

ENHANCING EFL STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS VIA DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN A VOCATIONAL HIGHER-EDUCATION CLASSROOM: A TWO-CYCLE ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

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Abstract

This classroom action research aims to investigate the effectiveness of digital storytelling in improving English speaking skills. The study was conducted at Universitas Prabumulih, involving 21 students from the Diploma 3 Computerized Accounting Study Program, Faculty of Computer Science. The study was conducted in two cycles, following the stages of planning, action, observation, and reflection. Data were gathered through speaking tests, observations, student reflections, and researcher journals. The results demonstrated a consistent improvement in students' performance. The mean score increased from 64.48 with a standard deviation of 3.77 in the pre-test to 69.88 with a standard deviation of 3.96 in Cycle I, and further to 76.55 with a standard deviation of 2.08 in Cycle II. Qualitative data revealed some challenges students encountered during the learning process in Cycle I, including technical barriers, low self-confidence, linguistic limitations, and incomplete tasks due to time management. To address these challenges, the learning process in Cycle II was modified by providing enhanced literary support, script templates, and modules, along with timely and respectful feedback. In conclusion, the integration of digital storytelling in teaching speaking has proven to be an effective strategy for enhancing students' speaking abilities.

Keywords: Speaking, Speaking Skills, Digital Storytelling

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INTRODUCTION

In learning English as a foreign language (EFL), speaking is one of the fundamental skills. Speaking serves both as a means of oral communication and as a crucial component in preparing students to enter the workforce. Through speaking, students can communicate to achieve certain purposes or to express their viewpoints, opinions, hopes, and intentions (Lou, 2023; Mashwani & Damio, 2022; Roy, 2023). Mastering English speaking skills allows individuals to communicate effectively and connect with

people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, speaking skills help enhance students' career opportunities and make them more valuable candidates in the job market.

In the context of workplace communication, proficiency in English is highly valued. A study conducted by Annisa et al. (2023) at the Regional Office for Cultural Properties Preservation in Sulawesi revealed that English skills had a positive impact on employees' performance and helped them complete their work more efficiently. The results also revealed that listening and speaking were the most frequently used skills. Having English proficiency also contributes to job acquisition. Similarly, Devie (2023) found that the English skills of alumni from the Department of Business Administration at Semarang State Polytechnic had a positive impact on their employment outcomes. English competency is highly required in the field of business administration where effective communication skills play a crucial role in supporting graduates' employability. These findings highlight the strong connection between speaking skills and workplace readiness, reinforcing the need for vocational higher education institutions to prioritize the development of students' speaking skills to meet industry expectations.

Vocational higher education, which primarily aims to prepare graduates for the world of work, is expected to place strong emphasis on English language proficiency as it supports the students' readiness for specific careers. However, preliminary observations carried out at the University of Prabumulih on students of the Diploma 3 Computerized Accounting Study Program revealed that approximately 75% of the 21 students observed were recorded as being less active in the English learning process, especially in speaking activities. They demonstrated low levels of engagement during classes. Such a condition should be addressed by employing innovative instructional strategies to enhance students' engagement.

Technology can be applied in teaching. It has become an inherent aspect of the modern education system, offering benefits for both teachers and learners (Fauzi et al., 2023; Nernere et al., 2025). One promising technology that may be applied is digital storytelling. Storytelling is the skillful use of language, voice, and physical expressions to convey the elements and imagery of a narrative to a particular live audience (Arjulayana & Nargis, 2023). In contrast, digital storytelling uses technological tools to deliver the story by integrating multimedia elements such as images, audio, video, animation, and text. Digital storytelling is regarded as a pedagogical tool that facilitates both reading and story creation. It plays a significant role in enhancing literacy skills such as reading, writing, and speaking (Caldwell & Whewell, 2024).

Digital storytelling has been acknowledged as a powerful instructional tool applicable to a wide range of academic disciplines (Choudhry & Sabah, 2023; Pilgrim & Pilgrim, J, 2021). The process stages of digital storytelling include developing a narrative concept, drafting the script, recording voice-over and sound, creating visuals, and editing videos (McMinn et al., 2024a).

The use of digital storytelling in the learning process contributes to the enhancement of students' speaking performance (Murad et al., 2023; Nurhikmah, 2024; Sahril et al., 2023). Students had positive perceptions of digital storytelling activity, primarily due to the extensive opportunities it fostered within the classroom setting (Bhakti, 2020; P. Dewi & Sari, 2022; Kasami, 2021; Misrita et al., 2020). Moreover, notable improvements were observed in aspects of communicative competence, particularly in phonology, grammar, vocabulary, word pronunciation, accuracy, and fluency (Al-Amri, 2020; Azzahra et al., 2024).

A quasi-experimental study conducted by Istanto et al. (2024) underscored the efficacy of digital storytelling in improving both English proficiency and multimedia communication competencies among vocational health students.

A systematic review on the role of digital storytelling in enhancing students' speaking skills conducted by Nair & Yunus (2021) indicated that digital storytelling is a valuable pedagogical tool for improving students' speaking skills from various levels of education, from primary to tertiary levels. Its effectiveness can be explained through several pedagogical mechanisms. Through rehearsal, learners engage in repeated practice, reflection, and self-correction, which helps enhance their fluency and oral accuracy (Nair & Yunus, 2021). The process of creating digital stories also enhances critical thinking and decision making, encouraging active learner participation. Wang (2025) reported that English majors who engaged in digital storytelling showed improvements not only in speaking but also in related literacies, such as reading, writing, and digital composition. Similarly, Dewi et al. (2025) emphasized that digital storytelling promotes speaking proficiency by merging structured oral production with creative narrative design, allowing learners to integrate linguistic components within meaningful, authentic communication. Overall, digital storytelling provides a multimodal and supportive learning environment that enhances learners' fluency, confidence, and engagement competencies that are particularly essential in vocational and tertiary EFL.

In light of the findings from previous studies, this research regards digital storytelling as a strategy worthy of implementation. While numerous studies have explored the general education context, there remains limited empirical evidence on its application in vocational education as an EFL setting, particularly for enhancing speaking skills. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by implementing digital storytelling within the vocational higher education context. Carried out as Classroom Action Research (CAR) at Universitas Prabumulih, this research aims to find out whether and how the use of digital storytelling can enhance students' speaking skills through iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study applied to Classroom Action Research (CAR). CAR is a structured form of inquiry conducted by practitioners themselves. Primarily, this method aims to enhance and refine their own practices (Sagor, 2000). CAR follows a cyclical process consisting of four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection. The four stages are repeated as needed until the intended improvement is reached. The participants in the research were 21 students from the Diploma 3 Computerized Accounting Study Program at the Faculty of Computer Science.

The data comprised both quantitative and qualitative elements. Quantitative data were obtained from students' speaking performance tests which were guided by Brown's assessment criteria, which encompass grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, pronunciation, and task (Brown, 2019a). Qualitative data were obtained from classroom observation, students' reflections, and the researcher's journal. Descriptive statistics were calculated to analyze students' progress across the pre-test, Cycle I, and Cycle II.

The implementation of CAR consisted of two cycles, each following the four stages of planning, action, observation, and reflection. In the planning stage, lesson plans and instructional materials were prepared. During the action stage, students were engaged in learning activities that involved creating, narrating, and presenting digital stories. In the observation stage, students' engagement and participation were systematically

monitored using observation checklists. Finally, in the reflection stage, the outcomes were evaluated collaboratively by the researchers and the students to identify strengths and areas requiring improvement before proceeding to the next cycle. Data collection was conducted continuously throughout the process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was conducted in two cycles with the goal of enhancing students' speaking skills through the use of digital storytelling. The study was conducted with a total of 21 students from the Computerized Accounting Study Program, Faculty of Computer Science. The evaluation of students' speaking skills was based on six components: grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, pronunciation, and task (Brown, 2019b).

Prior to the implementation of digital storytelling, a pretest was administered to evaluate students' baseline speaking performance. The data gained revealed that the mean score was 64.48, with a standard deviation of 3.77. None of the students met the minimum passing criterion, which had been set at 75. The data highlight the need for a more engaging speaking activity that could enhance students' communicative competence.

Cycle I

In Cycle I, four stages were carried out. These stages were planning, action, observation, and reflection. During the planning process, a learning plan incorporating digital storytelling was designed, which included rubrics for speaking assessments and an observation checklist. The students were guided to create English stories using narration and visual aids. The learning process was implemented over the course of two meetings during the action phase. Students engaged in a series of activities to produce a digital storytelling project. The activity began with the preparation of relevant materials, including narrative text, images, video clips, and background music. The Capcut application was utilized as the primary editing tool.

In the implementation of digital storytelling, the researcher actively observed the teaching and learning process. The observation involved monitoring the progression. The findings were systematically documented by taking detailed field notes. The data gained revealed that the average speaking score increased from 64.48 to 69.88, and 4 out of 21 students (19.05%) reached scores above the minimum passing criterion. This improvement was modest, but students began to demonstrate the ability to organize their spoken narratives.

Following the observation, all relevant information was compiled. Based on the observation in Cycle I, several challenges were encountered by students. Most students expressed the opinion that the video production process ran too quickly, particularly since it was their first time creating a narration using the application. As one student remarked, "*Because this was my first time making a storytelling video, I needed more time to edit and record it properly.*" Therefore, it was essential to adjust the pace in the following cycle to provide a more comfortable and manageable workflow.

Linguistic limitations in vocabulary and grammar also hindered their ability to build a coherent spoken narrative. A student commented, "*I couldn't find the right English word*". Another added, "*I often stopped speaking because I was worried about grammar mistakes*".

Several individuals did not manage their time efficiently, resulting in incomplete tasks. One student remarked, *"I couldn't finish my video on time. I needed better time management to complete the video."* These reflections highlight areas that require improvement in the next cycle. To address these challenges, it was recommended that student involvement be actively encouraged, clearer learning instructions be provided, and time management be more strictly implemented by planning how much time to spend on specific learning activities.

Cycle II

The action plan for Cycle II was developed based on the reflections from the previous cycle. The procedures mirrored those of the previous cycle; however, several adjustments were made to address the previously identified shortcomings and to improve the effectiveness of the learning process. The adjustments included more support and guidance for the Capcut application, as well as offering templates and modules to assist students in developing their scripts. To address issues of low self-confidence and linguistic limitations, peers and researchers could review the scripts and videos they created before the final recording.

The implementation of digital storytelling in Cycle II followed the steps and strategies outlined in the planning stage. The action began with the process of selecting a narrative theme for the speaking performance. Students were allowed to choose the themes and titles themselves independently. To enhance students' technical skills, they were first given a tutorial on how to use the Capcut application. Script template sheets were distributed to them to help them draft their narratives. This strategy also helped students manage their time effectively. To address issues of limited language proficiency, opportunities for peer feedback or guided rehearsal were integrated before the final recording.

The outcomes of Cycle II showed notable progress. The mean score rose to 76.55, with 17 out of 21 students (80.95%) successfully surpassing the minimum passing criterion. Students demonstrated improved comprehension, more accurate use of grammar and vocabulary, and increased confidence in their speaking performance. Data gained from Cycle II revealed that the implementation of digital storytelling led to a significant enhancement in students' learning outcomes compared to Cycle I. Students demonstrated a stronger understanding of how to effectively utilize the Capcut application as a tool to create videos that support the development of their speaking performance.

The quantitative data collected from the preliminary study through Cycle I to the completion of Cycle II are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Comparison of students' speaking test results: pre-test, Cycle I, and Cycle II

Number	Name	Pretest	Cycle I	Cycle II
1	Student-1	65,83	75,00	78,33
2	Student-2	64,17	75,00	80,83
3	Student-3	56,67	59,17	75,00
4	Student-4	66,67	70,00	78,33
5	Student-5	66,67	70,00	76,67
6	Student-6	67,50	73,33	78,33
7	Student-7	67,50	70,00	75,83
8	Student-8	65,00	72,50	76,67
9	Student-9	71,67	75,00	80,00

10	Student-10	65,00	69,17	76,67
11	Student-11	62,50	65,00	77,50
12	Student-12	59,17	75,00	77,50
13	Student-13	60,00	65,00	75,00
14	Student-14	56,67	65,00	73,33
15	Student-15	65,83	70,83	74,17
16	Student-16	65,00	70,83	79,17
17	Student-17	62,50	70,00	74,17
18	Student-18	65,83	69,17	74,17
19	Student-19	66,67	69,17	75,00
20	Student-20	65,00	69,17	75,83
21	Student-21	68,33	69,17	75,00
Total		1354,17	1467,50	1607,50
Mean		64,48	69,88	76,55
Standard Deviation		3,77	3,96	2,08

The findings of this study, as shown in Table 1, reveal a substantial improvement in students' speaking skills through the use of digital storytelling. This is evidenced by the increase in mean scores from 64.48 in the pre-test to 69.88 in Cycle I, and ultimately to 76.55 in Cycle II. The analysis of the standard deviation provides a deeper understanding of how students' speaking scores were distributed throughout the pre-test, Cycle I, and Cycle II. The standard deviation was 3.77 in the pre-test, slightly increased in Cycle I, and then declined to 2.08 in Cycle II. The slightly higher variation in Cycle I indicates that students were still adapting to the use of digital storytelling as a new strategy. In contrast, the notable decrease in standard deviation in Cycle II suggests greater uniformity in students' performance, showing less variation among individual scores. This implies that by the end of Cycle II, students demonstrated a more consistent improvement in speaking skills. For clearer information, the mean scores are represented in the following chart.

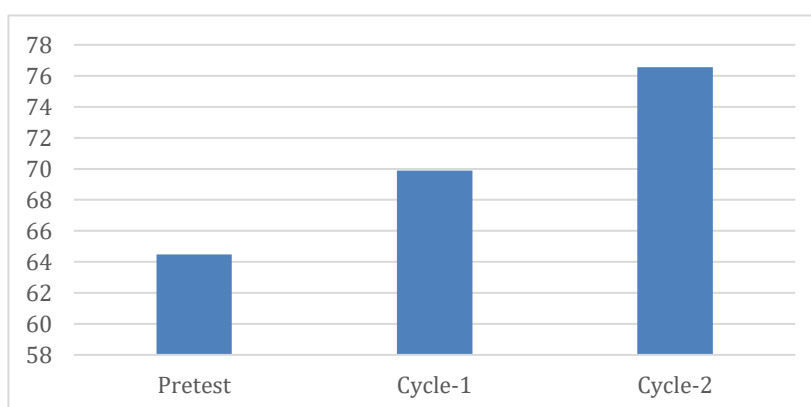


Figure 1. Students' average scores across the pre-test, Cycle I, and Cycle II

The following graph shows a consistent progression across the cycles. The percentage of students who achieved the minimum criterion increased sharply from none in the pre-test to 81% by the end of Cycle II. These results underscore the

effectiveness of digital storytelling as a pedagogical approach to improve speaking competence among vocational higher education students.

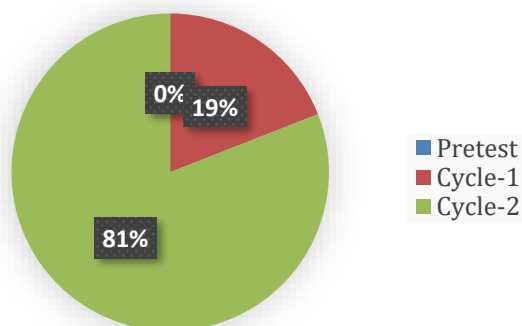


Figure 2. Percentage of students who achieved the minimum criterion across pre-test, Cycle I, and Cycle II

In Cycle I, even though improvement was observed, the progress was relatively modest. During the observation stage conducted in Cycle I, several challenges affecting students' performance were identified. The limited literacy of digital storytelling contributed to students' underperformance, particularly in organizing narratives and handling video editing. This was due to unfamiliarity with the digital tools and the speaking task format (Pramesti et al., 2025). To ensure that digital storytelling was not merely adopted but also adapted to students' learning context, students were provided with a deeper understanding of digital storytelling in Cycle II. Digital storytelling was introduced gradually through a series of preparatory stages, starting with basic functions like inserting images and adding text, then moving on to more complex features such as narration, transitions, and audio editing. The process was implemented at a measured pace to ensure students' understanding and engagement. The process of digital storytelling should not be implemented by merely adopting existing models; instead, it needs to be carefully adapted to align with students' cultural context and support the intended learning goals. It demands the ability to navigate digital tools (Jiyanboyeva Nazokat Alisher qizi, 2024; Purnamasari, 2024; Yuniarti et al., 2022). This finding also highlights the value of integrating theoretical knowledge with authentic experiences to support their digital communication skill. When they engage in reflective learning through digital media production, they can strengthen their language skills and become more critically aware of their progress in the English language (McMinn et al., 2024b).

It was also evident that they not only struggled with technical barriers but also with low self-confidence and limited linguistic competence. These factors hindered their speaking performance (Arjulayana, 2019). Many students were reluctant to express their ideas and felt hesitant when recording their voices or speaking in front of a camera. This finding is consistent with Misrita's research, which revealed that several students experienced embarrassment when listening to their own voices (Misrita et al., 2020). This result is also in line with Sunderland's study which found that a number of students felt fear and anxiety in the beginning. One of the reasons for their fear is the discomfort of hearing their own recorded voice (Sunderland et al., 2021).

To help overcome challenges related to self-confidence and linguistic limitations, students' scripts were evaluated by both their peers and the researchers throughout the learning process. Suggestions and recommendations given by peers and researchers are used to improve their work (Misrita et al., 2020; Rahayu et al., 2023). Feedback

from peers can focus on the overall production of the stories, but students need to be reminded to be respectful. Responding with kindness and consideration helps create a supportive environment (Linville & Vinogradova, 2024).

Incompleted tasks also served as a part of the information gained. To address this issue, students were encouraged to be more actively involved. Clearer instruction was also provided, along with a timeline for each assigned work. The pilot module was a useful resource for creating digital stories. Students appreciated the module's suggested timeline for developing their digital stories (Sunderland et al., 2021)

CONCLUSION

The use of digital storytelling in English language learning has been shown to be an effective strategy for developing students' speaking skills, particularly as the two-cycle Classroom Action Research (CAR) design demonstrates how iterative cycles of reflections and refinements strengthened its impact. This strategy also fosters a more engaging and student-centered learning environment, encouraging students to express themselves more confidently and creatively. The result reinforces the notion that digital storytelling is a valuable pedagogical tool for supporting language development.

It offers a meaningful and multimodal learning experience that can enhance students' speaking performances, especially when supported by adjustments tailored to their needs. Students benefit from adequate guidance to overcome technical barriers, realtime and constructive feedback to build confidence and address linguistic limitations, and structured script templates and modules with clear timelines to ensure task completion. These types of adjustment play a crucial role in addressing challenges encountered throughout the learning process. Such adjustments should be maintained and continuously improved in future classroom practices to maximize the pedagogical benefits of digital storytelling. Future research may explore its integration with emerging technologies and collaborative learning approaches to further enhance students' communicative competence.

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