

## Digital Storytelling as a Communicative Language Teaching Based Method in EFL Classrooms

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### Abstract

Communicative language teaching has emerged in second and foreign language pedagogy due to the inadequacy of previous language teaching methods to enhance English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' communicative competence. However, old language teaching methods, mainly, grammar-translation and audio-lingual, are still prevalent in EFL contexts. One of the reasons behind EFL teachers' hesitance to shift entirely to communicative language teaching (CLT) is the absence of clear guidance, including examples for classroom activities appropriate for this approach. Thus, the aim of this study is, first, to bridge this gap by suggesting digital storytelling as a classroom activity that is well-aligned with the principles of the communicative language approach. Second, to assess the effectiveness of digital storytelling activity on improving some linguistic aspects of students' communicative competence. To this end, the study incorporated a case study design using multiple qualitative methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews and analysis of participants' scripts and recordings to measure the improvement, if any. Participants were a class of 32 10<sup>th</sup> graders who collaboratively created five digital stories over 12 weeks. Results showed students' favourable views to digital storytelling activity, particularly the ample opportunities it creates for communication inside the classroom. As for communicative competence, improvement in phonology, grammar, and lexicon were the most notable. Finally, suggestions for effective integration and possible future research venues based on these findings are provided.

*Keywords:* communicative competence, communicative language teaching, digital storytelling, EFL context

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## Introduction

As Savignon (2017) asserts, enhancement of communicative competence should be the goal of second and foreign language pedagogy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In other words, it is no longer sufficient to demonstrate adequate knowledge of grammatical rules and the accumulation of new words but cannot communicate efficiently through the target language. However, the attainment of a certain degree of proficiency in a second language that enables the speaker from efficiently communicating with others is complicated due to multiple variables (Ellis, 1989). It, moreover, is more challenging in foreign language contexts for the reasons inherent in second language situation together with the shortage of chances to practice it in daily life communications. Hence, English language classrooms in non- English speaking contexts are responsible for providing students with as many chances to speak English as possible so they can compensate for the shortage of opportunities outside the classroom.

This need for a language teaching approach that focuses primarily on communication led to the emergence of communicative language teaching CLT. This approach has proved effective, where it has been embraced. Nonetheless, some EFL teachers are still reluctant to implement CLT in their classrooms due to the inadequacy of communicative activities (Chowdhury, 2012), and teachers' lack of time and expertise to design these activities (Kalanzadeh, Mirchenari, & Bakhtiarvand, 2013). This paper believes the characteristics of digital storytelling activity make it an excellent choice for EFL teachers aiming to implement CLT.

Consequently, it is hoped that this activity has the potential to enhance EFL students' communicative competence. More specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do participants perceive using digital storytelling in the English language classroom?
- 2) To what extent did participants' collaborative creation of digital stories enhance communicative competence?

## Communicative Competence

The concept of communicative competence has initially emerged in the field of first language communication in the beginnings of 1970s. Scholars have provided various yet similar definitions of communicative competence. For example, Hymes (1972), who coined the term "communicative competence" argues that communicative competence comprises not only the knowledge of grammatical rules but, more importantly, the knowledge to use this linguistic competence appropriately. He maintains that, besides linguistic competence, psycholinguistic competence, sociocultural competence, and probabilistic competence are all integral components of communicative competence.

Following Hymes' conceptualisation, Savignon (1976) also considers communicative competence as "The ability to function in a truly communicative setting— that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic of one or more interlocutors" (p. 12). A similar standpoint was embraced by Kiato and Kiato (1996), who observed that communicative competence reflect one's ability to show a proper understanding and producing language in real situations. One significant

implication in all these definitions is that the mere knowledge of grammatical rules does not measure communicative competence, rather, the ability to put this knowledge in a proper use considering the social and cultural context. Moreover, these definitions establish the basis for what becomes known as aspects or components of communicative competence.

In the 1980s, Canale and Swaine (1980) extended the concept of communicative competence into second language research through a series of works (Canale, 1983; Canale, 1984; Canale & Swaine, 1980). They identified four components for communicative competence in the second language. First, grammatical competence includes the ability to recognise and produce correct utterance. Second, sociolinguist competence which concerns knowledge of appropriateness of utterances. This knowledge is built on the third question suggested by Hymes (1972), who asserts that the rules of use are no less important than the rules of grammar. Third, discourse competence is the ability to recognise and produce different types of discourse, oral or written. Finally, strategic competence refers to the ability to use effective strategies to compensate for inadequacy in any of the previous competences.

The notion of communicative competence paved the way for the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which also is referred to as “Communicative Approach”.

### **Communicative Language Teaching Approach**

Communicative language teaching meets the need for an approach to teaching students how to communicate orally and in writing and not about speaking and writing. It acknowledges the importance of grammar but emphasises the importance is to offering language learners with abundant opportunities to put this knowledge in use. Scholars have identified different principles for effective adoption of communicative language teaching approach in classrooms. For examples, Savignon (2017) emphasised writing and reading activities that engage learners in active discussions of meaning. He maintained that communicative teaching does not depend entirely on group or pair work, though it acknowledges the effectiveness of collaboration. He also highlights the need to focus on both pragmatic competence aspects and linguistic competence aspects. Nunan (1991) further explained how this approach could be implemented in EFL classrooms. He emphasises interaction in the target language; use of authentic materials; enhancement of learners' personal experience; and assigning language activities outside the classroom.

These principles are being integrated into second language classrooms through activities such as role-plays, interviews, discussions, information gap activities, language games, language learning simulations, and problem-solving tasks. However, for most EFL teachers, who are the product of old language teaching methods, the idea of designing a communicative activity can be daunting. Next section, therefore, presents a collaborative digital storytelling activity and discusses its characteristics which makes it a good alternative for EFL teachers looking for communicative activities.

### **Digital Storytelling**

Digital storytelling has become burgeoning in classrooms for its positive outcomes. Pertinent literature offers several definition for this activity. Robin (2008), for example, defined digital storytelling as the use of multimedia tools to tell a story about a specific topic, and it is usually a

few minutes long. Malita and Martin (2010) define digital storytelling as a combination of technology and the old art of narratives. Alexander and Levin (2008) beautifully described digital storytelling as:

"A collection of pauses, to let the audience think or to indicate a change in the topic; interruptions, to indicate excitement; the ending of a topic before its full resolution, to produce a cliff hanger; vocal intonation, pacing, and pitch; sound effects and music" (p, 54)

As with any type of genre, the creation of digital storytelling should follow certain principles to achieve its maximum impact. The StoryCenter (<https://www.storycenter.org/>), for example, outlined some elements that need to be considered when creating a digital story. First, an excellent digital story needs to convey one's viewpoint. Second, to attract the attention of the audience from the outset of the story, the story should pose a dramatic question. Third, what differentiates digital storytelling from a PowerPoint presentation is the emotional dimension and the ability to convey it to the audience. Fourth, to amplify the effect, the story should relate to the teller's personal experience. Fifth, the choice of a suitable soundtrack is critical in delivering the meaning of the teller. Sixth, the use of multimedia should be and limited to what is deemed needed to create the desired effect. Finally, the fulfilment of the previous points will not ensure a good story if the incidents of the story did not unfold at proper pacing.

Digital storytelling holds a profound potential to improve different aspects of EFL students' communicative competence. For example, Harji and Gheitanchian (2017) found that at the end of a 16 weeks digital storytelling project, EFL students were able to produce more accurate, fluent, and complex language outputs. A similar finding was presented by Kimura (2010), who added that digital storytelling had improved oral aspects, such as pacing, expression and volume, phrasing, and smoothness. When designed as a collaborative task, chances to enhance communicative competence are even higher as students engage in lengthy discussions about each stage of the production.

Because creating a compelling digital story depends mainly on a well-written story, the writing quality of EFL students is expected to improve. Many studies have focused on examining this hypothesis, and positive findings were reported accordingly (Akhyak & Anik, 2013; Buckingham & Alpaslan, 2017).

That said, there still some gaps in digital storytelling scholarship, which this study intends to fill. No previous studies have looked into digital storytelling as a communicative language approach based activity. Thus, this study investigates the effectiveness of digital storytelling through a new lens. Second, because studies are scarce on using digital storytelling in Saudi EFL context, exploring the perspectives and effect of digital storytelling on a new EFL context will consolidate the existing literature.

### Research Design and Methods

This study incorporated a case study design which is commonly used in educational research for its potential to generate an in-depth understanding of a specific case in its natural setting. This design enabled the researcher to play the role of the facilitator of the activity.

Multiple qualitative methods were used to obtain answers to the research questions. First is the participant observation, which was chosen over non-participant observation due to the researcher's role in the study as a facilitator of the activity. The process of observation adopted is what Werner and Schoepfle called descriptive observation (as cited in Angrosino & Depeerez, 2000). The researcher observed everything inside the classroom throughout the 12 weeks of the study without any presumptions.

Besides observation, semi-structured interviews with 20 participants were conducted at the end of the study. Insights drawn from the prolonged involvement in the setting informed the focus of interview questions. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, the language with which students can express themselves well. Finally, students' recordings along with their story scripts were also analysed to assess progress, if any, in their linguistics competence.

### Participants and Site

A class of 32 female students at 10<sup>th</sup> grade participated in this study. The school from which students were drawn is a public school located in the southern region of Saudi Arabia and participants were predominantly Saudis (27) with the remaining from Arab countries, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, and Jordan. The selection of girls-only school as the location to undertake this study was determined by the fact that schools in Saudi Arabia are gender-segregated at secondary grades, which resulted in excluding boys' schools. The selection of a public school to undertake this study was to achieve typicality of the setting, and hence, make the findings of more applicable to a broader range of educational contexts. However, no specific criteria for selecting specific public girls' school was used. A request for entry was sent out to various schools located in the researcher's city, and the selected school expressed an interest in the project and approved the research to be conducted.

### Implementation of Digital Storytelling Activity

The activity was implemented in three main phases. First is the preparation phase, which extended over four weeks, with four 40 minutes periods per week. This phase involved different communicative activities such as interaction among group members and collaborative searching and writing. These are the topics participants came up with for their stories: the war in Arab countries, memorable moments, friendship, my role model, and racism. Each member of the group contributed a reflection, personal experience, or viewpoint to the selected topic. Next, using a template storyboard, students chose what multimedia elements best convey the meaning of the story.

The second phase was the production of the stories using an editing platform called *WeVideo*. For six weeks (four, 40 minutes sessions per week), participants weaved narrations of their stories, photos, background sounds, and hypertext to produce personal, compelling stories. This stage involved various communicative activities such as story narration, discussion among

group members and between participants and the instructor over the selection of supporting multimedia elements.

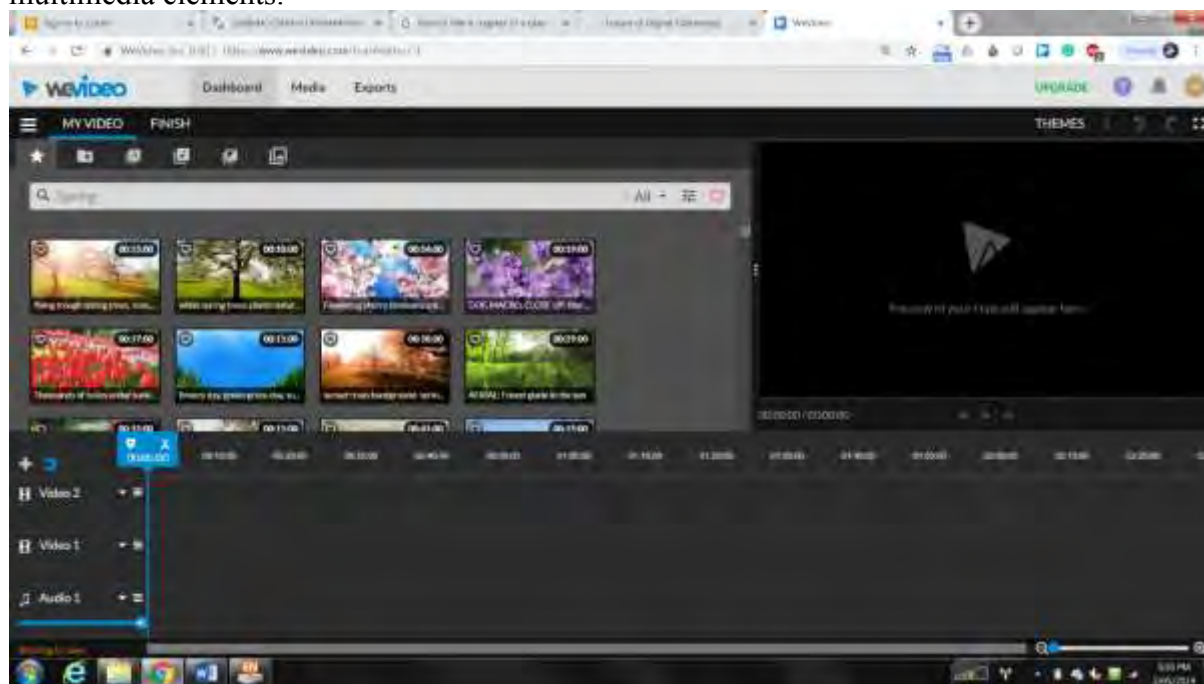


Figure 1 Typical layout of the advanced editing mode

The final phase included presenting the stories to the class, discussing the topics, and giving and receiving feedback. Stories were also published online on YouTube. Below are the links to these stories: the war in Arab countries<sup>i</sup>, racism<sup>ii</sup>, my role model<sup>iii</sup>, Friendship<sup>iv</sup>, and memorable moments<sup>v</sup>.

### “WeVideo” as the tool for digital stories creation

WeVideo (<https://www.wevideo.com>) was selected among the plethora of digital storytelling tools available for its unique features. It is a cloud-based platform for video editing and sharing. It is widespread in schools for purposes like formative assessment and project-based learning. It offers unlimited use of hundreds of thousands of licensed and royalty-free video clips, images, and soundtracks. It also has two options for video editing: a basic mode for beginners and a more sophisticated mode for high-tech students. WeVideo, moreover, facilitates initiating a collaborative work, managing addition of members, and monitoring each student's contribution. This collaborative feature also helps teachers assign roles for group members, which provides students with clear responsibilities, ensures equal contribution to the project and a higher likelihood of completion.

### Findings and Discussion

This part presents the findings relevant to each research question and discusses these findings considering the existing literature.

**Findings relevant to students' perspectives about using digital storytelling in EFL classroom**

Owing to some factors, when participants were asked about their experience of using digital storytelling as a learning tool in the English language classroom, they unanimously expressed their positive impression and acceptability of the activity. The following were the most recurring factors.

*Autonomous Learning*

Participants valued that they were in control of their learning and in position to make autonomous decisions during each step of the activity. For example, during the pre-production stage, participants chose their group members, about what topics they wrote their stories, and what multimedia elements to include. That degree of control over learning enhanced participants' problem-solving and critical thinking and empowered them to make responsible decisions. Some examples of participants making sound decisions out of their sense of autonomy and responsibility were, first, when they were asked to choose their members. They made sure to include at least one with advanced English level and one technical expert so that they could accomplish the requirements of producing English digital stories. The potential of digital storytelling to enhance students' autonomy, as reported in this study, mirrors the concept promoted by Black (2007) and Lam (2004; 2006) that a technology-enhanced environment is an effective way to enhance autonomous learning.

*Cooperative Learning*

Besides, students appreciated the cooperative aspect of the activity, which created a sense of belonging and relatedness they needed to feel secure and understood. Cooperative learning served different purposes. One participant, for example, commented: "Groups are nice and helpful like putting pictures together or editing the clips we are talking about". Another participant added that collaboration strengthens relationships: "Our involvement in the achievement of one activity did not only make us motivated, but we also got to know each other well".

This sense of connectedness was also reflected in the topics participants chose for their stories. For example, the majority of participants whose story was about "War in Arab countries" were immigrants, one Yamani and three Syrians, another group chose to write about "friendship" as they were friends since primary school.

*Communicative Activities*

Participants expressed their gratitude that the activity allowed them to use their English resources. Following quotes illustrate this point: "I honestly liked this activity, it was a nice opportunity, we benefited from it, and we developed the confidence to talk in class", "It was amazing, and it gave me the ability to speak more English".

Moreover, participants' favourable comments about digital storytelling allowing them to communicate inside the classroom were often combined with complaints about the current instructional approach. When they were asked about teaching methods the teacher implements into the classroom, answers explained participants' extremely low communicate competence. Instruction still heavily depends on the grammar-translation method, which put minimal emphasis on communication and giving students abundant chance to use their linguistics resources. Instead,

this language teaching approach focuses primarily on memorising grammatical rules and new words, and translating from and into the target language. As the participants put it: “we repeat speech”, “there is no cooperative learning, role plays”, “She asks us questions, and that is it... she sometimes asks us to form a group and write a report or something”, “ She tells us something in Arabic and asks us to translate it.”

Participants were disappointed with their low communicative competence and awareness of the importance to demonstrate high language proficiency. They believed because language learning occurs primarily in the classroom, activities like digital storytelling which provide opportunities to use the target language in a meaningful communication would improve their communicative competence.

#### *Relevancy of Topic*

The majority of participants highlighted how personalisation was crucial to their positive perception of the activity. This aspect, however, of the activity was more significant to some participants than others. One participant, for example, was brought up by her mother, which instilled a deep appreciation in herself for her mother. According to this participant, the video was "an expression of love and to tell her I am proud to be her daughter". Other students found, in digital storytelling, the means through which they can express their suffering and liberate their negative feelings. One Syrian participant, who had immigrated with her family to Saudi Arabia, commented: "We loved participating, and I liked talking about the Syrian war and the circumstances we are currently living". Another participant, who escaped devastation in her country, Yemen, echoed this impression: "Indeed, this project allows us to share our longing to where we belong, where our loved ones are, and where we want to grow up". Being enabled to communicate their personal stories not only to their classmates but to the broader audience on the internet, participants felt there is meaning to their learning.

#### ***Findings relevant to the aspects of communicative competence digital storytelling activity improved in students***

Analysis of classroom observations and participants' recording of their narrations reveal a positive impact on their communicative competence, which is consistent with findings from previous studies (Oskoz & Elola, 2016). The discussion to follow will focus on the aspects that received a noticeable improvement.

#### *Phonological Competence*

Improvement in phonology, including pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation, though not immense, was notable. This outcome can be ascribed to the prolonged time participants spent repeating their recordings until they are satisfied with the narration. The majority of the participants were so nervous about this step. One participant pleaded: "Please, I do not want to record; my pronunciation is horrible; I do not want to read my story out loud". The recording step revealed how unsatisfying was the phonological aspect of students. At first, their hesitation was thought to be normal because people usually hate their voices recorded. Later on, when students began recording, it was evident that their awareness of their poor pronunciation was, mostly, the reason.



At the end of the activity, when participants were asked which skill this activity enhanced the most, they responded: "I learned how to speak English well". Another added: "it helped me read, the words were a bit hard, but repetition made them easier". Several phonological mistakes persisted to the final recording, as can be noticed on their videos. However, participants managed to enhance a great deal of their phonological competence throughout the narration process.

### *Grammatical Competence*

This activity has enhanced the grammatical knowledge of participants including verb-subject agreement, use of connectors and verb tense has considerably. This outcome can be explained by participants' involvement in the constant correction of any spotted grammatical mistakes in their story scripts. The collaborative aspect of digital storytelling activity has also contributed to the improvement of grammatical accuracy in participants' writing. Researchers found out that task type, in this case, collaborative writing, yield more accurate writing due to cooperation between students in editing. Figure 2 shows some grammatical mistakes in the first draft, which the participant recognised and corrected in their next draft following the instructor's feedback.

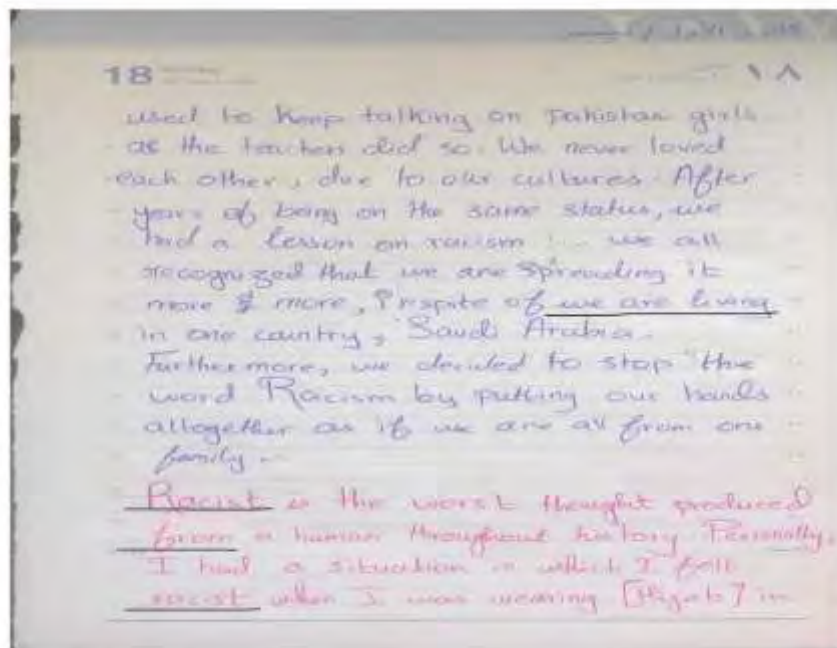


Figure 2 Example of grammatical mistakes in participants' writing

### *Lexical Competence*

Digital storytelling activity has also enhanced another aspect of communicative competence that was related to their lexical competence. Digital storytelling was an implicit way of vocabulary development, which is more effective in teaching vocabulary than explicit instruction (Doughty, 2003 & Ellis, 1989). Unlike explicit vocabulary teaching which depends on activities that require participants to memorise vocabulary words in decontextualised context, acquiring of new vocabulary words is embedded in the process of participants' searching for words to express their meaning.

Figure 3 shows samples of participants' scripts which reveals their use of new words as they needed to tell their stories. Because participants still do not know the correct pronunciation by heart, they underline these words and use Arabic letters representing their pronunciation.

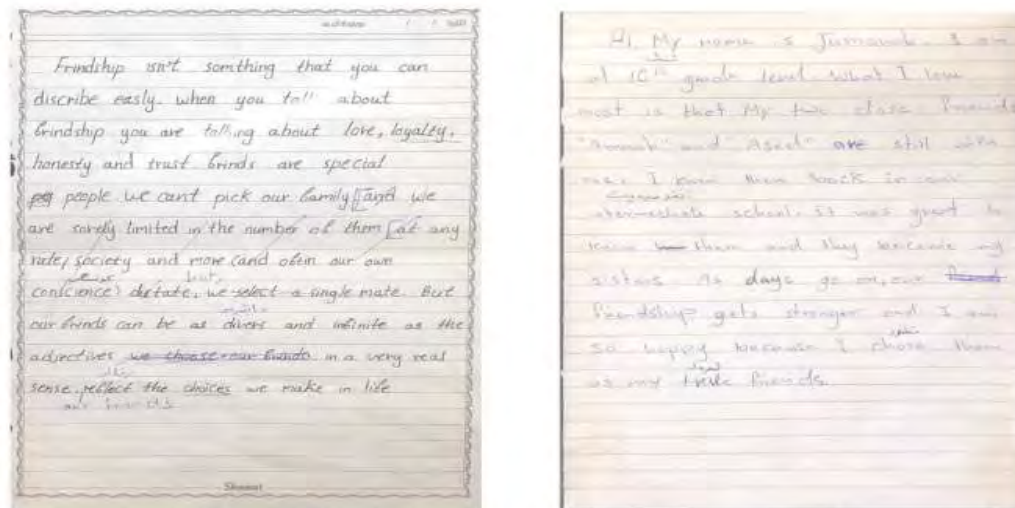


Figure 3 Students' strategy to know the pronunciation of new words

### Conclusion

In light of the findings of this study, it concludes that digital storytelling was a good fit for the communicative language teaching approach. This activity provided EFL learners with ample chances to practice their productive and receptive skills using authentic, personal materials. Also, the collaborative feature of this activity facilitated more communication and use of the target language inside the classroom. More importantly, this activity was an implicit approach to enhance participants' linguistic competence, which, in most cases, is more effective than direct and explicit teaching of grammar.

In terms of the effect of digital storytelling on EFL learners' communicative competence, results were promising. Providing more communication opportunities, making learning more meaningful, and focusing on different competences all fed into some tangible improvement of these aspects. However, it must be noted that significant development in language proficiency cannot be reached through the mere adoption of any classroom intervention during a short period. Therefore, it is recommended to integrate this activity into the EFL curriculum for more significant and persistent results.

Moreover, teachers need to consider some points to ensure effective integration and maximum benefit of digital storytelling activity inside EFL classrooms. For example, teachers should ensure internet accessibility and availability of necessary software and hardware. Of equal importance is teachers' awareness of the level of language proficiency of students and use this knowledge to guide the design of the activity. Time allocated to the steps of the activity also varies from context to another, depending on the participants' digital competence.

Finally, this study uncovers some possible future research areas. First, because this study was conducted on a small scale, it can be extended through selecting a larger population and assessing the effect during a more extended period. Another way of extending this study can be using quantitative methods to assess the effect on different aspects of communicative competence to yield more accurate results.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrKccnd-Is&t=2s>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6ZgtgvGnJY&t=34s>.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zq1n7HVkig>.

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWiYfo\\_G7m0&t=104s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWiYfo_G7m0&t=104s).

<sup>v</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m3XW5Th-voV2sg2uuyT-ChyOrpR5JAo7/view>.