DIGITAL STORYTELLING: DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS IN LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract. This study examines the role of digital storytelling in enhancing speaking skills among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in higher education. The research highlights digital storytelling as an innovative pedagogical tool integrating multimedia elements to foster personalized, interactive, and practical learning experiences. Based on existing literature and a case study at the Vinnytsia Institute of Trade and Economics, the study demonstrates significant improvements in students' speaking abilities. Digital storytelling lets students personalize their learning, improve speaking skills, and develop essential soft skills. Pre- and post-test analyses confirm a marked improvement in speaking skills across multiple aspects, validating digital storytelling as an impactful educational technology. The findings underscore its potential to transform EFL classrooms, enhance students' motivation, and create collaborative and independent learning opportunities. The study concludes with recommendations for integrating digital storytelling into language teaching to achieve optimal learning outcomes.
Key words: digital storytelling, speaking skills, EFL learners, higher education, personalized learning, multimedia tools, interactive learning.

Introduction. Nowadays, there are positive transformations in Ukrainian higher education as the traditional model does not meet the current needs of society (Ivanytska, Dovhan, Tymoshchuk, Osaulchyk, Havryliuk, 2021). The researchers claim that «the educational events of the last decade have given impetus to significant changes in the education system in Ukraine» (Zahorodna, Saienko, Tolchieva, Tymoshchuk, Kulinich, Shvets, 2022: 78). The teaching of modern foreign languages is deeply connected to innovative developments in education. Advances in technology have significantly impacted teaching approaches, leading to a growing emphasis on digital resources and interactive methods in recent years (Tymoshchuk, 2022; Zamkova, Tymoshchuk, Havryliuk, 2023; Tymoshchuk, 2024).

English language learning is one of the primary language skills taught at all levels of education in Ukraine, from primary to higher education. All levels of Ukrainian education emphasize improving students' speaking skills. Being one of the four primary skills in language learning, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing, speaking is considered the most difficult because it involves a complex process of representing meaning (Tymoshchuk, 2009). English language learners must not only read and understand information in a written form but also understand the content of speech and express their thoughts effectively. Speaking is an integral part of people's daily lives because it is seen as a social and situation-based activity that English language learners develop. We fully agree with Ukrainian scholars Iryna Shkola and Bohdana Saliuk that digital storytelling can be beneficial for teaching speaking because it can encourage students to explore their unique expressiveness and heighten their ability to communicate and express their thoughts and feelings (Shkola, Saliuk, 2022).

According to Stanley and Dillingham, storytelling is «the oldest form of teaching and probably the best way to learn» (Stanley, Dillingham, 2023). With the rapid technological advances, classic

storytelling has been supplemented by digital storytelling, which «contains some mixture of computer-based images, text, recorded audio narration, video clips, or music» (Stanley, Dillingham, 2023). Recently, digital storytelling has become a global phenomenon, with teachers and practitioners worldwide aiming to utilize digital stories to integrate technology into their classrooms to support lots of learning processes, significantly enhancing the speaking skills of students (Anderson, Chung, Macleroy, 2018). They believe that learners' speaking skills can be improved through digital storytelling due to its ability to facilitate and support language learning, facilitate discussions, and utilize technology to enhance the learning process with incredible speed and efficiency (Mirza, 2020).

Analysis of recent studies and publications. Storytelling as a teaching method has gained significant attention from researchers worldwide. Recently, educational studies have increasingly focused on integrating storytelling, including digital storytelling, into the learning and teaching processes. Foreign and Ukrainian scholars research communication skills development through digital storytelling. Several evidence-based studies confirm its effectiveness as an innovative educational technique for various academic purposes (Leshchenko, Tymchuk, Ruban, 2017; Robin, 2016; Ogawa, Tsuchiya, 2016; Benmayor, 2008; Karpenko, Ajtay-Horváth, 2021; Ruth, Greenidge, 2009). There are several studies on digital storytelling implementation in higher education for different educational purposes (Leshchenko, Tymchuk, Ruban, 2017; Robin, 2016; Ogawa, Tsuchiya, 2016; Panchenko, 2020; Benmayor, 2008; Karpenko, Ajtay-Horváth, 2021). The analyzed technology is defined as a promising education strategy and an emerging field of study in higher education in Ukraine.

The article aims to investigate digital storytelling as an innovative approach, particularly in teaching English to higher education students, focusing on its potential to enhance their speaking skills.

Methods of the study. The study employs general scientific and highly specialized methods (analysis, synthesis, comparison, generalization). The literature review summarizes the educational experience of digital storytelling in improving speaking skills.

The findings of the study. Personalization is a key aspect of practical education in the current digital age. Digital storytelling, with its unique ability to cater to individual learning styles and preferences, plays a crucial role in this personalized learning experience. Digitalization is a tool for improving the education system, including the philological one. Digital technologies provide several benefits, particularly the optimal use of time for more effective formation of the critical competencies of specialists in a multicultural language environment. Digitalization makes the educational process more personalized, accessible, and flexible, providing a comfortable environment for self-study, effective development, and career growth (Tymoshchuk, 2024).

Digital storytelling is based on using computer tools to tell stories. According to Banaszewski, digital storytelling combines personal stories with multimedia (images, audio, and text) to produce a short movie (Banaszewski, 2005). Robin similarly defines digital storytelling as the art of telling a short story using various digital media, including images, written text, audio, and videos (Robin, 2016). These elements are combined using computer tools to tell stories that revolve around a specific theme and often include the author's point of view. Most stories vary in length and last from two to ten minutes. These short stories are saved in a format uploaded to the Internet and can be viewed on any device that can play video files. Various terms describe this method, i.e., digital documentaries, computer-based narratives, interactive storytelling, electronic memoirs, or even digital essays (Shelton, Archambault, Hale, 2017).

Digital storytelling plays the most crucial role in education among its many applications. Scholars consider it a pedagogical technology. On the one hand, digital storytelling, like any technology, involves a chain of actions aimed at creating a specific product; on the other hand, this technology can be considered a pedagogical technology because it contributes to solving practical and educational problems. Thus, digital storytelling has characteristics typical for educational pedagogical technologies, such as operability, systematicity, conceptuality, reproducibility, and controllability.

Panchenko notes that pedagogical experts who have used digital storytelling are relatively optimistic about this method. They believe it can improve the educational process by promoting group work and classroom discussion, developing problem-solving and critical thinking skills, and helping students understand complex ideas (Panchenko, 2020).

Having summarized and analyzed scientific publications (Leshchenko, Tymchuk, Ruban, 2017; Robin, 2016; Ogawa, Tsuchiya, 2016; Panchenko, 2020), we have identified several competencies, the formation of which is promoted by this pedagogical technology:

a) information competencies: the ability to use ICT tools; the ability to search for and save the most given information; the ability to create written messages and use texts as part of digital stories; the ability to create hypertext and multimedia information objects; the ability to process images and create graphic objects; the ability to record and process sounds; the ability to create musical objects; the ability to use geodata;

b) cognitive competencies: the ability to set learning tasks and solve them; the ability to think creatively and critically; the ability to organize information; the ability to learn from reading; the ability to be attentive to details;

c) communicative competencies: the ability to use oral and written communication effectively; the ability to work in a team; the ability to organize collective activity; the ability to evaluate oneself and others;

d) research competencies: the ability to collect and select data; the ability to create a project; the ability to cite sources correctly; the ability to organize references, respecting copyrights.

Personalized learning is also among the advantages of digital storytelling technology. «Digital Storytelling appeals to students with diverse learning styles and can also foster collaboration when students are able to work in groups and provides value in enhancing the student experience through personal ownership and accomplishment» (Robin, 2024). Multimodal literacy, associated with activities such as reading, visualizing, understanding, responding, generating, and interacting with digital and multimedia texts, also develops in digital storytelling. According to Walsh, processing various types of information, i.e., graphic, verbal, acoustic, and kinetic, within a digital story is simultaneous, interrelated, and synchronized (Walsh, 2010).
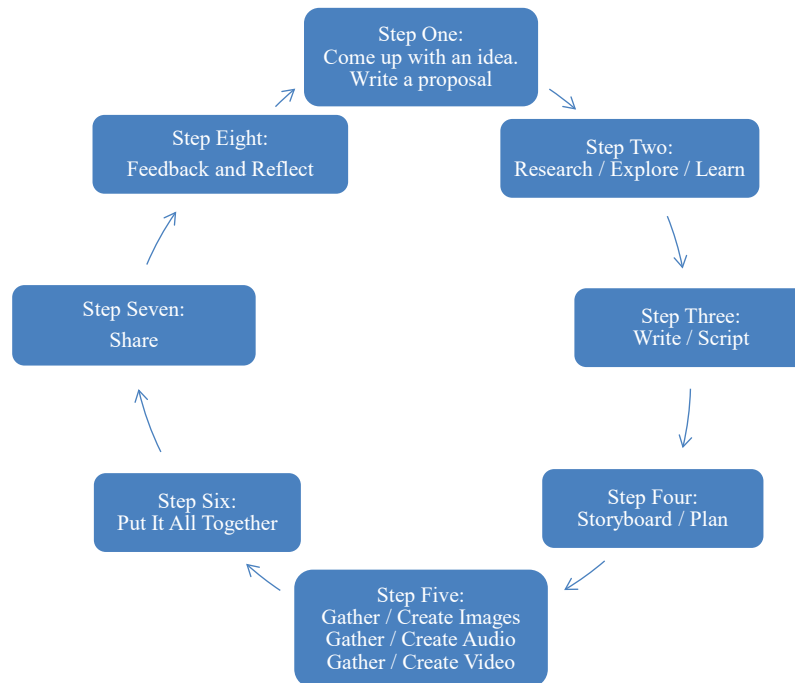
Digital storytelling technology involves specific changes in the pedagogical paradigm. The principle of cooperation prevails in the teacher-student interaction. The teacher is a coauthor and facilitator helping the students choose a topic, structure the digital story, and advise what technical and software tools can be used to create it.

The Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California, is known for developing and disseminating the Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling, often cited as a helpful point for those starting to work with digital stories. We agree with Robin that «the specific requirements of an educational digital story differ slightly from the original Seven Elements for Digital Stories» (Robin, 2024). Ten Robin's modified elements are the following: the overall purpose of the story; the narrator's point of view; a dramatic question or questions; the choice of content; clarity of voice; pacing of the narrative; use of a meaningful audio soundtrack; quality of the images, video, and other multimedia elements; economy of the story detail; good grammar and language usage.

The digital storytelling process can be divided into three phases: 1) the phase of planning and text preparation, 2) the compilation phase, and 3) the phase of feedback and reflection. The algorithm of work on digital storytelling has been described numerous times in several studies (Leshchenko, Tymchuk, Ruban, 2017; Robin, 2016; Ogawa, Tsuchiya, 2016; Benmayor, 2008; Karpenko, Ajtay-Horváth, 2021; Ruth, Greenidge, 2009). In the following article, we present an algorithm based on a variant given by the Stony Brook University Libraries site (Figure 1).

When implementing digital storytelling, various tools are used, such as infographics, interactive presentations, mind maps, comics, scrapbooking, and various types of videos (explanatory videos,

animations). Their choice depends on the topic and objectives of the lesson, the content, and, indeed, the teacher's or student's creativity and technical skills during active learning. Developing their stories motivates students because it allows them to express their creativity, so storytelling improves their speaking skills and significantly impacts their motivation to learn the language in general and speaking skills in particular (Shkola, Saliuk, 2022).

Fig. 1. Digital Storytelling Process (Morra, 2024)

The majority of teachers noted that digital storytelling technologies make it easier to present complicated educational material (94.53%), improve students' understanding of the subject (92.46%), and develop digital competencies and presentation skills through the use of a variety of digital services (86.25%). The increase in learning motivation through the use of storytelling technologies was noted by 80.5% of respondents, and the opportunities for group and project activities of students were mentioned by 70.15%. Teachers also indicated the impact of digital storytelling on improving students' research skills, especially when using analytical storytelling tools and methods (58.42%) and, consequently, increasing overall academic results (48.3%) (Figure 2).

Previous studies proved that digital storytelling contributed to the development of digital, global, technological, visual, and knowledge literacy (Brown, Bryan, Brown, 2005), critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Yang, Wu, 2012; Chen, Chuang, 2020), reflective thinking skills (Saritepeci, 2017; Pieterse, 2018), communication skills (Mnisi, 2015; Karakoyun, Kuzu, 2017; Al-Amri, 2020), creativity and critical thinking (Anggeraini, 2020). Digital storytelling has gained global popularity as various studies have proved its contribution to developing advanced skills.

Numerous studies (Mnisi, 2015; Karakoyun, Kuzu, 2017; Al-Amri, 2020; Wahyuni, Sujoko, Sarosa, 2017; Kallinikou, Nicolaidou, 2019; Chan, Churchill, Chiu, 2017) indicate that digital storytelling can significantly improve students' speaking skills in English language lessons. The research findings suggest that teachers must implement digital storytelling projects throughout 8 to 14 weeks to witness noticeable improvements in students' speaking abilities. According to Sintonen, Kumpulainen, and Vartiainen, digital storytelling contains various features that enhance students' speaking skills. Additionally, compelling digital stories include multiple elements that help students develop their

ability to speak more effectively (Sintonen, Kumpulainen, Vartiainen, 2018). Essentially, digital storytelling enables students to create digital stories and share personal experiences, deepening their understanding of the subject matter and fostering greater speaking fluency (Gurrieri, Drenten, 2019). Digital storytelling aims to evoke a range of emotions in students, enabling them to express their feelings more clearly and enhancing their speaking skills. Additionally, learners will try to personalize their story by recording themselves and reciting the script, which improves their speaking skills, too (Chambers, Yunus, 2017).
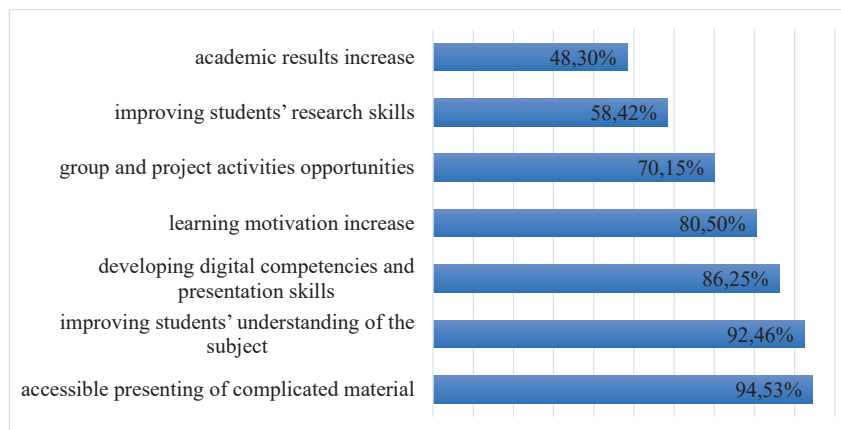
Fig. 2. Benefits of using digital educational storytelling

Teachers can implement digital storytelling offline (in the classroom) and in distance or blended learning environments. In higher education, digital stories serve as a tool to present new material, stimulate discussion, and simplify complex or abstract concepts. Using multimedia helps with retaining new information and understanding complex subjects. By creating digital stories, students learn to structure their ideas, express their opinions, pose questions, develop narratives, and share their thoughts and knowledge uniquely and relevantly.

Digital storytelling can be implemented in both individual and group work. Group learners are expected to discuss the topic and task together, actively communicate during the story-creation process, and assign responsibilities (note-taker, presenter, leader, etc.). Collaborative activities in digital storytelling improve learners' comprehension and communication skills. When they speak through an animated character, students develop their imagination and improve pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension. In addition, if teachers use storytelling following Bloom's Learning Outcomes Framework, this teaching method contributes to improved learning (Shkola, Saliuk, 2022).

Digital storytelling can be one of the main driving forces for EFL learners to gradually develop their speaking skills as they gain more confidence in creating various engaging oral presentations for their target audience. Researchers argue that with the support of digital storytelling, EFL learners will have more opportunities to develop their communicative competencies as they focus on developing more interesting learning content for speaking. EFL learners' willingness to speak has also increased after digital storytelling implementation, in which they are constantly encouraged to practice their desired speaking skills, leading to the full achievement of more fruitful speaking learning outcomes. Scholars recommend that foreign language teachers worldwide use digital storytelling at the beginning of a communicative EFL course to motivate EFL students to speak, leading to significant progress in their speaking competencies (Badawi, El Gabas, Mohamed, 2022). As EFL learners gradually become proficient speakers through digital storytelling, they can improve their pronunciation, use meaningful language expressions, and increase their vocabulary. These essential attributes of speaking training are fundamental as students can inspire others to develop their speaking skills to their full potential.

These benefits of speaking skills development are highlighted by Indonesian scholars, who found that many university students studying ESP significantly improved their speaking skills, gradually becoming more competent speakers (Febriyanti, Susanto, 2017). These results coincide with similar Ukrainian research (Shkola, Saliuk, 2022). The scientists claim that "results of over 2 years of practice have shown that digital storytelling helped students to improve their oral skills while practicing their speech during the creation of digital history" (Shkola, Saliuk, 2022, p. 403).
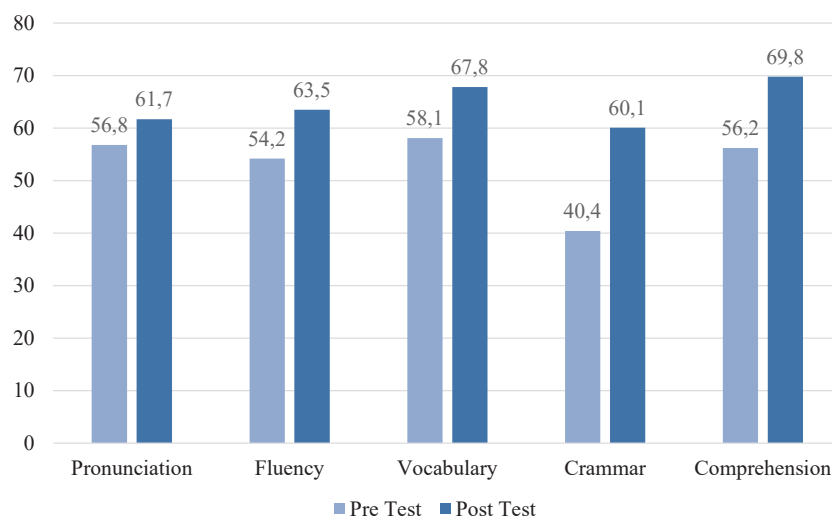
Table 1 shows the pre-test and post-test results of Vinnytsia Institute of Trade and Economics learners. From Table 1, it was observed that students got better grades in the post-test.

Table 1

Students' level of speaking ability (pre-test and post-test results)

Test Score	Level of Ability	Frequency		Percentage	
		Pre Test	Post Test	Pre Test	Post Test
90–100	Excellent	0	5	0 %	14.7%
75–89	Good	6	11	17.6%	32.4%
60–74	Average	13	14	38.2%	41.2%
0–59	Poor	15	4	44.2%	11.7%

Figure 3 demonstrates learners' speaking skills based on the adapted Harris's Oral Rating Scale (Helmanda, Nisa, 2019), focusing on pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension. There was a significant difference between the students' pre- and post-test mean scores in all five speaking aspects. There was also an increase in the mean score for all five aspects.

Fig. 3. Comparison of pre-test and post-test results on all speaking aspects (mean score)

Conclusions. The study demonstrates that digital storytelling is an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing speaking skills among higher-education EFL learners. By integrating multimedia elements, digital storytelling fosters personalized learning experiences, motivates students, and enables the development of critical competencies such as communication, cognitive, and research skills. The pre-test and post-test results clearly show improved student performance, emphasizing pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension advancements.

Digital storytelling also reshapes the teacher-student interaction, promoting collaboration and active engagement. Its implementation supports individual and group activities, improving learners'

abilities to express ideas and engage creatively and critically with content. Furthermore, this method aligns with modern educational paradigms, addressing the challenges of digitalization and creating flexible and inclusive learning environments.

Considering its transformative potential, it is recommended that digital storytelling be widely adopted as a core component of EFL courses, enabling students to achieve higher proficiency and build essential skills for the globalized world. Future research could explore its applications across other language skills and diverse educational contexts to broaden its impact.

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