



Teaching Syntax through Stories: Integrating Digital Storytelling to Enhance English Language Skills

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ABSTRACT

Traditional methods of teaching English syntax are often criticized for being decontextualized and failing to engage students, leading to a gap between grammatical knowledge and practical application. Digital storytelling presents a promising, narrative-based alternative, yet empirical evidence of its effectiveness specifically for syntax instruction remains scarce. This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of integrating digital storytelling on students' syntactic competence compared to conventional methods and to explore students' perceptions of this pedagogical approach. A mixed-methods study with a quasi-experimental, pre-test-post-test design was conducted with 50 intermediate-level university students. The experimental group (n=26) received instruction via digital storytelling, while the control group (n=24) used conventional methods. Data were collected through a syntax test and a perception questionnaire and were analyzed using an Independent Samples t-test on gain scores and Thematic Analysis. The quantitative findings revealed that the experimental group achieved significantly higher learning gains in syntactic competence compared to the control group ($p < .001$). Qualitatively, the thematic analysis indicated that students perceived the digital storytelling method as highly effective for enhancing comprehension through context and for significantly increasing their motivation and engagement in learning grammar. The study concludes that digital storytelling is a highly effective and engaging pedagogical tool for teaching English syntax. It provides a validated framework for educators seeking alternatives to traditional drills and contributes important empirical evidence to the field of Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL).

Keywords: Digital Storytelling, Syntax Instruction, English Language Teaching (ELT), Mixed-Methods, Quasi-Experimental Design

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of global communication, proficiency in the English language has become an indispensable skill, with grammatical competence forming its foundational bedrock. Among the components of grammar, syntax, which governs the structural arrangement of words to form coherent sentences, is paramount for effective and meaningful communication (Chomsky, 1965). However, traditional pedagogical approaches to teaching syntax, often characterized by decontextualized drills and rule memorization, have frequently resulted in passive

learning and a lack of student engagement (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2014). This conventional methodology often fails to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge of grammatical rules and their practical application in real-world communication, leaving students unable to construct complex sentences accurately and confidently.

This challenge has prompted educators and researchers to explore more engaging and meaningful pedagogical alternatives. Narrative-based instruction, which situates grammatical structures within a rich, comprehensible context, has emerged as a powerful approach because stories provide a natural framework for memory and understanding (Robin, 2008). More recently, the advent of digital technologies has transformed this narrative approach into digital storytelling, an innovative method that integrates multimedia elements to create compelling narratives where syntax is seen in action rather than as isolated rules (Robin, 2008). However, despite its praised potential to boost motivation and general communicative skills (Purnama et al., 2022), a specific research gap persists. Much of the existing literature has focused on the benefits of digital storytelling for developing general fluency, vocabulary acquisition, or writing skills, leaving its targeted application for enhancing students' syntactic competence largely underexplored. There is a notable scarcity of empirical evidence demonstrating how this engaging method can be systematically leveraged to make abstract syntactic concepts more concrete and memorable. To address this gap, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of integrating digital storytelling into the teaching of English syntax. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) To what extent does the use of digital storytelling improve students' understanding and application of English syntactic rules compared to traditional methods? and (2) What are the students' perceptions regarding the use of digital storytelling as a tool for learning grammar?

The findings of this research are expected to make a significant contribution to the field of Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) by providing empirical evidence on the synergy between narrative pedagogy and explicit grammar instruction (Chapelle & Sauro, 2017). Practically, it provides educators and curriculum designers with a validated, innovative framework for teaching syntax more engagingly and effectively, potentially transforming a traditionally challenging aspect of language learning into an enjoyable and meaningful experience for students. This research provides a pathway to transform grammar instruction from a detached exercise into a dynamic and meaningful experience, ultimately enhancing the overall English language skills of learners.

METHOD

This section delineates the methodological framework used to conduct the study. It covers the research approach, design, participants, and the instruments employed for data collection and

analysis, providing a systematic foundation for the investigation into the effectiveness of digital storytelling in teaching syntax.

2.1 Research Approach

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data within a single investigation. This approach was chosen for its ability to provide a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the research problem. The strength of mixed-methods research lies in its capacity to leverage the complementary strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research to develop a more complete picture of a research problem than either approach by itself (Creswell & Saville, 2016). The quantitative component was utilized to objectively measure the effectiveness of the digital storytelling intervention on students' syntactic competence by comparing test scores. The qualitative component, on the other hand, was designed to explore the nuances of the learning experience, capturing students' subjective perceptions, attitudes, and engagement levels. By combining these two approaches, this study not only assesses if the intervention works but also delves into how and why it works from the learners' perspective.

2.2 Research Design

This study utilized a quasi-experimental design, specifically employing the non-equivalent control group, pre-test-post-test model to systematically investigate the causal relationship between the instructional method and students' learning outcomes. This research framework is intentionally selected for its suitability in real-world educational environments where the random assignment of participants into experimental and control groups is often not feasible or would disrupt the natural classroom structure. True experiments with random assignment are the preferred model; however, in practical situations where strict control is unattainable, quasi-experimental approaches provide a viable and reliable alternative (Campbell, D. T., Stanley, J. C., & Gage, 1963). The choice of this design, therefore, represents a pragmatic yet attentive approach to examining pedagogical effectiveness in an authentic academic context.

The design involved two pre-existing student groups: (1) an Experimental Group, which received instruction on English syntax using the integrated digital storytelling method, and (2) a Control Group, which was taught the same syntactic materials through conventional, non-narrative-based methods like lectures and drills. Both groups were administered a pre-test at the beginning of the study to establish a baseline, followed by a post-test after the intervention period to measure any changes in performance. The inclusion of a control group is crucial as it allows for a more robust conclusion; it helps control for extraneous variables and strengthens the claim that any significant difference in post-test scores is directly attributable to the specific pedagogical

intervention rather than other external factors.

The participants of this study were students from the English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar. These students were enrolled in an intermediate-level grammar course as a compulsory part of their curriculum. The selection of participants was conducted using purposive sampling, a non-probability technique where participants are chosen based on specific characteristics relevant to the study (Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, 2018). The criteria for inclusion were being an active student in the intermediate grammar course. The 50 participants were from two intact classes, with one class (n=26) assigned as the experimental group and the other (n=24) as the control group. This use of intact classes is a key feature of the non-equivalent control group design.

2.3 Research Instruments

This study utilized two primary instruments for data collection: a syntax test to gather quantitative data and a perception questionnaire to obtain qualitative data. The primary quantitative instrument was a researcher-developed syntax test designed to objectively measure students' competence in specific English syntactic structures, including relative clauses, conditional sentences, and passive voice. The test consisted of 40 items, combining multiple-choice and sentence-construction tasks. To ensure the instrument's quality, its content validity was established through expert judgment by two senior lecturers specializing in English grammar. Furthermore, a pilot test was conducted to confirm the instrument's reliability, which yielded a high Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.89. Meanwhile, to collect qualitative data, a semi-structured questionnaire was administered to the experimental group at the end of the study. This instrument was designed to capture in-depth insights into their learning experience, perceptions, and attitudes toward learning syntax through digital storytelling. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: a) Section A applied a 5-point Likert scale to gauge students' general opinions on factors such as engagement and motivation; and b) Section B consisted of open-ended questions that prompted students to elaborate on their experiences, such as, "What aspects of learning syntax through digital stories did you find most helpful?"

2.4 Data Collection

The data were collected systematically over an eight-week period following a clear procedural timeline to ensure the integrity of the quasi-experimental design. The process involved the following four stages:

1. **Pre-test Administration:** In the first week, before any intervention was introduced, the syntax pre-test was administered to all 50 participants in both the experimental (n=26) and control (n=24) groups. This step was essential for establishing a baseline score of each

student's existing syntactic knowledge.

2. **Intervention Phase:** For the subsequent six weeks, the treatment was implemented. The experimental group received syntax instruction through the integrated digital storytelling method, where grammatical rules were presented and practiced within the context of narratives. In parallel, the control group received instruction on the exact same syntactic topics using conventional methods, primarily involving direct teacher explanations and decontextualized grammar drills.
3. **Post-test Administration:** In the final week, the syntax post-test was administered to both groups. This measured the students' syntactic competence after the intervention period and allowed for a comparison of learning outcomes between the two groups.
4. **Questionnaire Distribution:** Immediately following the post-test, the perception questionnaire was distributed exclusively to the students in the experimental group. They were given ample time to reflect on their learning experience and provide thoughtful, detailed responses.

2.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to comprehensively address the research questions. The quantitative data from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed statistically to determine the effectiveness of the digital storytelling intervention on student learning outcomes. In parallel, the qualitative data from the open-ended questionnaire were analyzed thematically to gain in-depth insights into the students' learning experiences and perceptions. This dual approach allowed for a robust evaluation of both the outcomes and the process of the pedagogical intervention.

2.5.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The analysis of quantitative data involved two main stages: descriptive and inferential statistics. First, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, min/max scores) were calculated to provide a clear overview of each group's performance. The primary inferential analysis was conducted as follows:

- a. **Calculating Gain Scores:** A gain score was calculated for each participant by subtracting their pre-test score from their post-test score ($\text{Gain Score} = \text{Post-test Score} - \text{Pre-test Score}$). This score represents the amount of learning improvement for each student.
- b. **Independent Samples t-test:** An Independent Samples t-test was then conducted on these gain scores. The purpose of this test was to compare the average gain score of the experimental group with that of the control group. This allowed the study to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in improvement between the students who

learned through digital storytelling and those who learned through conventional methods.

2.5.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions of the questionnaire were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, a systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (or themes) within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). An inductive, data-driven approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge directly from the students' responses. The analytical process involved data familiarization, systematic coding of salient comments, and collating these codes into potential themes. This involved a recursive process of reviewing and defining the themes to ensure they accurately represented significant patterns in the dataset, providing nuanced insights into the 'why' behind the quantitative findings.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study, organized according to the two primary research questions. First, the quantitative results addressing the effectiveness of the digital storytelling method on students' syntactic competence are presented. Following this, the qualitative findings detailing the students' perceptions of the learning experience are outlined.

The Effect of Digital Storytelling on Syntactic Competence

A quantitative analysis of the pre-test and post-test scores was conducted to address the first research question, which investigates the extent to which digital storytelling improves students' syntactic competence. The performance of the experimental group, which received the digital storytelling intervention, was compared against the control group, which underwent conventional instruction. The primary objective of this analysis was to objectively measure and compare the learning gains between the two groups to determine the pedagogical effectiveness of the intervention. The initial stage of the analysis involved examining the descriptive statistics to summarize the performance of both groups. The pre-test and post-test scores from both the experimental group (n=26) and the control group (n=24) were analyzed to answer the first research question regarding the effectiveness of the digital storytelling method. The descriptive statistics for these tests are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Group	Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	Pre-test	26	57.85	8.12
	Post-test	26	82.46	7.95
Control	Pre-test	24	56.92	8.34

	Post-test	24	64.58	8.67
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As shown in Table 1, both groups started with similar mean scores on the pre-test, with the experimental group at 57.85 and the control group at 56.92, indicating a comparable baseline of syntactic knowledge. However, the post-test results reveal a marked difference in performance. The experimental group, which received the digital storytelling intervention, achieved a mean score of 82.46, while the control group, which received conventional instruction, obtained a mean score of 64.58. An independent samples t-test was conducted on the gain scores (post-test score minus pre-test score) of both groups to determine if this difference in improvement was statistically significant. The experimental group had a mean gain score of 24.61 points, whereas the control group had a mean gain score of only 7.66 points. The result of the t-test revealed that this difference was statistically significant, $t(48) = 8.34, p < .001$. This finding provides a clear answer to the first research question: the use of digital storytelling resulted in a significantly greater improvement in students' understanding and application of English syntactic rules compared to traditional teaching methods.

Student Perceptions of Learning Syntax through Digital Storytelling

The thematic analysis of the open-ended questionnaire responses from the 26 students in the experimental group revealed three major themes regarding their perceptions of learning syntax through digital storytelling. These themes provide insight into the 'why' behind the quantitative results.

Theme 1: Enhanced Comprehension and Retention through Contextualized Learning

A predominant sentiment among students was that learning syntax within a narrative context made abstract grammatical rules more concrete and easier to understand. They reported that seeing sentence structures used naturally in a story helped them remember the rules better than memorizing them in isolation.

"It was much easier to understand the passive voice when I saw how it was used in the story to create suspense. Before, it was just a formula on the whiteboard. Now, I understand its purpose." (Student 14)

"The rules finally made sense. The story gave them meaning. I think I will remember them longer because I can connect them to the characters and the plot." (Student 21)

Theme 2: Increased Motivation and Engagement

Students overwhelmingly described the digital storytelling method as more enjoyable, engaging, and less intimidating than conventional grammar lessons. The integration of visuals, sound, and narrative was frequently cited as a key factor in boosting their interest and motivation

to learn what they traditionally considered a "boring" subject.

"I actually looked forward to grammar class. The lessons felt more like watching a short movie than studying. It was fun, so I paid more attention." (Student 5)

"Learning grammar is usually stressful for me, but this way was different. It didn't feel like we were being drilled. The story pulled me in, and I learned the grammar without even realizing it sometimes." (Student 18)

Theme 3: A Desire for Creative Application and Minor Technical Hurdles

While the feedback was largely positive, a third theme emerged that highlighted a desire for more active participation and noted some initial technical challenges. Some students expressed that while they enjoyed consuming the digital stories, they felt they would learn even more if they had the opportunity to create their own simple stories using the target syntactic structures.

"I loved the method. My only suggestion is maybe we could try to make our own short stories too. I think using the grammar to build something myself would be the ultimate test." (Student 9)

"At first, the video player on my phone was a bit slow, which was frustrating. But after the first lesson, it was fine. The method is great, but the technology must work smoothly." (Student 25)

DISCUSSION

This section interprets the findings presented in the previous chapter, discusses their implications in relation to existing theories and research, and provides an overall analysis of the study's contribution. The discussion is structured around the primary findings related to the effectiveness of digital storytelling and student perceptions. The results of this study provide compelling evidence that integrating digital storytelling is a significantly more effective pedagogical strategy for teaching English syntax than conventional methods. The quantitative findings unequivocally demonstrated that the experimental group, which learned through digital storytelling, achieved substantially higher learning gains than the control group. This result directly answers the first research question and aligns with theories that critique traditional, decontextualized grammar instruction (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). While conventional methods often present grammar as a set of abstract rules to be memorized, the significant improvement in the experimental group suggests that embedding syntactic structures within a meaningful and engaging narrative context facilitates deeper learning and application. The marked difference in improvement suggests that by situating complex grammatical rules within a

meaningful narrative context, digital storytelling successfully overcomes the limitations of rote memorization and mechanical drills.

The qualitative findings illuminate why this method was so effective. The first theme, Enhanced Comprehension and Retention through Contextualized Learning, strongly supports the theoretical premise of narrative-based instruction (Bruner, 1991). Students' comments, such as understanding the purpose of the passive voice through a story's suspense, reveal that the narrative provided a cognitive anchor for abstract rules. Instead of learning a formula, students learned its communicative function. This contextualization appears to be the key factor in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, a common failure point of traditional grammar teaching.

Furthermore, the second theme, Increased Motivation and Engagement, addresses the affective dimension of learning, which is often overlooked in grammar instruction. The students' descriptions of the lessons as "fun," "less stressful," and like "watching a short movie" suggest that digital storytelling successfully lowered the affective filter, a crucial element in second language acquisition. When students are engaged and motivated, their receptiveness to complex linguistic input increases. This affective engagement, combined with the cognitive benefits of context, creates a powerful learning environment that explains the superior performance of the experimental group. This finding empirically substantiates the claim that technology, when used thoughtfully, can transform challenging subjects into motivating learning experiences (Purnama et al., 2022).

The findings of this study have significant implications for language pedagogy and research. Pedagogically, this research offers English teachers a practical and empirically validated framework for moving beyond rote drills. By integrating digital stories, educators can teach complex syntax in a way that is not only more effective but also more enjoyable for students. Theoretically, this study contributes to the fields of TELL and SLA by filling a critical research gap. It provides specific evidence for the use of digital storytelling in the explicit teaching of syntax, an area that was previously underexplored. Moreover, the third qualitative theme—the Desire for Creative Application—opens a new avenue, suggesting that the pedagogical benefits might be even greater if students transition from consumers to creators of digital stories.

Despite the clear findings, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and drawn from a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other populations or contexts. Second, the intervention was conducted over a six-week period; a longitudinal study would be needed to assess the long-term retention of syntactic knowledge. Finally, the possibility of a novelty effect, where students' engagement was partly due

to the newness of the method, cannot be entirely ruled out. Future research should aim to replicate this study with larger, more diverse samples and over a longer duration. Additionally, future studies could investigate the pedagogical impact of having students create their own digital stories, directly addressing the insightful feedback provided by the participants in this study.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effectiveness and student perceptions of integrating digital storytelling into the teaching of English syntax. Based on the analysis of the findings, this research draws several key conclusions. First, in response to the primary research question, the study concludes that the use of digital storytelling is a significantly more effective pedagogical method for improving students' understanding and application of syntactic rules compared to conventional, decontextualized instruction. This was evidenced by the statistically significant learning gains of the experimental group. Second, the study found that students' perceptions of the method were overwhelmingly positive. They perceived it as a highly engaging, motivating, and effective tool that enhanced their comprehension by providing meaningful context for abstract grammar rules.

The findings of this research carry significant implications for both pedagogical practice and academic theory. Practically, this study provides English language teachers and curriculum designers with a validated, innovative framework for teaching syntax that can transform a traditionally challenging subject into an enjoyable and effective learning experience. Theoretically, this research contributes valuable empirical evidence to the fields of Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) by filling a crucial research gap, demonstrating the specific utility of digital storytelling for explicit grammar instruction.

While the findings are compelling, the study's limitations must be acknowledged, including the relatively small sample size, the short duration of the intervention, and the potential for a novelty effect. Therefore, future research is recommended to replicate this study with larger, more diverse populations and over a longer period to assess long-term retention. Furthermore, inspired by the student feedback, future studies should investigate the pedagogical impact of transitioning students from consumers to creators of digital stories, which may yield even greater learning benefits.

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