

THE APPLICATION OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN TEACHING ENGLISH LISTENING SKILLS TO YOUNG LEARNERS: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF BENEFITS AND CONSTRAINTS

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Abstract: Digital storytelling has emerged as an alternative method to teach language skills to various types of learners due to its flexibility, engaging aspects, and linguistic features. Albeit its prevalence, the use of digital storytelling in English language teaching varies from one context to another. This study aimed to investigate English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' perceptions of benefits and constraints in implementing digital storytelling to teach listening skills to young learners. Thirty EFL teachers conveniently sampled from a primary school in Bien Hoa City, Dong Nai province, Vietnam partook in answering a closed-ended questionnaire, and ten of them were invited for semi-structured interviews. The obtained data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively using descriptive statistics and content analysis, respectively. The findings indicated the possibility of applying digital storytelling to teach listening skills at the primary school as it could provide the students with adequate language knowledge, listening sub-skills, and a positive learning environment. However, the study revealed a number of difficulties in terms of the content, linguistic features, and grammar in digital stories that EFL teachers encountered in applying digital storytelling to teach listening skills to young learners.

Keywords: digital storytelling, English listening skill, young learners

1. Introduction

In recent years, the application of technology in education, particularly English language education has become prevalent in Vietnam (e.g., Duong et al., 2021; Tran & Duong, 2021; Tran & Duong, 2022; Tran & Hoang, 2022). Among the innovative technology-related teaching tools, digital storytelling has been considered one of the effective methods to teach listening skills to ESL/EFL learners

thanks to their content variation and the interesting aspects they bring about. It is believed that digital storytelling helps students, even with limited ability in English, engage in rich and complex interpretations of texts (Early & Marshall, 2008), and they can provide visual and verbal interpretations, which extend the concept of literacy (Towndrow & Pereira, 2018). Digital storytelling has been applied in various English language teaching contexts as they are proven to assist students

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to develop their language abilities, academic performances (Yuksel et al., 2011), and linguistic features (Ribeiro, 2015).

It is argued that one of the skills which challenge both teachers and learners is the listening skill which requires learners to acknowledge the function of pronunciation, the stress, the intonation in the listening process; and the linking sounds system of the language to completely understand the speakers' attention or the contents of talks. Field (2008) claimed that listening is generally considered the most challenging language teaching and learning skill, particularly in English classes. Furthermore, in the context of Vietnam, many EFL students have identified listening skills as the most difficult skill among the four macro skills (Tran & Duong, 2020; Vu & Shah, 2016). In addition, in Vietnam, listening skills have not been paid attention to as supposed (Duong & Chau, 2019; Tran & Ha, 2022). Bui and Duong (2018) explained that most of the English curricula in Vietnam's education system are exam-oriented as they put an emphasis on grammar, reading, and vocabulary. Consequently, teachers appear to overlook listening skills in the teaching process (Hamouda, 2013).

Within the current research context, the application of digital storytelling to teach listening skills has proved its engaging characteristics as it creates a positive learning atmosphere where students wish to take part in the lesson actively. Normally, teachers tend to use digital storytelling as a way to teach students pronunciation and vocabulary by having them read aloud those stories and listen to the audio for correction. Based on informal discussions with the researchers, however, some teachers have expressed their uncertainty about the advantages of digital storytelling in teaching English listening skills due to different accents in the recording which may cause confusion among learners. Apparently, the

effectiveness of the adaptation of digital stories in teaching English listening skills has still led to an argument among the teachers at the research site. Therefore, this study endeavors to explore English teachers' perceptions of prospects and challenges in the application of digital storytelling to teaching listening skills to primary school students. The research questions are drawn as follows:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the benefits of implementing digital storytelling to teach English listening skills to young students?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of possible constraints of implementing digital storytelling to teach English listening skills to young students?

2. Literature Review

Digital storytelling

Several scholars (e.g., Loniza et al., 2018; Ribeiro, 2015; Reynolds, 2014) believed that digital storytelling can be understood as the combination of the traditional way of storytelling, literacy work, and the modern method of transferring the story, through videos, pictures, and audio recordings. Instead of archiving stories on books by written literacy works, storytellers now can utilize continuously updated technology to make written content more understandable to digest. For example, readers can sit back and listen to a digital story read in a comfortable voice. In this way, digital storytelling emerges as a way to help readers feel more relaxed when they are in the process of digesting the story. In addition, digital storytelling can also be seen as an upgraded or alternative version of the original ones. That is to say, a digital story can be an adaptation of a well-known literary work, a sharpened transcript of an interview, or even a bibliography story of a person.

Digital storytelling can be beneficial in English language teaching in some ways.

Yuksel et al. (2011) pointed out that digital storytelling can help students to develop various language abilities and academic performances, and other aspects of development are mentioned, e.g., students learning with digital stories are able to improve their cognitive level, social interaction, and reflection skills. Additionally, digital storytelling for educational purposes addresses not only language features in the stories but also the content and implied value of such stories. In another sense, Ribeiro (2015) highlighted that digital storytelling is the integration of different skills in terms of literacy and language. That is to say, by using digital storytelling, students have opportunities to be exposed to a variety of linguistic features, which can enrich their language ability and knowledge.

However, there exist a few challenges of implementing digital storytelling in a language classroom such as limited facilities, legal matters, appropriate content of digital stories, students' low proficiency in technology, and an ability to assess learning performance. Yuksel et al. (2011) pointed out that the dearth of teaching facilities or conditions may prevent students from sufficiently experiencing digital storytelling. In another aspect, legal issues, suitable digital stories, and assessment skills are referred to as challenges to digital storytelling implementation (Beck & Neil, 2021). Regarding legalization, Harding and Hill (2011) proposed guidelines for ethical issues involving digital storytelling. Assessment criteria are one of the biggest concerns when digital storytelling is applied (Bromberg, 2013; Bui, 2015). In addition to worries about students' proficiency in technology and story selection, Bui (2015) raised other teachers' concerns over administrative affairs, teachers' honor, and ethical practice.

Listening skills and young learners

Listening is defined as a blend of hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating, and responding (Brownell, 2012). More specifically, listening is referred to as the message-receiving process (Tyagi, 2013) or the information acquisition (Walberg, 2004) in which a listener needs to absorb utterances produced by a speaker. Listening and reading are viewed as receptive skills, whereas speaking and writing are identified as productive skills (Brown & Lee, 2015). This means that listening is generally supposed to be a passive skill; however, Nunan (2015, p. 40) argued that this skill is an active process as "when we listen, we do a great deal more than decode the sounds that strike our eardrums into words, phrases, and sentences. Rather, we use contextual knowledge to construct a reasonable interpretation of what a speaker has said."

As regards the role of listening skills in language education, listening skills can be considered one of the key criteria to evaluate learners' language proficiency (Baurain, 2011; Linse, 2005; Tyagi, 2013). To teach listening and speaking skills to young learners effectively, a teacher needs to bear their characteristics in mind such as continuous exposure to the target language in an exciting way, limited attention span, high demand for physical movement, the ability to acquire a language through repetition and imitation, and opportunities to communicate in the purposeful and authentic learning environment (Kirkgöz, 2019). Likewise, Brown and Lee (2015) pinpointed five considerations to facilitate the children-teaching process, including intellectual development, attention span, sensory input, affective factors, and authentic and meaningful language.

Previous studies

There has been a small number of studies on the contribution of (digital)

storytelling towards the development of ESL/EFL students' listening skills. Specifically, Loniza et al. (2018) conducted research on how digital storytelling-based materials influenced the listening skill development of very young learners. The study revealed that the listening competence of those who were taught by utilizing digital storytelling outperformed the listening skills of those instructed in a traditional way. The study conducted by Oduolowu and Oluwakemi (2014) explored the effect of storytelling on teaching listening skills to primary school students. The research examined if there were significant differences between male and female students. It was found that the female students had a tendency of developing listening skills more than the male ones. In the context of Vietnam, there is a scarcity of research on the use of digital storytelling in teaching English listening skills. Therefore, this study aims at exploring the application of digital storytelling in teaching listening skills to young students from EFL teachers' perceptions in the context of a primary school in Bien Hoa City, Dong Nai province, Vietnam.

3. Methodology

Research design

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed in this study. The quantitative method concentrates on numeric data while the qualitative method aims to gain insights into participants' perspectives or thoughts (Creswell, 2009). The closed-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect quantitative and qualitative data respectively. The quantitative method was used to investigate teachers' perceptions of the benefits of applying digital storytelling in teaching English listening skills to young learners, and the qualitative method was utilized to explore the constraints the

teachers encountered during the teaching process.

Research setting and participants

The research was carried out at a primary school in Bien Hoa City, Dong Nai province, which is an international school. This school, established in 2010, has been offering more than 500 students an international learning environment such as qualified faculty, learning facilities and conditions, educational services, learning materials, and curriculum. To meet the requirements of an international school, this school focuses on providing students with an interactive and international learning environment. Therefore, English speaking and listening skills are the core of the teaching curriculum. Since 2020, digital storytelling has been adapted to the training program, especially for listening and reading comprehension. The digital stories used generally addressed figures, historical events, daily lives, and discoveries. Because the students in the research setting varied in proficiency levels, the topic was selected with careful consideration. As for listening skills, there were five periods for teaching listening skills through digital storytelling. In particular, pronunciation and vocabulary were taught in the first two periods to provide students with the necessary knowledge for upcoming listening tasks which were introduced in the next two periods. The last period focused on review and consolidation.

This research recruited a group of 30 EFL teachers (17 Vietnamese teachers and 13 foreign teachers) who were instructed to apply digital storytelling in listening lessons based on the convenience sampling method. They all experienced at least three years in applying digital storytelling to teach listening skills to young learners at all levels. Most of them were in their twenties, and two of them were middle-aged, so they mostly got exposure to technology with ease. Ten

out of 30 teachers (7 Vietnamese teachers and 3 foreign teachers) were invited for the interviews. The interviewees were labeled from T1 and T10. These teachers were selected based on their willingness and availability.

Research instruments

A closed-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were employed for data collection. The former contains two main parts: Part A is about respondents' background information; Part B is the questionnaire content which was adapted from Chauhan and Maniar's (2017) study, and it includes 14 five-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) items addressing EFL teachers' perceptions of the prospects of the application of digital storytelling in teaching listening skills to young students (language knowledge (3 items), listening sub-skills (5 items), and learning environment (6 items)). The Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire was .84, i.e., the questionnaire is reliable. The latter concerns difficulties in applying digital stories in teaching English listening skills to young learners. To minimize any language barriers, the two versions of the questionnaire were simultaneously used for both groups of teachers, i.e., the Vietnamese version was delivered to the Vietnamese teachers, and the English one was administered to the foreign teachers.

Data collection and analysis procedures

With respect to data collection, before collecting data for the main study, we sent the questionnaire to two teachers working at this research site. It is noted that these teachers were excluded from the main study. Following this, we interviewed them about challenges they encountered during the digital storytelling-based listening

teaching process. After the pilot, we made some minor modifications to the questionnaire and interview questions. For the main study, the questionnaire was administered to 30 EFL teachers in person, and it took them around 10 minutes to answer the questionnaire. Then, ten EFL teachers were invited based on their willingness to participate in the interviews which lasted about 20 minutes each. With the participants' permission, all the interviews were recorded for later data analysis.

As for the data analysis, the quantitative data generated from the questionnaire were processed by the SPSS software in terms of descriptive analysis (i.e., Mean: M; Standard deviation: SD). Meanwhile, the qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed through content analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

Results

As indicated in Table 1, the average mean score of the EFL teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the application of digital storytelling in teaching listening skills to primary school students is 3.83 (SD=.78) out of five. Regarding three components, it is noticed that the mean score of the learning environment is 3.89 (SD= .78), followed by that of the listening sub-skills (M=3.83; SD=.76) and the language knowledge (M=3.77, SD=.79). This shows the EFL teachers' positive perception concerning the application of digital storytelling in teaching English listening skills to primary school students as it could help students improve their language knowledge and listening sub-skills and provide them with a supportive learning environment.

Table 1

EFL Teachers' Perceptions of the Merits of the Application of Digital Storytelling in Teaching Listening Skills to Young Students

Components	n=30	
	M	SD
Language knowledge	3.77	.79
Listening sub-skills	3.83	.76
Learning environment	3.89	.78
<i>Average</i>	3.83	.78

Turning to details, the results in Table 2 present that the EFL teachers agreed that digital storytelling could help students identify “words’ pronunciation” (item 3: M=3.77; SD=.67) and “key structures” (item 2: M=3.73; SD=.94), and “provide useful vocabulary” (item 1: M=3.63; SD=.85) in learning listening skills. It can be observed that the mean values of language knowledge were insignificantly different. Among the three key areas of language, the contribution of digital storytelling to pronunciation development was highly valued, followed by the improvement in grammar structures and lexical items.

Table 2

Language Knowledge

Statement	n=30	
	M	SD
1. Digital storytelling provides useful vocabulary.	3.68	.85
2. Digital storytelling helps identify key structures.	3.73	.94
3. Digital storytelling helps identify words’ pronunciation.	3.77	.67

As can be seen in Table 3, the EFL teachers reckoned that digital stories could help students “clarify stress and sounds” (item 8: M=4.03; SD=.71), “determine listening tasks’ requirements” (item 8: M=4.00; SD=.64), and “identify details in texts” (item 5: M=3.83; SD=.80).

Additionally, they also believed that digital stories could help students with “general information clarification” (item 4: M=3.70; SD=.75), and “provide students with clues to identify speakers’ feelings” (item 6: M=3.60; SD=.93). This means that the teachers showed their agreement in the merits of digital storytelling towards these listening sub-skills. More specifically, the teachers showed a high agreement in developing pronunciation aspects (e.g., stress and sounds) and determining task requirements. However, some of them expressed neutrality towards the identification of speakers’ feelings through clues in digital stories.

Table 3

Listening Sub-Skills

Statement	n=30	
	M	SD
4. Digital storytelling helps students with general information clarification.	3.70	.75
5. Digital storytelling helps students identify details in texts.	3.83	.80
6. Digital storytelling provides students with clues to identify speakers’ feelings.	3.60	.93
7. Digital storytelling helps students clarify stress and sounds.	4.03	.71
8. Digital storytelling helps students determine listening tasks’ requirements.	4.00	.64

Table 4 illustrates that the research participants strongly agreed that digital storytelling could “provide a communicative environment helping students to practice listening authentically” (item 9: M=4.23; SD=.70). Furthermore, they supposed that digital storytelling could provide “a collaborative environment helping students to work with peers” (item 10: M=4.00; SD=.87), “listening sources for further

listening development” (item 12: $M=3.93$; $SD=.70$), and “appropriate learning sources for the listening learning process” (item 13: $M=3.80$; $SD=.80$). They also thought that digital storytelling could provide “a pressure-free learning environment” (item 11: $M=3.87$; $SD=.73$) and “an active learning environment” (item 14: $M=3.67$; $SD=.80$). Although the teachers admitted the benefits of digital storytelling in teaching

English listening skills to young learners, their perceptions relating to the learning environment varied in levels of agreement. The communicative learning environment and collaborative learning environment that digital storytelling brings students were believed to be the most salient factors, whereas an active learning environment was the lowest-rated benefit of digital storytelling.

Table 4

The Learning Environment

Statements	n=30	
	M	SD
9. Digital storytelling provides a communicative environment helping students practice listening authentically.	4.23	.70
10. Digital storytelling provides a collaborative environment helping students work with peers.	4.00	.87
11. Digital storytelling provides a pressure-free learning environment.	3.87	.73
12. Digital storytelling provides listening sources for further listening development.	3.93	.70
13. Digital storytelling provides appropriate learning sources for the listening learning process.	3.80	.80
14. Digital storytelling provides an active learning environment.	3.67	.80

Besides the results concerning the teachers’ perceptions of the possibilities of digital storytelling as a learning and teaching tool, the findings from interviews indicated that a majority of the participants confessed that one of the major difficulties in applying digital storytelling in teaching English listening skills to young students was the challenging content in the digital stories.

Sometimes, students ask questions about the topic of the listening text because they find some familiar content. It is difficult to know all, so I have to search for a lot of things before teaching. (T7)

Additionally, the teachers found the linguistic items in the digital stories were quite limited. To deal with the requirement of the educational curriculum, many of them

had to look for other sources for related linguistic items covered in the stories, which was really time-consuming.

Occasionally, the students keep asking me about the meaning of terms used in the digital stories. It is quite hard for me to explain to them in English. (T3)

Another difficulty related to linguistic issues was the grammar that appeared in the digital stories. Obviously, the stories contained various complex sentences that were beyond what was taught to the students. For instance, one teacher mentioned:

Eventually, during the teaching process, students often ask questions involving grammar points used in digital stories. With such questions, I

have to answer without explaining the difference in linguistic functions. Sometimes, I find it challenging to explain the new grammar point to them because they are still young, and too much information may demotivate their learning. (T8)

In brief, the EFL teachers revealed three types of constraints (i.e., difficult content, linguistic terms, and grammar) in applying digital storytelling to teach English listening skills to young learners.

2.3. Discussion

This study endeavored to explore the EFL teachers' perceptions of the application of digital storytelling to teach English listening skills to young learners. After the data analysis, there were a few noticeable findings. The first major finding was that EFL teachers perceived that applying digital storytelling to teach English listening skills to young learners could be effective in providing students with language knowledge, listening sub-skills, and a learning environment. They believed that the content of digital storytelling conveyed a lot of valuable aspects which could help students develop their listening skills. This finding resonates with the claim by Chauhan and Maniar (2017) claiming that the features of digital storytelling could attract young learners' attention and offer a pressure-free learning environment, which could help students learn listening skills in an interesting way. Additionally, EFL teachers reckoned that digital storytelling offered many benefits for students' listening skills as students had an opportunity to practice listening skills in an authentic learning environment through digital storytelling. This finding is in alignment with Robin's (2006) and Ribeiro's (2015) viewpoints which state that digital storytelling is effective for students in the language learning process since it can function as meaningful and authentic language input.

According to Kirkgöz (2019), young learners can learn a language by communicating in purposeful and real-life situations.

The second noticeable finding was that although the EFL teachers perceived the possibilities of the application of digital storytelling to teach listening skills to young learners, they still encountered some difficulties in applying digital storytelling to teach listening skills to young learners such as difficult content, linguistic terms, and grammar that students could not absorb with ease. Several researchers (Beck & Neil, 2021; Bui, 2015) shared similar opinions about content-related constraints. As a matter of fact, the content could be challenging for young learners due to cultural differences and authentic language as Brown and Lee (2015) affirmed that young learners find it hard to grasp abstract concepts. Strikingly, while Yuksel et al. (2011) and Ribeiro (2015) claimed that digital storytelling probably enhances students' language proficiency, the findings of this study indicated that linguistic terms and grammar in digital storytelling were teachers' hindrance to teaching listening skills to young students. This finding, however, was confirmed by Chauhan and Maniar's (2017) research which has shown that linguistic features in digital storytelling were one of the major difficulties for students to understand the content of the stories.

3. Conclusion

The study has indicated that although EFL teachers believed that digital storytelling is effective in developing young learners' English listening skills in terms of language knowledge, listening sub-skills, and learning environment, they still encountered some challenges relating to content selection, linguistic features, and grammar used in digital storytelling in teaching English listening skills.

Such conclusions suggest some pedagogical implications as follows. Firstly, EFL teachers should be active in consulting the administrators regarding the content of digital stories to be adapted to the teaching curriculum. Specifically, based on the clarified benefits as well as how they affect the students' listening skill development, teachers can make possible suggestions to revise or expand the positive aspects of the digital stories. Furthermore, it is necessary for teachers to discuss certain strategies for teaching listening skills by applying digital storytelling to reach a common teaching practice because of the aforementioned difficulties. In addition, digital storytelling is possibly useful in further listening progress, such as preparing for academic tests if appropriately modified. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers should focus on relevant features of digital storytelling and academic tests, e.g., IELTS or TOEIC. Secondly, the findings may offer opportunities for administrators to consider digital storytelling as an effective educational tool. To this end, the content of digital stories should be more selective, and teachers should be given more freedom to make a choice of digital stories based on their teaching practices. Digital stories should also be rigorously selected in terms of linguistic features. Digital stories are assumed to be useful sources of listening content to prepare for international exams such as Starters or Movers. Therefore, administrators should consider integrating the listening content of the examination with the content of digital stories to familiarize students with such tests. In addition, digital stories contain a massive amount of authentic language as well as comprehensible input for speaking skills, so it is advised to combine the speaking and listening lessons to maximize the effectiveness of the digital stories.

This study still limits itself in some ways. The sample size was quite small, and

the study was conducted at one primary school. Therefore, recommendations for further research are given. Future research can be conducted with a bigger sample size involving both teachers and students from diverse research contexts. Moreover, the use of digital storytelling in relation to language efficiency and teaching strategies for both speaking and listening skills should be under investigation. Finally, the employment of various research instruments deserves a mention to ensure data triangulation. That is, more than one instrument should be used to address each research question.

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ỨNG DỤNG KỂ CHUYỆN SỐ TRONG GIẢNG DẠY KỸ NĂNG NGHE TIẾNG ANH CHO HỌC SINH TIỂU HỌC: NHẬN THỨC CỦA GIÁO VIÊN VỀ LỢI ÍCH VÀ THÁCH THỨC

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Tóm tắt: Kể chuyện số được xem là một phương pháp cải tiến để dạy các kỹ năng ngôn ngữ cho những đối tượng người học khác nhau nhờ vào tính linh hoạt, các khía cạnh tăng tính gắn kết của sinh viên và đặc điểm ngôn ngữ. Mặc dù phương pháp này khá phổ biến nhưng mức độ ứng dụng của nó khác nhau ở các bối cảnh. Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu nhận thức của giáo viên tiếng Anh về cơ hội và thách thức của phương pháp kể chuyện số để dạy kỹ năng nghe tiếng Anh cho học sinh tiểu học. Đối tượng khảo sát gồm có 30 giáo viên đang công tác tại một trường tiểu học quốc tế ở thành phố Biên Hòa, tỉnh Đồng Nai, Việt Nam. Tất cả các giáo viên này đã trả lời bảng khảo sát và 10 thầy/cô được mời tham gia các phiên phỏng vấn cá nhân sau đó. Dữ liệu định lượng được phân tích thông qua thống kê mô tả; dữ liệu định tính được phân tích dựa vào phương pháp phân tích nội dung. Kết quả chỉ ra tính khả quan của việc áp dụng kể chuyện số để dạy nghe tiếng Anh cho học sinh tiểu học tại bối cảnh này bởi vì nó cung cấp cho học sinh kiến thức về ngôn ngữ, kỹ năng nghe và môi trường học tích cực. Tuy nhiên, những giáo viên này cũng nêu lên những khó khăn liên quan đến nội dung của câu chuyện, đặc điểm về ngôn ngữ và những điểm ngữ pháp được dùng trong những câu chuyện đó.

Từ khóa: kể chuyện số, kỹ năng nghe tiếng Anh, học sinh tiểu học