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UNLOCKING VOICES: THE IMPACT OF CANVA DIGITAL STORYTELLING ON PRIMARY ESL LEARNERS' SPEAKING ACHIEVEMENT

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Abstract:

In today's global workforce, effective speaking skills are essential for communication and professional success, making it critical to foster oral proficiency from an early age. The rapid advancement of technology has paved the way for Digital Storytelling (DST) as an innovative method to develop speaking skills by integrating multimedia that support the development of speaking competence. This study investigates the impact of Canva Digital Storytelling (DST) on enhancing speaking achievement among Malaysian primary ESL learners. A quasi-experimental design was employed involving 60 Year 5 pupils from suburban schools, divided into an experimental group using Canva DST and a control group following traditional instruction. Data collected via pre- and post-tests were analysed using paired t-tests. The findings indicated significant improvements in the experimental group. While promising, the study recommends further exploration using longitudinal and mixed method approaches as well as on different socio-cultural backgrounds to deepen the pedagogical understanding and scalability of DST.

Keywords:

Digital Storytelling, Speaking Achievement, Canva, Primary ESL Learners

Introduction

In Malaysia, English language competence plays a pivotal role in advancing the country toward high-income status, fostering economic growth and cultivating a globally competitive workforce (Azhar Khan bin Ashfar Ahmad & Md Yunus, 2019; Bernama, 2023; Steve Ngeow

& Kajang, 2024). Continuous efforts have been implemented to enhance English language acquisition, particularly within the education sector. These commitments align with the second shift of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013–2025, which emphasizes bilingual proficiency in Malay and English for all students (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Despite over a decade of formal English instruction, studies indicate that many Malaysian students continue to struggle with English proficiency (Abu Bakar et al., 2022; Hussan Sahib & Stapa, 2022). Additionally, although students tend to perform well in written assessments, their proficiency in spoken English often falls behind (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021). This persistent gap raises concerns, as limited English proficiency can adversely impact students' career prospects and employability (Hussan Sahib & Stapa, 2022).

These challenges are also echoed globally, where educators seek effective strategies to promote communicative competence (Aravantinos et al., 2024; Lavidas et al., 2024). Strong speaking skill has become increasingly essential for professional success in today's interconnected and globalized job market, where effective communication encompasses not only linguistic accuracy but also cultural awareness and interpersonal skills (Kevin Astrero et al., 2024). Supporting this view, Bilderback & Thompson (2025) emphasizes that the ability to communicate across cultures and collaborate internationally positions communicative competence as a vital skill in the global workforce.

With the growing incorporation of technology in education, Digital Storytelling (DST) has become a valuable instructional method for improving speaking skills (Nair & Yunus, 2021). While research highlights DST's potential benefits in language learning, its effectiveness remains underexplored in the Malaysia primary ESL classroom context (Gidor et al., 2024). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating the impact of Canva DST on enhancing the speaking achievement of Malaysian primary ESL learners. It specifically addresses the following research question:

1. How does Canva Digital Storytelling impact the speaking achievement of primary ESL pupils?

Literature Review

Speaking Skills in ESL Context
Speaking is a fundamental aspect of language learning, defined by Brown (2001) as an interactive process of constructing meaning through the reception and processing of information. It is a critical skill that enables individuals to navigate social interactions, build relationships, and express their thoughts, aspirations, as well as daily experiences (Elenein, 2019; Ramalingam et al., 2022). Speaking encompasses multiple dimensions, including pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension (Harris, 1974). Each of these aspects plays a vital role in determining a learner's ability to communicate effectively, and teachers must understand these components to diagnose areas of weakness and provide targeted support.

In the ESL classroom context, learners face both internal (fear of ridicule, anxiety, lack of motivation, shyness) and external (limited linguistic competence, mother tongue interference, insufficient resources) barriers in speaking skill development (Adickalam & Yunus, 2022).

When speaking activities are confined to the classroom, learners may experience limited opportunities for practice. According to Phan Kim (2023), several factors contribute to this issue, including restricted interaction with native speakers, cultural and social obstacles in using English and limited participation in English-speaking environments.

Digital Storytelling

With the advent of globalization and technological advancements, traditional storytelling has evolved into more digital way, introducing DST, a modern pedagogical approach that integrates multimedia elements to enhance learning experiences. It represents a contemporary adaptation of the old age oral storytelling tradition, combining narrative techniques with digital tools such as text, images, audio, video, and music to create engaging and meaningful stories (Robin, 2016; Smeda et al., 2010).

DST can be categorized into three primary types: personal narratives, historical documentaries, and stories that inform or instruct (Robin, 2008). The third category, stories that inform or instruct, combines narrative elements with educational objectives, making it particularly relevant for classroom settings. This type of DST can be used to introduce new concepts, explain abstract ideas, or stimulate discussions on specific topics across various disciplines. By leveraging this category, educators can tailor DST to meet diverse learning needs and objectives in the classroom.

Digital Storytelling to improve Speaking Skill

DST has emerged as a transformative pedagogical tool in language education, particularly in enhancing various aspects of speaking skills (Cahyanti & Nuroh, 2023; Nair & Md Yunus, 2022). Research has consistently demonstrated its effectiveness in addressing these components, making it a valuable resource for ESL educators.

Studies have highlighted DST's role in vocabulary improvement, as learners are exposed to new words, apply them in sentence formation, and actively expand their lexical knowledge (Rosli, 2019; Sunar et al., 2022). Similarly, DST has been shown to enhance pronunciation through script revision, repeated practice, and increased self-awareness during recording (Arroba & Acosta, 2021; Zhussupova & Shadiev, 2023). In terms of grammatical accuracy, Tatlı et al. (2022) found that DST activities provide learners with opportunities to construct their own sentences, reinforcing their understanding of grammatical structures through practical application.

Furthermore, DST enhances speaking comprehension by integrating multimedia elements such as pictures, animations, and videos, which simplify complex concepts and stimulate engagement through interactive discussions (Asmawati & Asmara, 2023; Sahril et al., 2023). Studies also demonstrated that DST promotes coherent and cohesive speech by providing structured narrative frameworks, reducing the use of fillers, and enabling self-assessment through ICT tools (Arroba & Acosta, 2021; Fu et al., 2022).

DST extends beyond enhancing speaking skills by nurturing learners' creativity and collaborative abilities. Through creative expression and collaborative learning, DST enables learners to construct and share narratives in an engaging, interactive environment, thereby strengthening both linguistic proficiency and interpersonal communication (Fitri et al., 2022). Supporting this perspective, Aravantinos et al. (2024) emphasized the role of digital tools in

fostering learners' critical thinking and creativity, highlighting their value in enhancing 21st-century communication skills. Overall, DST emerges as a holistic pedagogical strategy that simultaneously develops speaking skills, creativity, and collaboration.

Canva Digital Storytelling

Canva, a user-friendly graphic design platform with a drag-and-drop interface, has gained widespread popularity in academia (Daff, 2022). It offers free access to a variety of resources, including fonts, animations, images, videos, shapes, and text, making it an effective tool for teaching and learning (Wijayanti, 2022). Its versatility extends to creating educational videos (Fitria, 2022), and its pre-designed elements are highly valued by students for their convenience, eliminating the need for manual creation (Erwin & Pedroso, 2023). With its continuous evolving features, Canva is well-suited for crafting digital narratives, positioning it as a valuable tool for creating DST in educational settings.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a quasi-experimental design, mirroring the structure of true experiments by comparing the outcomes of an Experimental Group (EG) receiving the intervention with a Control Group (CG) that did not undergo the treatment (Gopalan et al., 2020). This design is widely used to assess the effectiveness of interventions, social programs, or policies (Thyer, 2012), particularly advantageous when random assignment to treatment and comparison groups is impractical or unfeasible (Dong & Maynard, 2013).

Participants of the Study

A total of 60 Year 5 pupils were selected through purposive sampling, evenly distributed between the two groups. This sampling method aligned with the study's objectives, ensuring a homogeneous sample with shared characteristics (Etikan, 2016). Selection criteria included (1) age, (2) speaking proficiency, (3) familiarity with ICT tools, and (4) access to devices, the internet, and the Canva application. Due to the impracticality of random assignment, this study utilized pre-existing groups (Terrell, 2016). To minimize the potential for selection bias, participants were categorized based on their speaking proficiency levels as determined by the pre-speaking test. Establishing this equivalence was essential for enhancing the reliability and generalizability of the study's findings to the broader population represented by the sample (Zajić & Maksimović, 2022).

As shown in Table 1, the results of Levene's Test indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was upheld, with significance values for all central tendency measures (mean, median and trimmed mean) exceeding the 0.05 threshold. Additionally, the ANOVA test revealed no statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups, as indicated by an F-value of 0.562 and a corresponding p-value of 0.456. These findings confirmed that the groups were comparable at the pre-test stage and that the assumption of equal variances was met. This validation supports the reliability of subsequent analyses aimed at evaluating differences in pre- and post-test performance.

Table 1: Homogeneity Test based on Speaking Test Score

G	N	Mean	Levene's Test			ANOVA Test		
			Based on Mean	Based on Median	Based on Trimmed Mean	F	Sig.	Effect Size
EG	30	54.53	0.980	0.929	0.994	0.562	0.456	0.010
CG	30	50.53						

Intervention of the Study

Throughout the intervention, the EG engaged with Canva DST, while the CG received instruction through traditional teaching methods during English lessons. Before implementation, the English teachers assigned to EG were briefed on integrating DST into speaking lessons and provided with a comprehensive module containing step-by-step guidelines for using Canva DST effectively. The intervention spanned eight weeks, with one-hour session conducted weekly during English lessons. Study by Nair & Yunus (2021) suggested that DST should be implemented for eight to fourteen weeks to effectively enhance pupils' speaking skills.

Before the intervention, all participants completed a pre-test to establish the baseline of their speaking proficiency. From week two to week eight, the EG created digital stories using Canva, while the CG engaged in conventional speaking activities. In week nine, EG participants presented their stories via Canva, whereas CG participants used manila cards for their presentations. The intervention concluded in week ten with a post-test administered immediately to assess its impact on pupils' speaking performance. This structured approach ensured consistency, minimized potential confounding variables, and controlled time-related effects, thereby enhancing the reliability of the study's findings.

Research Instrument

Achievement tests are designed to evaluate student learning within a specific curriculum area (Terrell, 2016). In this study, a speaking test was administered before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the intervention to measure pupils' speaking achievement. Their oral responses were assessed using the Speaking Evaluation Rubric, adapted from Helmanda & Nisa (2019) which was originally developed by Harris (1974). The rubric evaluated the five aspects of speaking as shown in Table 2. Scores were converted to a 100-point scale for analysis.

Table 2: Elements in the oral evaluation rubric

Elements	Score
Pronunciation	5
Grammar	5
Vocabulary	5
Fluency	5
Comprehension	5
Total score	25

Source: Nair & Md Yunus (2022)

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS Statistics (version 29). The data were analysed quantitatively using both descriptive and inferential statistics, paired samples t-tests, to answer the research question. Descriptive statistic was used to examine changes in the five aspects of

speaking between the pre-test and post-test stages. The paired samples t-test assessed mean differences within each group, evaluating the intervention's impact.

The speaking test, evaluation rubric, and Canva DST module were validated by three experts in English language learning. Based on the feedback, several modifications were made to improve the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the instruments with the research objectives. A pilot study was conducted to assess the reliability of the speaking test and evaluation rubric before the main study (In, 2017). The results demonstrated high reliability across all measures. In EG, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.979 for the pre-test and 0.963 for the post-test. Similarly, the CG exhibited strong reliability, with values of 0.991 for the pre-test and 0.998 for the post-test. These findings confirm the consistency of the speaking test in assessing pupils' proficiency across both groups and time points in the actual study.

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to protect participants' rights and well-being. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the Educational Research Application System and the State Education Department. Official letters were then issued to the relevant District Education Office and participating schools. Appointed teachers received briefings to ensure ethical compliance. Informed consent forms, outlining the study's aims, procedures, and participants' rights, including voluntary participation and the option to withdraw, were distributed to pupils and their parents or guardians. Data privacy was strictly maintained through secure storage, ensuring full transparency and adherence to international ethical research standards.

Finding of the Study

Pre- and Post-test results of the Five Speaking Aspects
In this study, the pre and post speaking test was conducted based on the five aspects of speaking. Table 3 compares the mean scores for various aspects of speaking between the pre-test and post-test for the Experimental Group (EG) and Control Group (CG).

Table 3: Pre- and Post-test Results of the Five Speaking Aspects

Group	Aspects of Speaking	Mean Score	
		Pre-Test	Post-Test
EG	Pronunciation	2.93	3.67
	Grammar	2.63	3.60
	Vocabulary	2.67	3.70
	Fluency	2.70	3.40
	Comprehension	2.63	3.70
CG	Pronunciation	3.00	3.60
	Grammar	2.47	2.97
	Vocabulary	2.50	3.27
	Fluency	2.37	3.23
	Comprehension	2.30	3.17

Based on the result, EG consistently showed higher post-test mean scores across all aspects compared to their pre-test results. The comprehension aspect showed the highest improvement, with the mean scores increasing from 2.63 to 3.70, (an increase of 1.03 points) while fluency exhibited the lowest improvement, rising from 2.70 to 3.40, which corresponds to an increase

of 0.70 points. Generally, the CG also showed improvements, though the gains were more modest in certain aspects. Based on the data, comprehension showed the highest improvement with its mean score increasing from 2.30 to 3.17, resulting in an increase of 0.87 points. Conversely, grammar exhibited the lowest improvement, rising from 2.47 to 2.97, which corresponds to an increase of 0.50 points.

Paired T-test Result for Speaking Test

The results of the paired t-test for EG are summarized in Table 4, while Table 5 presents the paired t-test findings for CG.

Table 4: Paired T-test Result for Speaking Test in Experimental Group

Test	N	Mean	SD	Correlation	Mean Difference	T-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Pre	30	54.53	20.837	0.838 (p < 0.001)	-17.46667	-8.402	p<0.001	-1.534
Post	30	72.00	16.774					

In EG, the mean speaking score increased from 54.53 (SD = 20.837) in the pre-test to 72.00 (SD = 16.774) in the post-test, indicating significant improvement. A strong correlation (r = 0.838, p < 0.001) was observed between the pre-test and post-test scores. The mean difference of -17.47 was statistically significant (t = -8.402, p < 0.001), suggesting that the intervention had a substantial effect. Cohen's d value of -1.534 indicates a large effect size, demonstrating the effectiveness of Canva DST in enhancing speaking achievement.

Table 5: Paired T-test Result for Speaking Test in Control Group

Test	N	Mean	SD	Correlation	Mean Difference	T-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Pre	30	50.53	20.490	0.897 (p < 0.001)	-14.40000	-8.693	p<0.001	-1.587
Post	30	64.93	18.336					

In CG, the mean score increased from 50.53 (SD = 20.490) in the pre-test to 64.93 (SD = 18.336) in the post-test, indicating improvement. A strong correlation (r = 0.897, p < 0.001) was observed between the pre-test and post-test scores. The mean difference of -14.40 was statistically significant (t = -8.693, p < 0.001), suggesting that the participants improved over time. Cohen's d value of -1.587 indicates a large effect size, highlighting the effectiveness of traditional instruction in enhancing speaking achievement, though to a lesser extent than Canva DST.

Discussion of Findings

How Does Canva Digital Storytelling Impact The Speaking Achievement Of Primary ESL Pupils?

The paired t-test results for both the EG and CG indicate significant improvements in speaking scores. In the EG, the mean score increased from 54.53 to 72.00, with a mean difference of -17.47 (t = -8.402, p < 0.001). The large effect size (Cohen's d = -1.534) suggests that Canva DST had a notable impact on speaking achievement. Similarly, the CG showed a mean score increase from 50.53 to 64.93, with a mean difference of -14.40 (t = -8.693, p < 0.001) and a slightly larger effect size (Cohen's d = -1.587). Although both groups demonstrated significant progress, the EG exhibited a higher mean gain (17.47 vs. 14.40), suggesting that Canva DST contributed to greater speaking improvement. These results align with previous research,

reinforcing DST as an effective instructional approach for enhancing speaking skills, particularly in the primary school context (Cahyanti & Nuroh, 2023; Nair & Md Yunus, 2022).

The comparison of speaking aspects between the EG and CG revealed that both groups showed improvements in all five aspects from pre-test to post-test. However, the EG exhibited consistently higher post-test scores and greater mean gains across all aspects of speaking. This suggests that Canva DST provided a more effective approach to enhancing speaking skills, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension, where the difference between pre- and post-test scores was more pronounced compared to the CG.

The results of this study implied that comprehension aspect saw the most significant improvement among the EG, with scores increasing from 2.63 to 3.70, a notable gain of 1.07 points. The various features in Canva, including text, images, and audio, supported participants in enhancing their ability to effectively convey their digital stories. Previous study implied that the multimedia-rich nature of DST, which integrates visuals, animations, text, and sound, plays a crucial role in supporting learners' understanding (Asmawati & Asmara, 2023). Study suggested that the inclusion of images and videos in DST enhances students' engagement, making it easier for them to grasp complex concepts (Sahril et al., 2023). The integration of multimedia elements reduces cognitive overload and provides contextual support, allowing learners to construct meaning more effectively.

Likewise, vocabulary scores increased from 2.67 to 3.70, reflecting a gain of 1.03 points and demonstrating the effectiveness of DST in supporting vocabulary development through meaningful interaction with new words. The process of crafting and presenting digital stories actively engaged participants in using newly learned vocabulary, aiding its incorporation into their spoken language. Previous research highlights DST's role in providing repeated contextual exposure to vocabulary, reinforcing retention and practical application (Sunar et al., 2022; Tatlı et al., 2022). By engaging in DST activities, learners actively utilize new words, enhancing their confidence in spoken communication.

The improvement in grammar, with scores rising from 2.63 to 3.60 (a gain of 0.97), highlights the role of DST in reinforcing grammatical accuracy in speaking. One key factor contributing to this enhancement was the teacher's feedback, which helped participants identify and correct errors in their digital story scripts before recording. This process provided learners with repeated exposure to accurate sentence structures, promoting self-correction and deeper grammatical understanding. Previous studies support the effectiveness of DST in improving grammar by offering opportunities for learners to construct and refine their sentences in meaningful contexts (Tatlı et al., 2022). The interactive and iterative nature of DST allows students to practice grammar through scriptwriting, revision, and oral narration, fostering a more intuitive grasp of sentence structures.

Pronunciation demonstrated notable improvement, rising from 2.93 to 3.67 (an increase of 0.74), highlighting the effectiveness of Canva DST in refining learners' spoken accuracy. The process of recording and reviewing their own voices provided participants with an opportunity for self-assessment, allowing them to identify and correct pronunciation errors. Previous research emphasizes that repeated practice in storytelling narration significantly enhances pronunciation (Zhussupova & Shadiev, 2023). The ability to revise scripts and re-record voices encouraged learners to refine their spoken output in which this iterative process fostered active

engagement with pronunciation, stress, and intonation, promoting gradual improvement (Arroba & Acosta, 2021). The interactive and flexible nature of DST enabled learners to seek assistance in refining their speech while reinforcing correct pronunciation through repeated exposure.

Fluency also showed significant progress, increasing from 2.63 to 3.40 (an improvement of 0.70), demonstrating the role of DST in supporting smoother and more confident speech production. The integration of visual aids and structured storytelling elements provided participants with scaffolding, reducing hesitation and enhancing their ability to articulate thoughts more fluidly. The structured narrative framework in DST activity helped learners organize their ideas systematically, enabling them to speak with greater coherence and ease (Fu et al., 2022). Arroba & Acosta (2021) highlighted that the use of digital tools not only minimized the use of fillers but also encouraged learners to focus on effective delivery techniques. By engaging in iterative storytelling, learners gradually developed fluency, reinforcing their confidence and competence in spoken communication.

The results of this study strongly support the effectiveness of DST in enhancing ESL learners' speaking abilities. The significant statistical improvements, reinforced by previous research, highlight DST's potential as an engaging and dynamic instructional method. By integrating storytelling with multimedia elements, DST creates an interactive learning environment that fosters language development. Overall, DST serves as an innovative approach to language instruction, providing learners with meaningful opportunities to practice and refine their speaking skills in an immersive and supportive context.

Implications of the Study

This study underscores the potential of Canva DST as an innovative approach to improving speaking skills in primary ESL classrooms. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that incorporating multiple DST activities can provide learners with more consistent practice, leading to deeper skill development. Empirically, this study contributes to the growing research on DST in ESL education, reinforcing its positive impact on various speaking skill components. Addressing these practical and empirical considerations will help educators and researchers optimize DST as an engaging and effective instructional tool, ensuring its meaningful integration into ESL learning environments.

Limitations of the Study

This study encountered several limitations that may have impacted its findings on the effectiveness of Canva DST in enhancing speaking achievement. Firstly, the intervention was limited to eight weeks, during which participants created only one DST clip. Secondly, the absence of qualitative data limited the depth of understanding regarding students' experiences with Canva DST, which could have provided richer insights into its impact. Lastly, the study was conducted within a primary suburban school context, which may limit the applicability of its findings to contexts with differing backgrounds. Despite these constraints, the study offers valuable insights into the potential of Canva DST for improving speaking skills in ESL classrooms.

Recommendations for Future Study

DST has gained recognition as a valuable educational tool for enhancing language skills across diverse learning environments. While this study highlights its potential, further research is essential to refine its implementation by integrating multiple DST activities to maximize the impact of Canva as DST tool. Additionally, examining socio-cultural influences, employing mixed-method approaches, and investigating long-term effects are crucial to fully harness DST's benefits. Addressing these aspects will contribute to a deeper understanding of DST's role in improving speaking skills in primary ESL classrooms.

Conclusion

This study highlights Canva DST as a promising tool for enhancing ESL pupils' speaking achievement, particularly in the different aspects of speaking. Future research should explore long-term effects, integrate qualitative insights, and examine DST's adaptability across diverse learning environments to optimize its role as an engaging and effective strategy in ESL classrooms. By addressing these areas, educators and researchers can refine DST implementation strategies, ensuring its meaningful integration into ESL teaching and learning. Ultimately, this study lays the foundation for further exploration of DST as a transformative tool for fostering speaking proficiency in primary ESL classrooms.

Acknowledgement

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