

LOCAL WISDOM DIGITAL STORYTELLING TO FOSTER CULTURAL LITERACY AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN EFL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

The rapid advance of digital technology reshaped English learning, yet it also sharpened a persistent problem: the lack of cultural relevance in standard EFL materials. This decontextualized approach reduced student engagement and hindered authentic cultural literacy and communicative competence. Traditional methods prioritized grammatical accuracy over meaningful communication and cultural understanding, resulting in lower motivation and weaker communication skills. This qualitative case study explored local wisdom-based digital storytelling as an innovative method in English classes at SMA Negeri 1 Kolaka, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. Over three months, data were gathered through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving two experienced teachers and twenty Grade XI students, then analyzed thematically. Results revealed that incorporating Tolaki and Bugis cultural narratives into digital storytelling significantly boosted student engagement, strengthened cultural identity, and enhanced language proficiency by connecting English learning to students' social realities. Despite these gains, challenges arose, including limited technology access, initial student resistance to local content, and the need for teacher training in digital tools. The study provided a practical framework for culturally responsive EFL teaching through the integration of local wisdom and digital technology.

Keywords: communicative competence; cultural literacy; digital storytelling; English language learning; local wisdom.

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INTRODUCTION

English language learning in Indonesia largely focuses on structural and grammatical methods, which stress memorizing grammar rules and mastering sentence forms (Anjani et al., 2025). These methods often ignore how to use the language in real-life situations. This oversight leads to students having a limited ability to communicate well in everyday settings (Ismail & Syahputra, 2021; Mudra & Jamin, 2025). This

situation highlights a significant gap in addressing the communicative aspect, which is essential for learning a foreign language. Language instruction often does not take into account the cultural backgrounds of learners. Communicative competence involves not just mastering the language but also understanding and responding to meaning in specific social and cultural situations. Byram (1997) points out that intercultural competence is a vital part of foreign language education, where appreciating both local and global cultural values should go together. Yet, in many Indonesian classrooms, incorporating local cultural content is still minimal, which limits students' chances to connect language learning to their own cultural identities (Supriyadi & Fitria, 2019).

The 2020 National Examination report published by the Ministry of Education and Culture revealed that many students struggle to comprehend contextual and communicative English texts, particularly those that include cultural elements. This indicates a weak connection between instructional content and students' sociocultural realities, which ideally should serve as the foundation for meaningful language learning. With the rapid development of digital technology, especially the use of digital storytelling (DST), educators now have new opportunities to deliver more authentic and context-rich learning experiences. Digital storytelling enables students to produce narratives through digital platforms while incorporating stories and values from their local culture. As such, local wisdom-based approaches are increasingly recognized as a bridge between foreign language learning and cultural identity.

The significance of integrating cultural values into education is also underscored in Government Regulation No. 57 of 2021 on National Education Standards, which states that national education serves to develop capabilities and build the character and civilization of a dignified nation through the strengthening of character education and the preservation of cultural values. Despite these policy directions, there remains a lack of in-depth studies on how English teachers concretely incorporate local wisdom through digital media.

Responding to this gap, this study investigates how local wisdom-based digital storytelling is implemented in Indonesian secondary school English classrooms. It specifically aims to analyze teachers' strategies in applying this approach, examine its impact on students' cultural literacy and communicative competence, and identify the challenges encountered during its implementation.

Previous research has shown that DST is effective in language education. Robin (2006) defined DST as the practice of telling stories using a mix of text, visuals, audio, and video. Studies by Sadik (2008) and Cahyani & Cahyono (2020) found that DST effectively increases student participation, confidence, and natural language use. In South Korea, Lee & Lee (2017) demonstrated that DST supports both language skills and cultural understanding. In Indonesia, Putra & Dewi (2019) noted that DST improved students' speaking confidence but did not look into how local cultural values could be integrated. More recent research by Huang & Johnson (2022) presented DST as a teaching method that encourages teamwork and reflective learning. However, most existing studies have concentrated mainly on technical language skills without examining DST's potential to strengthen cultural identity.

The integration of local knowledge into language learning connects with the idea of glocalization (Robertson, 1995). This concept highlights the need to adjust global ideas to fit local cultural values. Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2010) promotes incorporating folk stories, local myths, and cultural practices into language materials. Maharani & Santosa (2022) showed that using digital storytelling to preserve local

culture helped students feel more emotionally connected to learning. However, their study did not look at the teacher's important role in blending digital storytelling with local content. Likewise, Díaz & Rivera (2021) pointed out that digital storytelling can help raise cross-cultural awareness, but they did not discuss the technical and teaching challenges teachers face in under-resourced classrooms.

This study aims to fill these gaps by looking at the role of teachers as instructional designers who combine digital storytelling technology with local cultural elements. It examines how this integration enhances students' language skills and strengthens their cultural identity through meaningful classroom practices. Responding to cultural values and social norms is key to developing intercultural communication skills (Byram, 1997). As Kramsch (1993) points out, language and culture are closely connected. Therefore, cultural literacy is essential for developing real communication skills, especially in today's globalized world.

Finally, the study highlights the changing role of teachers in the digital age. They are not just facilitators but also creative and thoughtful media designers. As Ertmer and Simonsen (2015) noted, teachers face real challenges in using digital tools and selecting content that is relevant to their local context. To implement DST effectively, teachers need both digital skills and an understanding of cultural issues. This will help them create learning experiences that are rich in language, culturally relevant, and educationally effective.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative case study method to explore how local wisdom-based digital storytelling is implemented in English language classrooms. The case study approach followed Yin's (2014) framework to provide a detailed analysis of this teaching practice in its natural setting. This design allowed for a thorough examination of the social, cultural, and teaching factors impacting the learning process at SMA Negeri 1 Kolaka, a public secondary school in Kolaka, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. The school serves mostly Tolaki and Bugis ethnic students, offering a rich cultural backdrop for studying how local knowledge is incorporated into language learning.

The study focused on describing teacher strategies, student engagement, and challenges faced during digital storytelling instruction. Researchers purposely selected participants to ensure key stakeholders in the digital storytelling process were included. Two female English teachers, aged 35 and 41, each with over ten years of teaching experience, were chosen for their active use of local wisdom-based digital storytelling. Both had completed specialized training in digital teaching through the school's professional development program. Additionally, twenty eleventh-grade students, aged 16 to 17 (11 females and 9 males), were selected using maximum variation sampling to capture a range of perspectives and experiences. Students were chosen for their active participation in the storytelling project and willingness to discuss their learning, with representation from different academic performance levels.

Data were collected over three months using three complementary methods: (1) In-depth interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted twice with each teacher, totaling four sessions lasting 45-60 minutes. These interviews examined the teachers' teaching methods, choice of local cultural content, implementation strategies, and challenges faced. Eight students were also selected as additional informants through theoretical sampling; each interviewed for about 30 minutes to gather varied student views; (2) Classroom observations: Three systematic classroom observations lasting 90 minutes each were carried out during digital storytelling activities. A

structured observation protocol documented interactions between teachers and students, patterns of student collaboration, technology use, and cultural integration; (3) Document analysis: A thorough analysis involved reviewing lesson plans (RPP), teacher reflection journals, student-made digital storytelling products (videos and interactive presentations), and student worksheets.

The study received formal approval from the school administration and followed strict ethical procedures. All teachers and students gave their informed consent, and parental permission was obtained for minor participants. Data was anonymized with pseudonyms, and raw data was stored securely. Thematic analysis was performed according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. The interview transcripts, classroom observation notes, and relevant documents were fully transcribed and analyzed using an interactive model involving data reduction, displaying data, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Methodological triangulation and member checking were used to improve credibility and analytical thoroughness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from in-depth interviews with teachers and students, classroom observations, and document analysis. For instance, interviews revealed that both teachers deliberately chose local themes like folktales and customs to increase student relatability. Observation notes recorded students actively collaborating in group storytelling using Canva and Adobe Spark. Document analysis of lesson plans and student products showed the embedding of cultural values such as cooperation and tolerance. The data were analyzed thematically and are organized into five main themes: teacher strategies, cultural literacy outcomes, communicative competence development, challenges in implementation, and study limitations. Following this, the discussion integrates such findings with relevant literature to provide insights into the pedagogical value of digital storytelling (DST) based on local wisdom in English language instruction. A summary of the key findings for the primary themes is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Main Themes and Key Findings on Local Wisdom-Based Digital Storytelling Implementation

Main Theme	Summary of Key Findings
1. Teachers' Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers intentionally selected culturally-grounded themes (Tolaki and Bugis folktales). • Guided students in using digital platforms like Canva and Adobe Spark.
2. Impact on Cultural Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students gained a deeper appreciation for their cultural heritage. • Showed three stages of development: (1) recognizing, (2) internalizing, and (3) creative expression.

3. Development of Communicative Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students were more confident when speaking about familiar cultural topics. • Showed an increase in "communicative confidence". • Language output improved in both fluency and expression.
4. Implementation Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical: Infrastructural limitations (unreliable internet, limited devices). • Student: Initial low interest in local culture, perceiving it as "outdated".

A. Teachers' Strategies in Integrating Local Wisdom

Interview data from both English teachers revealed that they intentionally selected culturally grounded themes such as folktales, traditional customs, and moral values from the Tolaki and Bugis communities. These local narratives were integrated into digital storytelling lessons to increase student relatability and to preserve regional identity. Both teachers noted in interviews that these themes were chosen because of their proximity to students' everyday lives and potential to foster deeper engagement.

Classroom observations confirmed these practices, showing that teachers demonstrated the use of platforms such as Canva, Adobe Spark, and simple animation apps step-by-step before allowing students to begin production. During observations, the teacher walked around the classroom checking each group's progress, assisting students who struggled with adding voice-overs, inserting cultural images, or arranging visual sequences. Observation notes also recorded that students frequently consulted cultural reference materials provided by the teacher, such as pictures of local ceremonies or folktale summaries, during the drafting and editing stages. The students worked in collaborative groups and received structured guidance throughout the process. This was supported by document analysis of lesson plans (RPPs), which included explicit cultural objectives and instructions for digital production tasks.

One student, in an interview, shared:

"We made a story about Burung Kongga, a legend from my grandmother's village. It brought back memories, and it was exciting to tell the story in English with our own visuals and voice."

Findings on teachers' strategies for integrating local wisdom through digital storytelling reveal important dimensions that extend beyond simply using technology in the classroom. When teachers choose cultural content, they do more than follow technical guidelines. They consider cultural relevance, historical sensitivity, and how well the content fits into the curriculum. In the context of glocalization (Estuarso, 2021), teachers serve as "cultural curators." They carefully select and adjust local cultural elements to incorporate them into global English language learning. These findings show that integrating local wisdom is not a routine task; it is a thoughtful practice. It requires a solid understanding of Tolaki and Bugis cultural values, along with the skill to link these values to language learning goals. Analyzing teachers' lesson plans reveals a clear pattern in designing digital storytelling activities. They start with cultural

exploration, which involves identifying local values. Then, they move to cultural adaptation, where they translate these values into a global context. Finally, they conclude with cultural expression, creating digital narratives that present local culture in a digital format. This pattern indirectly supports the “cultural scaffolding” framework proposed by Gay (2010), with a focus on the digital aspect, which has not been widely explored in earlier research. These findings also confirm that teachers act as “cultural instructional designers” (Ertmer & Simonsen, 2015). They not only deliver content but also create learning experiences that combine local knowledge with digital expression. Compared to the study by Maharani & Santosa (2022), this research highlights how teachers actively design and modify cultural content instead of simply using existing material. This suggests a need for special training for teachers in “cultural digital literacy.” This training would help teachers identify, select, and transform aspects of local culture into digital teaching formats.

B. Impact on Students’ Cultural Literacy

Students’ interviews and analysis of DST project content revealed that students gained a deeper appreciation for their cultural heritage. We argue that this can happen because engaging in the DST project encourages students to reflect on and narrate aspects of their own cultural heritage in meaningful ways. By selecting stories, images, and personal experiences tied to their backgrounds, students not only practiced language skills but also revisited and reinterpreted cultural values, traditions, and identities. This process, furthermore, fostered a stronger sense of connection and pride, leading them to develop a deeper appreciation for their cultural heritage. Through re-telling folktales and engaging with local customs in their narratives, they therefore internalized values such as mutual cooperation, tolerance, and ecological awareness.

Consider the following information as one student revealed during an interview:

"At first I thought old stories were outdated, but I realized there are so many valuable lessons, like helping each other and taking care of nature."

Findings on improving students' cultural literacy through DST based on local wisdom reveal that the transformation process is more complex than simply gaining knowledge about culture. An in-depth analysis of students' digital narratives shows three stages of cultural literacy development: (1) recognizing. At this stage, students begin to identify cultural symbols and values; (2) internalizing. Here, students start to understand the meaning and importance of cultural values in the context of modern life; and (3) creative expression. In this stage, students can adapt and share cultural values through innovative digital formats. This process supports and enriches Byram's (1997) framework of intercultural competence, especially in the areas of “savoir-être” (the ability to adapt to other cultures) and “savoir s'engager” (the ability to engage critically with cultures). Interestingly, these findings show that cultural literacy not only improves students' understanding of their own culture but also strengthens their ability to interact with other cultures. This supports the concept of “cultural metacognition” proposed by Liddicoat & Scarino (2013). This contradicts the common belief that focusing on local culture may limit a global perspective. In fact, this study shows that a strong grasp of one's own culture provides a solid base for understanding other cultures. Compared to the research by Mansor & Salleh (2019), this study shows that integrating local wisdom through DST not only boosts the use of contextual language but also encourages critical thinking about cultural values. This includes the ability to

tell which traditions should be preserved and which should be adjusted. The theoretical implication is the need to broaden the idea of cultural literacy in language learning into a dynamic process. This process should include identification, reflection, and creative expression, not just factual knowledge.

C. Development of Communicative Competence

Teachers reported in interviews that students were more confident when speaking about familiar cultural topics, noting that language output improved in both fluency and expression. The researchers believed that such confidence was derived as they already have rich background knowledge about their own culture or familiar cultural practices. In other words, they tend to engage more deeply with topics that are personally meaningful. Cultural themes often resonate with their identities, traditions, or lived experiences. This personal connection fosters intrinsic motivation and encourages students to communicate more naturally, leading to improved expression and fluency. In fact, observation data underpins this, namely students spoke more naturally during in-class presentations and discussions, often referring to personal or family experiences embedded in their DST projects.

One teacher stated during an interview:

"They were much more fluent when presenting their own stories. I think it's because the stories were already part of their lives, they didn't have to 'learn' them from scratch."

Students also commented in interviews that recording their voice-overs helped them practice pronunciation and narrative pacing without the pressure of public speaking. Document analysis revealed improved vocabulary usage, especially culturally embedded terms translated into English, and demonstrated their ability to construct coherent story arcs. To evaluate students' communicative competence, the researchers employed three key indicators: (1) fluency, as seen in the smoothness and spontaneity of speech during recorded presentations; (2) coherence, reflected in the organization and logical flow of ideas in students' narratives; and (3) sociolinguistic appropriateness, evaluated through the relevance of language choices in representing cultural values and using proper expressions. These were assessed using classroom observation notes, student presentation recordings, and samples of DST scripts.

Findings on the development of communicative competence through DST based on local wisdom reveal a more complex relationship between cultural context and language proficiency than previously assumed. For example, one observation log noted a group of students switching seamlessly between formal and informal registers when explaining a wedding tradition, while maintaining narrative coherence and accurate tense usage. An analysis of student presentation recordings shows that improvements in communicative competence are not just about linguistic aspects like grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. They also involve sociolinguistic dimensions, which focus on using language appropriately in context, discourse, which is the ability to construct coherent narratives, and strategy, which involves using communication techniques when facing difficulties.

Most importantly, the findings indicate that when students discuss cultural content they understand well, they show an increase in "communicative confidence." This confidence lets them use more complex communication strategies such as elaboration, clarification, and repetition to ensure understanding. This phenomenon supports Krashen's (1982) "affective filter" theory. It suggests that emotional factors like confidence and motivation play a critical role in learning a language.

However, this study builds on that theory by showing that communicative self-confidence comes from a supportive learning environment and the relevance of cultural content. This relevance makes students feel they have the "right to speak" in the target language. A multimodal analysis of students' DST products reveals that combining visual, audio, and text elements not only improves speaking skills but also develops "multimodal literacy" (Jewitt, 2008). This skill is becoming more important in our digital society. Compared to the study by Cahyani & Cahyono (2020), this study demonstrates that increased confidence occurs in presentation situations and in spontaneous interactions during the collaborative process of creating DST. The practical implication is the need to design language activities that focus on linguistic form and meaningful cultural contexts, along with multimodal expressions that support the overall development of communicative competence.

D. Challenges of Implementation

Despite the program's success, interview data from both teachers highlighted significant infrastructural limitations, including unreliable internet and limited access to digital devices among students. Classroom observations recorded moments where technical issues disrupted workflow, and students had to improvise or share devices.

In interviews, several students initially expressed low interest in local culture, perceiving it as outdated or irrelevant. One student reflected:

"At first I thought it would be boring, just another assignment. But after working with friends and seeing the results, I actually liked it."

Teacher reflection notes (analyzed as documents) indicated that students' perceptions changed as they progressed through the creative process, especially once they began integrating personal and familial cultural knowledge into their DST scripts.

Findings on the challenges of implementing DST, based on local wisdom, reveal issues that go beyond simple infrastructure problems. A close look at teacher reflections and classroom observation notes shows that implementation challenges can be divided into three layers: (1) technical layer, which includes infrastructure and digital skills; (2) pedagogical layer, focusing on integrating cultural content into the curriculum; and (3) philosophical layer, involving a shift from structure-based language teaching to culture-based teaching. Interestingly, the findings show that students' initial resistance to local cultural content comes not just from seeing it as outdated, but also from the impact of globalization. This has created a cultural hierarchy that views local cultures as inferior to global ones. This situation aligns with the idea of "cultural imperialism" proposed by Phillipson (1992) in language teaching, where English is linked to progress and modernity, while local culture is tied to outdated traditions.

However, this study shows that we can overcome this resistance through gradual cultural support. We start with cultural content that is closest to the students' experiences, such as family stories, before moving on to more abstract cultural concepts. These findings add to the research of Ertmer & Simonsen (2015) by indicating that technological challenges are tied to cultural and teaching challenges; all three are connected and need a complete approach to solve them. Compared to previous studies that often viewed challenges as barriers, this study reveals that these challenges are actually valuable teaching moments. When students face technical difficulties, they are encouraged to collaborate and innovate. When they question the relevance of local culture, class discussions provide chances for critical reflection on cultural identity. The

theoretical implication is that we should view implementation challenges not as obstacles, but as an essential part of a transformative learning process. This aligns with the idea of productive failure in learning theory (Kapur, 2012).

E. Limitations and Future Directions

This study faced several limitations. First, infrastructural constraints limited access to software and digital devices, which affected the consistency of DST production across student groups. Second, the research was conducted in a single school in Kolaka, with a relatively small sample size, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Third, as observed in classroom facilitation and recorded in teacher reflections, the teacher's active involvement may have influenced student outcomes.

These limitations suggest important directions for future research. Broader studies across different regions and school types, especially with varied technological resources, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how DST can be adapted. Longitudinal studies could assess its sustained impact on students' cultural identity and communicative growth. Finally, incorporating local communities into the design and feedback stages of DST projects could foster school-community collaboration and deepen cultural engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that local wisdom-based digital storytelling (DST) is not only an innovative instructional method but also a transformative approach to English language teaching. By integrating local cultural narratives into digital media, students were able to develop contextual and communicative English skills while simultaneously deepening their connection to their cultural identity. This process fostered a more reflective and meaningful learning environment in which language was not isolated from social values and local cultural contexts.

Looking forward, future research is encouraged to broaden the scope of investigation by including a wider range of schools and regional contexts in order to explore the varied applications and outcomes of DST. Longitudinal studies could help assess its long-term impact on students' cultural identity, self-confidence, and intercultural communicative competence. Additionally, involving local communities in the co-creation of DST learning materials may foster stronger ties between education and cultural preservation efforts, offering a collaborative model for culturally grounded pedagogy. These directions would further validate the theoretical contributions of this study, particularly the importance of glocalization and multimodal literacy in EFL contexts. On a practical level, they may also reinforce the role of teachers as instructional designers, supporting the continued development of inclusive, culturally responsive, and technology-enhanced pedagogical models.

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