P2PL and DST show promise for language learning and student engagement, its implementation requires careful considerations of cultural context and existing educational practices. Unlike previous studies that often present P2PL as uniformly beneficial, our research reveals the need for balanced teacher intervention and structured support systems, particularly in traditional educational settings transitioning to more collaborative approaches.

Circle 3: Level of engagement (LoE)

D: Both the digital and storytelling elements elicited enthusiasm and a high level of engagement, although at times during the creation phase the whole team was waiting for one member to complete a digital task, so there were moments of disengagement. The students clearly enjoyed creating their stories and using their digital expertise and were proud of their work. They relished creating moments of high drama and the gratification of emotional responses from their audience. The students were at ease with the digital element of the project, but less familiar with scripting and presenting a story. However, despite the novel challenge, the storytelling element delivered both educational and motivational benefits. I observed that the students showed enthusiasm in creating, performing and watching the emotional journeys of their stories.

Mandating the topics (Halloween, Christmas) helped to focus creativity. It may be that further mandatory elements would ensure more participation from the shyer members of the classes - for example, one might request that each group must comment however briefly, in English, on each of their peers' presentations. In the second class, I observed that the digital element was simpler, and the dialogue was live. The students were more engaged, more confident, and more humorous. It may be that the digital element lent them some security by broadening the focus of attention of the audience, so they felt less exposed and more confident to speak and perform in front of their peers.

C: I would like to focus on the level of engagement (LoE) of each class theme. The observers analyzed the level of engagement (LoE) each class theme contributed, using a 1-5 rating scale to capture key performance indicators:

1 - Poor, 2 - Below Average, 3 - Average, 4 - Good, 5 - Excellent.

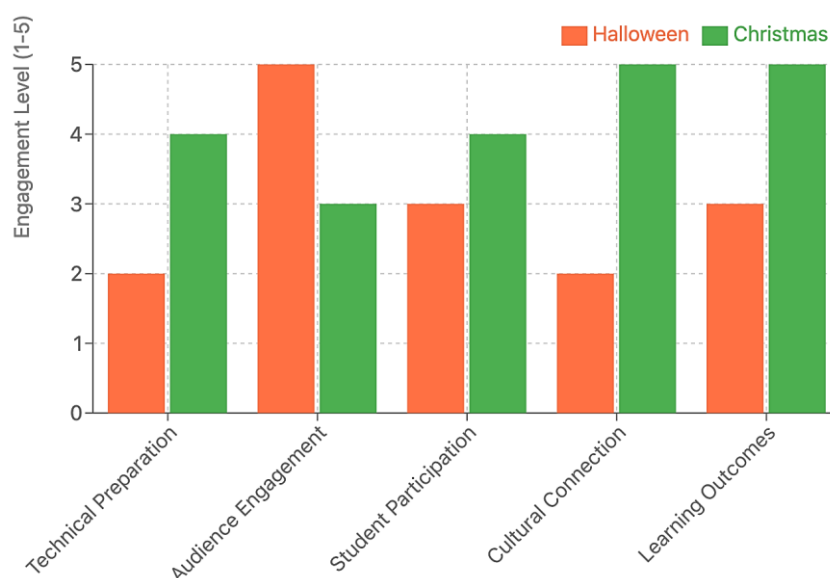


Figure 7. Comparison between Halloween theme and Christmas theme

I have also tabulated explanations for the scores to clarify the reasoning behind each assessment:

Table 3. Detailed explanation of each theme rating

Category	Halloween theme (digital presentation)	Rate	Christmas (digital and live presentation)	Rate
Technical Preparation	Issues with introduction, anxiety-related problems, forgotten lines	2	Well-prepared and invested in performance	4
Pronunciation & Delivery	Lack emphasis on pronunciation	2	Mixed results - some too quiet, others used complex language	3
Audience engagement	Very entertained audience	4	Some audience members distracted by phones	3
Assessment Behavior	Not actively assessing other presentations	2	Actively taking notes during other presentations	4
Learning outcome	Basic group work and vocabulary expansion	3	Complex learning about language use, audience engagement, and group dynamics	5

The Christmas theme showed higher LoE when applying DST due to multiple factors:

- The theme motivation: Christmas shares similarities with the Vietnamese New Year (Tet holiday), such as the emphasis on family gatherings, gift-giving, and feasting. This familiarity and cultural overlap may have contributed to a more positive reception of the assignment.
- In the second attempt, the teacher provided clearer instructions, better modeled processes and procedural feedback to help students produce more engaging stories.
- The freedom to choose their own tools and approach may have allowed students to express themselves more authentically, enhancing their overall work.

However, audience engagement was stronger for the Halloween theme, likely due to its inherent thematic appeal. The elements of mystery, suspense, and unpredictability in Halloween presentations captured and maintained attention more effectively. In contrast, the predictability of Christmas-themed stories may have contributed to lower engagement.

B: I agree with C that the topic of Christmas was more successful and yielded better results than the Halloween topic since the students are more familiar with Christmas in Vietnamese culture. From my personal observation, DST enhanced our conventional teaching methods and improved the students' writing skills. With conventional writing activities, students are given instructions to write and then teachers would correct and give feedback. With Digital storytelling, students need to think of their stories as a big picture where not only the plot of the story should be well-written, but both technical and presentation skills are required. Students' talking time dominates the class time as they frequently ask questions and discuss their project's next move. The role of the teacher is, therefore, switched to observer and facilitator (Iding et al., 2002; Meletiadou, 2022; Romeo, 2006; Shamatha et al., 2004). Furthermore, combining technology and conventional stories is something new to the students. At first, most students felt overwhelmed by the workload that should be completed within the time range. Yet, they found excitement and engagement in using their effort to bring their stories to the audience. In the Vietnamese educational system, it is not common to express emotions explicitly, so students found it both challenging and rewarding to do so in the context of storytelling.

A: I agree with B that DST can enhance students' writing skills, especially their communication skills on social media as well as inside the classroom, before, during, and after the presentation. A few days before the show-time, my students would reveal an Official Teaser on YouTube and send YouTube links of their video clips to the class Zalo Group and Facebook fan pages to draw attention (Figure 7). In the show, they sold tickets to the movie and ended the show with a lucky draw (Figure 8). After the show, they posted "Thank you" statuses to update key numbers of their projects and a feedback form for improvement. I enjoyed listening to new versions of old stories and was proud to see the effort made by students to step out of their comfort zones.



Figure 8. Official Teaser on YouTube, which proactively engages students before the presentation with 31 subscribers and 53 likes



Figure 9. Movie tickets and lucky draw. The presentation is like a movie show time with games

E: As I shared previously, at first, I was skeptical about the assignment. Honestly, I felt confused and unsure where to begin. But I had no option but to trust and follow the teacher's directions since I believed this approach would benefit me in one way or another. I eventually recognized the significance of each small activity to complete a whole story as I progressed through the task: I began by researching tools to add voice overs, music, and special effects. I created many sample scripts with my team and compared them to see which one was the best. Then, I

finalized the best version and submitted it to the teacher. Following that, we prepped the props to ensure that the performance was as complete as possible.

From these experiences, I somewhat changed my perspective on the teacher's teaching method. And, upon reflection, I must say that I recall the words I used and how much fun we had finishing that story. The most vivid memory we have is of being on stage to perform. At that time, I felt recognized. We then watched other groups perform, and I've never felt more connected to my peers. We laughed, offered each other comments, and spoke about it.

One more thing is that, it was somewhat like a talent show, I recognized my classmates' talents as well. I still remember the way a male classmate presented, speaking clearly and coherently with extremely good acting. I thought that if I ever had a project to do and pitch, he would definitely be a strong candidate.

Discussion summary

DST has great potential to boost the enthusiasm of students. The integration of digital elements, such as producing teasers and sharing their work on platforms like YouTube and Facebook, gives students the opportunity to showcase their creativity and divert attention from their performance anxiety. Student E expressed pride in completing a story despite initial frustration, realizing the value of small steps in achieving the final product. This shift in attitude aligns with findings of Hava (2021) that students' self-confidence and personal engagement significantly improve after DST activities.

Our experience shows that the teacher needs to ensure the technical elements are carefully calibrated to students' capabilities to prevent time loss on execution problems. The live delivery of 'soundtracks' proved particularly beneficial in the English language teaching context. In doing so, the students engaged in collaborative learning as they devised scripts, corrected each other's pronunciation, and created non-verbal sound effects. Student E highlighted how group activities fostered laughter, discussions, and a stronger sense of connection with peers. DST not only helps improve English speaking and technical skills but also fosters creative thinking and willingness to step outside their comfort zones.

For attention and engagement aspects, Yang et al. (2022) suggest that DST automatically improves student attention span. However, our study identified persistent distractions, particularly B noted some lack of attention. These distractions highlight the need for strategies that can enhance focus and foster consistent engagement, particularly in large classroom settings. Participant D's suggestion of incorporating "ludic elements" and enforcing English-only periods could mitigate these challenges.

Further, empathy plays a crucial role in fostering connections between lecturers and students. Bassi (2016) notes its importance in designing inclusive classrooms that empower students to be reflective, independent, and proactive decision-makers. This was evident in how students engaged collaboratively during DST projects and supported one another in overcoming challenges.

5. CONCLUSION

The trio-ethnographic methodology employed in this study manifests voices from students, storytellers and educators in a public university in Vietnam. The dialogic structure of the methodology enhances readability and includes many observations that offer further opportunities for research. Furthermore, trio-ethnography provides a record of the development of thinking and how insights arise from the interaction of multiple points of view.

In the competitive, theory-laden environment of Vietnamese schooling, students who are not English majors often lack motivation and engagement in language learning and face challenges from under-equipped infrastructure. Digital storytelling (DST) proves a welcome respite for students while maintaining their learning trajectory. The digital element engages their technical skills and allows them to demonstrate creative competence beyond the requirements of language learning. DST aligns with research by both serving the needs of and benefiting the communities and cultures where the research is conducted (Davey & Benjaminsen, 2021). However, there is limited literature on DST and it has not been systematically studied (De Jager et al., 2017).

As students create their stories, teachers shift from a didactic role to that of empathic facilitator, fostering peer-to-peer learning and creating a supportive learning environment. Students are empowered to become adventurous in their engagement with the English language. Moreover, the task builds trust and relationships which support their ongoing study. Our observations revealed contextual nuances not fully addressed in existing literature. While Raffone

and Monti (2019) emphasize peer motivation as a driver of collaborative learning, our findings found more complexity. Though we observed similar benefits during group work, challenges emerged during whole-class presentations. The students felt more comfortable collaborating in groups rather than passively listening to the teacher, suggesting that distractions and uneven participation diminished engagement. These findings suggest that cultural and contextual factors significantly influence peer-to-peer learning outcomes. Moreover, digital technology, which can sometimes be a classroom distraction and undermine engagement by providing quick answers, can nevertheless be harnessed to increase student motivation and peer-to-peer learning. However, it became clear that technology is best used not to supplant but to augment live teaching, learning, and presentation.

Our research has several educational implications. Firstly, teachers need to find a balance between direct instruction (“putting in”) and student-driven activities (“drawing out”) to give students adequate scaffolding while encouraging exploration, creativity, and collaborative independence. Secondly, educators can leverage Gen Z’s proficiency with digital platforms and should be wary of over-specifying digital tools. Lastly, teachers should prioritize post-activity feedback, summarizing key points and addressing misconceptions. This step reinforces learning outcomes and ensures both presenting and audience students benefit.

Our method and the output may be helpful for other educators, encouraging collaboration, discussion, and active engagement in the learning process. However, this was a small-scale project, limited in time and involving only 80 students in two classes in one public university. The future research can provide further learning to optimize the integration of face-to-face teaching and DST.

Conflict of Interest: No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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