

Digital Storytelling: A Catalyst to Enhance English Language Learning in Malaysia

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Abstract

English Language Learning (ELL) stands as a pivotal subject in worldwide education, gaining increasing significance in the landscape of 21st-century learning. The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in ELL, particularly from early childhood, has been a focal point. Nonetheless, a knowledge gap persists concerning the challenges and possibilities linked to the incorporation of Digital Storytelling (DST) within the Malaysian educational context. This conceptual paper explores the transformative role of DST as a catalyst for advancing ELL in the Malaysian educational landscape. Through an analysis of the global and Malaysian context, the paper sheds light on the unique opportunities and challenges associated with implementing DST in ELL. Additionally, it delves into the impact of DST on language skills, creative thinking, and critical analysis, offering insights that resonate with the goals of the Malaysian Education Blueprint and align with the aspirations of Sustainable Development Goal 4. The findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on effective strategies to enhance language education, particularly within the diverse and multicultural framework of Malaysia.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling, English Language Learning, English as Second Language, Information and Communication Technology, Language Skills

Introduction

English Language Learning (ELL) is a global endeavour that encompasses a diverse range of challenges and opportunities. The significance of the English language as a global lingua franca has led to a surge in the number of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners worldwide (Alam, 2023; Hui et al., 2022; Mu et al., 2023). The difficulties in learning English can include dealing with different cultures (Getie, 2020) and finding effective strategies to teach and learn based on the learners' needs (Murray & Christison, 2019). On the bright side, learning English opens up many opportunities, like better communication with people from different cultures, access to information globally and more chances for education and jobs (Durova, 2023; Rao, 2019; Sinaga & Pustika, 2021). Teaching and learning English are changing and new ideas and tools, like using technology and focusing on what learners need, are helping to make learning English better for everyone. Researchers are studying how to make learning English easier

and more enjoyable (Shin & Yunus, 2021; Sinaga & Oktaviani, 2020), so that people all over the world can become better at it. Understanding students' attitudes and motivation towards learning English has been a focal point of research, shedding light on the individual elements or factors influencing students' attitudes and motivation in English language learning (Esra & Sevilen, 2021; Getie, 2020; Zin & Yunus, 2020). Moreover, the importance of English language learning has been highlighted in specific national contexts, such as Malaysia, where the government and educators are striving to outline the significance of developing English language learning for students (Renganathan, 2023).

The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has indeed significantly impacted ELL by transforming the traditional language learning domain (Parveen et al., 2023). Studies have shown that ICT plays a crucial role in improving language skills and motivating learners (Isnani, 2019; Sulistiyo et al., 2022). Teachers and students have generally shown positive perceptions towards the use of ICT in learning English, with students finding it more engaging and enjoyable (Gómez et al., 2018; Triassanti et al., 2022). Additionally, the use of ICT has been found to enhance language learning by providing personalised and interactive experiences, thereby promoting learner autonomy (Diari et al., 2023). Moreover, the integration of ICTs in pre-service English teacher education has shifted the focus from teaching knowledge to teaching competence and from teacher-centred to student-centred learning, facilitating learners to construct knowledge (Septiyanti et al., 2020). Students' perceptions of the use of ICT in ELL have been studied, revealing the potential for ICT to enhance language proficiency and listening comprehension of second language learners (Oktalia et al., 2018). Additionally, integrating learning materials with ICT has been found to enable language users to interact with website learning materials, leading to success in language learning (Shen et al., 2014). The use of ICT has been recognised as crucial for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Tjoa & Tjoa, 2016). Furthermore, the relations between ICT and sustainability have been discussed through the perspective of the SDGs, highlighting the importance of proper planning, analysis, implementation and monitoring for favourable outcomes (Velden, 2018). Moreover, the role of ICT in promoting quality education and lifelong learning, as per the UNESCO 2030 agenda, has been emphasised (Ghamrawi, 2023; Otto & Kerres, 2022).

However, challenges exist in the effective integration of ICT in English language education. While there are opportunities for ICT in language teaching, such as providing rich authentic learning materials and overcoming the lack of authentic language environment (Ullah & Farzana, 2018), there are also challenges related to access to ICT tools and the necessary skills for their effective use (Poudel, 2022). Furthermore, the utilisation of available ICT resources in English language teaching and learning is often found to be unsatisfactory, despite teachers possessing the necessary ICT skills (Samuel & Zaitun, 2007). UNESCO has indeed identified the need to engage ELLs with critical global literacies during instruction, emphasising the importance of developing global awareness and personal identity among language learners (Yol & Yoon, 2020). Furthermore, there is a growing focus on addressing deficit views and unproblematic framings of ELLs, aiming to promote a decolonial approach to English language learning (Chaka, 2021). Effective educational practices for ELLs within mainstream settings have been recognised as crucial, particularly in the context of political propaganda and the need to prepare students for the global market place and technological advances (Chaka, 2021). Other than that, challenges such as teachers' awareness and attitudes towards ICT in

language classrooms have been identified (Kalra, 2018; Undi & Hashim, 2021). Furthermore, studies have explored the obstacles and perceptions of using ICT in teaching English language among English teachers, particularly in Malaysia (Katemba, 2020; Raman & Mohamed, 2013).

In Malaysia, ELL faces significant challenges despite the recognised importance of English proficiency in the global context (Yacob et al., 2022). While the country acknowledges the critical role of English as a second language, the traditional methods of teaching may not always effectively engage learners and enhance their language skills (Ahmad & Yamat, 2020). There is a pressing need to address the existing limitations and explore innovative approaches to ELL. The utilisation of Digital Storytelling (DST) for enhancing English language learning presents a potential solution (Aljaraideh, 2020). However, amidst the potential benefits, there exists a gap in the understanding of the issues and opportunities associated with the integration of DST in the Malaysian context. Hence, this paper aims to explore how DST could be employed to suit the diverse linguistic and cultural landscape of Malaysia, ensuring inclusivity and maximising its impact on language learning outcomes. Addressing these considerations is crucial for establishing a comprehensive framework that optimally leverages DST as a catalyst for English language enhancement in the Malaysian educational context.

English Language Learning (ELL) in Malaysia

The history of English language learning (ELL) has been a subject of significant interest and research in the field of language studies. The evolution of English language teaching has been influenced by various factors such as learning strategies, learning styles and attitudes towards language learning. For instance, the impact of learning strategies on English language teaching has been widely recognised (Khansir et al., 2021). Additionally, the influence of learning styles on ESL students and the importance of learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom have been subjects of considerable research (Nikoopour & Khoshroudi, 2021). Moreover, the shift towards independent learning and the adoption of innovative teaching methods have been highlighted as significant developments in English language teaching (Robin et al., 2021; Thomas, 2022). Moreover, the impact of English language exposure and the adoption of English as a medium of instruction in educational institutions have been discussed, particularly in regions such as China and Southeast Asia (Domingo, 2020; Liu et al., 2020). The field of language learning and teaching is continuously evolving, with a focus on incorporating innovative approaches and technologies. In recent years, ELL has undergone a paradigm shift, with one of the most significant shifts being the focus on independent learning. This shift has been influenced by various factors, including the integration of information and communications technology (ICT) in the classroom, which has become paramount in language education (Thomas, 2022).

The status of ELL, specifically English as a Second Language (ESL), in Malaysia is closely related to the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and the national curriculum. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 has been influential in shaping the English Language Education Reform in Malaysian primary schools, aligning the curriculum with CEFR standards (Aziz et al., 2018; Azman, 2016; Mohaideen et al., 2020). The Integrated Curriculum for Primary or Secondary Schools (KBSR/KBSM) has been a key component of the ESL curriculum in Malaysia since 1983, emphasising the use of local literary texts as reading materials (Musa et al., 2021). In 2011, the Ministry of Education Malaysia reinforced the shift towards a formative assessment environment by introducing school-

based assessment (SBA) across all schools. This initiative was part of Standard Curriculum of Primary or Secondary Schools (KSSR/KSSM), a curriculum reform that established national standards and performance levels for primary school subjects, including ESL (Mohd Yunus et al., 2023). Additionally, the CEFR-informed curriculum structure has been implemented in English Language (EL) courses at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), reflecting the integration of CEFR in higher education (Musa et al., 2021).

ELL in Malaysia has undergone significant changes before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, Malaysia emphasised English language acquisition, especially in the education system, where it holds the status of a second language (Tan et al., 2022). However, the proficiency level in the English language among Malaysian students was reported to be low (Soh & Sharif, 2021). The implementation of programs such as the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) aimed to enhance the language proficiency of primary school pupils (Abdullah & Mohamad, 2020). Additionally, the use of English as a medium of instruction in higher education institutions was widespread (Soh & Sharif, 2021). One of the key challenges is the need to enhance the quality and accessibility of STEM education in the country (Idris et al., 2023). This is significant as it reflects the broader educational challenges faced by ELLs in accessing specialised fields such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Additionally, the lack of communicative ability among learners in Malaysia has been identified as a persistent problem (S. F. Omar et al., 2020). This directly impacts ELLs as they require effective communication skills to navigate academic and professional environments. The implementation of the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) in Malaysia has posed challenges too, particularly related to teachers' attitudes and readiness, as well as the lack of training provided by education authorities (Nawai & Said, 2020). This has implications for the quality of English language education received by ELLs and the effectiveness of language teaching methods.

The challenges of digital learning during the COVID-19 pandemic were experienced by English language learners in Malaysia, leading to a transformation from face-to-face interaction to online learning (Rif et al., 2023). The closure of schools and universities in response to COVID-19 necessitated the adoption of remote learning in Malaysia, as in much of the rest of the world (Alakrash & Razak, 2022). The integration of digital approaches such as mobile learning, gamification, virtual reality and online games in English lessons is becoming a trend in Malaysia (Azar & Tan, 2020). The pandemic brought about a shift to online learning, which posed challenges and obstacles for English language learners in Malaysia (Mahyoob, 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic led to changes in the learning environment, impacting children's language acquisition and vocabulary gains (Kartushina et al., 2021). The bilingual home language boost was also influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, shedding light on the modifications in language environments (Sheng et al., 2021). Additionally, the scarcity of digital devices and poor internet connectivity has hindered non-citizen children's participation in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Loganathan et al., 2021). The need to enhance the capabilities of lecturers in digital innovation is recognised as a crucial aspect of cultivating digital innovation in educational institutions such as the Teacher Training Institution of Malaysia (IPGM) (Lokman et al., 2022).

Digital learning and the use of ICT in English Language Learning (ELL) have been the focus of several studies. In the post-COVID-19 era, the challenges of digital learning and the

importance of promoting teachers' wellbeing in Asian countries, including Malaysia, have been emphasised (Chiu et al., 2021). The comparison of online learning effectiveness in English Language Education (ELE) in Malaysia and Indonesia highlighted the need to assess the effectiveness of online learning platforms in the Malaysian context (Saputri et al., 2020). The attitude and motivation of Islamic Studies students towards learning English have been subjects of study, indicating the ongoing importance of English language learning in Malaysia (Soh & Sharif, 2021). Additionally, the heutagogical approach (an educational strategy that emphasises self-directed learning) in online English pronunciation learning and game-based learning in improving English vocabulary among undergraduates have been explored, reflecting the evolving strategies in English language education post-COVID-19 (Noor et al., 2022). Undi and Hashim (2021) investigate teachers' attitudes towards using ICT in Primary ESL classrooms and the challenges they face, highlighting the barriers encountered in integrating ICT into ESL instruction. Kit and Ganapathy (2019) emphasise the insufficient and inefficient access to ICT applications as a significant drawback in attempting to use ICT in teaching environments, reflecting the practical challenges faced by ESL teachers in Malaysia.

The Malaysian government has recognised the significance of ICT and has prioritised its implementation as a crucial element in transforming the country into a developed and knowledge-based nation (Arokiasamy et al., 2015; Loh, 2023). In line with this, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has incorporated ICT into the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, aiming to ensure that all teachers receive training to effectively integrate ICT into teaching and support student learning (Yieng & Daud, 2018). This strategic approach aligns with the government's efforts to create a network society and advance the ICT environment to drive economic growth in Malaysia (Sau-Rong et al., 2020). This aligns closely with the seventh transformative shift outlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, which underscores the strategic use of ICT to amplify the reach of high-quality educational practices throughout Malaysia. Additionally, the government has introduced high-impact ICT projects to benefit the rural community, reflecting its efforts to bridge the digital divide and promote ICT usage among rural populations (S. Z. Omar et al., 2012). This corresponds with the fourth objective of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seek to create a more balanced and inclusive educational landscape, irrespective of geographical location, by providing equitable access to quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for everyone, regardless of whether they reside in rural or urban settings (UNESCO, 2018).

Digital Storytelling (DST) as a Catalyst to Enhance ELL

Digital storytelling (DST) is a versatile and innovative method that has been applied across various disciplines and educational settings. It involves the use of low-cost digital tools such as cameras, non-linear authoring tools and computers to create short multimedia stories (Sadik, 2008). Chan and Sage (2019) claimed that DST involves the creation of narratives using digital technologies, including images, texts, sounds, and interactive elements. Maureen et al. (2018) stated that DST integrates the traditional art of oral storytelling with technical tools to present personal tales with multimedia elements, including the storyteller's voice. Recently, DST has been recognised as a catalyst for inspiring empathy and behavioral change, particularly in education and healthcare settings (Hidayat, 2023). The evolution of digital storytelling has been facilitated by modern technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), which have transformed traditional storytelling into a modern and challenging educational tool (Liang et al., 2015). Academics have regarded digital storytelling as a complement to

conventional methods of learning and assessment, emphasising its potential to enhance learning and problem-solving skills (Clarke & Adam, 2011). The advent of DST marks a transformative shift in communication, weaving technology and narrative into a powerful catalyst for enhanced expression and understanding in various domains.

DST has evolved into a powerful educational tool that engages students in deep and meaningful learning experiences (Smeda et al., 2014). It has been recognised as a practice that allows students to work collaboratively, design innovative and creative digital works and demonstrate their understanding of the content (Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021). Moreover, DST has been integrated into various disciplines such as physics instruction, values education and nursing education, demonstrating its versatility and effectiveness in different educational contexts (Balaman & Ataman, 2022; Kotluk & Kocakaya, 2016; Petty, 2021; West et al., 2022). The use of DST has also been associated with increased student engagement, critical thinking and creativity, aligning with the demands of the 21st-century digital landscape (Azliza et al., 2019; Baehaki, 2023; Yuliani & Hartanto, 2021). Furthermore, it has been recognised as a method that can effectively engage young learners, especially during challenging circumstances such as school closures (Nuroh et al., 2021). Additionally, DST has been explored in the context of crowdsourcing, where it is used to attract and persuade contributors to share their creativity and wisdom (Xiao et al., 2021). Furthermore, digital storytelling has been acknowledged for its potential to promote narrative competence and critical evaluation skills, making it an attractive method for historical learning and educational video assessment (Barsch, 2020). Moreover, DST has been employed in various educational contexts, including the teaching of psychology, local history documentation and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Adara, 2022; Conrad, 2013; Sheafer, 2016). Hence, DST functions as a catalyst in education, transforming traditional learning paradigms through its innovative integration of digital narratives.

In the field of English Language Learning (ELL), DST has been recognised as a valuable tool for enhancing English language skills. The implementation of DST has been found to improve students' attitudes toward English language and enhance their listening comprehension skills (Akdamar & Sütçü, 2021). Other than that, DST has been acknowledged as an alternative medium for teaching listening skills and it has been found to be effective in enhancing language learning in various contexts (Budianto et al., 2021). Research has shown that DST can be utilised to improve speaking skills, reading comprehension and writing skills in English language education (Lim & Noor, 2019; Nair & Yunus, 2021; Radaideh et al., 2020). Moreover, DST has been found to positively influence students' speaking performance and motivation in learning English as a foreign language (Kasami, 2021; Yulian & Yuniarti, 2022; Yuliani & Hartanto, 2021). Studies have also highlighted the potential of DST to improve students' content knowledge, speaking skills and fluency in language learning (Kallinikou & Nicolaidou, 2019; Zakaria et al., 2016). In terms of reading and literacy, DST has been proven to engage students in deep and meaningful learning, supporting literacy and digital literacy development in early childhood education (Maureen et al., 2018; Smeda et al., 2014). Additionally, it has been shown to enhance English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing skills, improve learners' motivation and performance and promote critical thinking and technological skills (Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021; Parsazadeh et al., 2020; Sabari & Hashim, 2023).

In the context of ESL education, the integration of global competence into Malaysian ESL lessons has been emphasised, positioning English as Second Language (ESL) teachers as bridge-builders between society and individuals through ESL teaching (Yacob et al., 2022). This underscores the multifaceted role of ESL educators in Malaysia. Moreover, the study by Yousef et al (2013) highlighted the high degree of communication apprehension among Malaysian ESL learners, indicating a potential area where DST could serve as a catalyst for improving communication skills. Hui and Melor (2023) highlighted the reshaping of the English language curriculum in Malaysia through the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scales, emphasising the evolving nature of ESL teaching and learning in the country. Furthermore, Fitri et al (2022) conducted a study to reveal ESL students' perspectives on DST-based tasks in speaking classrooms at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia, shedding light on the potential impact of DST on ESL learners. The studies provide insights into the potential catalytic role of external factors, such as the evolving ESL curriculum and the challenges faced by ESL learners in Malaysia. These findings underscore the need for further exploration of the impact of DST as a catalyst in Malaysia's ESL education.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper has delved into the pivotal role of Digital Storytelling (DST) as a catalyst in advancing English Language Learning (ELL) within the context of Malaysia. The integration of DST into educational frameworks has been explored, revealing its potential to revolutionise traditional language learning methods. Through a focus on the Malaysian landscape, unique opportunities and challenges posed by DST in enriching language acquisition experiences have been illuminated. As Malaysia continues to evolve its educational strategies, the embracing of DST is seen as a promising avenue for the fostering of dynamic, engaging, and effective English language learning environments. The insights derived from this exploration contribute to the ongoing discourse on innovative approaches to language education, particularly within the Malaysian context.

This paper makes a significant theoretical and contextual contribution to the existing knowledge by highlighting the transformative impact of DST on English Language Learning (ELL) within the unique context of Malaysia. The theoretical contribution lies in the exploration of DST as a catalyst, shedding light on its potential to revolutionise traditional language learning methods. By integrating DST into educational frameworks, this paper not only identifies its promise but also adds a practical dimension to theoretical discussions on innovative language education approaches. Contextually, the paper addresses the specific opportunities and challenges that arise in the Malaysian landscape, offering insights that are directly relevant to the local educational context. The significance of this contribution lies in its potential to guide educational strategies in Malaysia, providing valuable perspectives on how DST can be effectively harnessed to create dynamic and engaging English language learning environments. In essence, this paper serves as a valuable resource for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking innovative solutions to enhance language education in Malaysia.

Recommendation

Further research in the realm of Digital Storytelling (DST) as a catalyst for enhancing English Language Learning (ELL) in Malaysia underscores the need for in-depth investigations into the specific impact of DST on distinct language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and

writing. Moreover, future studies should delve into the influence of DST on higher-order thinking skills, particularly creative and critical thinking, examining how this innovative approach fosters cognitive development. To address the diverse linguistic and cultural landscape of Malaysia, research should also explore the adaptability of DST strategies to cater to learners from various language backgrounds, ensuring inclusivity and effectiveness in English language education. Comprehensive insights from these research avenues will not only refine pedagogical practices but also contribute significantly to the broader discourse on innovative approaches to language education in Malaysia. These highlight the potential of DST to address educational goals outlined in both the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 and SDG 4, paving the way for more inclusive, innovative, and effective language education in Malaysia.

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