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Digital Storytelling on Critical Reading Skills and Students' Responses in Vocational School Setting

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Abstract

Critical reading remains a persistent challenge in English language learning, particularly in vocational school contexts where instruction often prioritizes functional language use over higher-order thinking. Although Digital Storytelling (DST) has gained attention as an innovative pedagogical approach, limited empirical evidence exists regarding its effectiveness in promoting students' critical reading abilities. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, this study examines the effect of DST on critical reading skills of vocational school students. Cluster random sampling was used to select two classes, an experimental class tutored using DST-based instruction and a control class taught using conventional method. The statistical outcomes indicated that the difference between the groups was significant. The DST group outperformed the control group (M = 91.00 vs. 80.90; t (70.652) = 15.838, p < .001). Thus, the DST group proved effective in improving interpretive and evaluative reading. In addition, qualitative results show that DST promoted student engagement, deeper meaning-making and critical reflection. In student reports, multimodal elements helped with a greater understanding of the text and helped to connect real life. According to the results of this research, DST is an instructional tool that does not only captivate attention, but it is also a pedagogically meaningful way to teach reading critically especially in a vocational education context.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling, Critical Reading, Multimedia Learning, Mixed-Methods

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INTRODUCTION

The growing capacity of analyzing and reading information critically is an essential skill in today's world. It is no longer just an academic requirement, but a life skill for daily navigability. Critical reading allows individuals to interact with the onslaught of information

present in today's society (Mahayanti et al, 2023; Mahayanti et al., 2024; Mahayanti et al. 2025; Saputra et al., 2025). The absence of these abilities leaves readers open to misinformation and misleading accounts that spread rapidly across the web. According to Roomy (2022), reading critically helps in discerning information from credible or non-credible sources, thereby reducing the chances of misinformation consumption. This issue increasingly matters as technology continues to expand and take charge of how people consume information. Increasingly digital platforms make reading practices multimodal, dynamic and participatory (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023; Priyono et al., 2020). The main sites of literacy today are digital environments where texts are dynamic, non-linear, interactive and animated, incorporating graphics and sound (Burnett & Merchant, 2011; Coiro, 2008). The transformation is further evident with the advent of YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and other common social media platforms especially amongst the younger generation (Tyner, 2014). Despite of the above, the accessibility and speed of digital information represents significant risks, namely, fake news, ideological biases and logical flaws (Santisteban et al., 2020). Consequently, the ability to read has been extended from merely requiring decoding and comprehension to including critical evaluation, interpretation, and judgment (Eagleton & Dobler, 2007; Ng & Graham, 2017; Richards, 2015; Sadoski, 2004).

Even though it is vital, many students are still not able to develop critical reading skills. Students not only struggle to grasp the literal meaning of texts but also their context, arguments, and the assumptions behind them. According to Permatasari et al. (2020), lack of motivation, unsustained concentration, and high workload lead to students having difficulty in critical reading. In addition, learners often experience challenges with identifying main ideas, understanding text structures, and analysing authors' arguments (Minh & Phuong, 2019). These obstacles are also complemented by structural problems including limited learning time, large class sizes, and unpreparedness of teachers in critical reading. On a more fundamental level, critical reading often gets reduced to a cognitive activity only, whereas Freire (2004) point out that reading should also be seen as social, ideological, and transformative. According to Fairclough (2001), texts are never neutral because they reflect power relations, cultural assumptions, and ideological positions. Similarly, Luke (2012) and Lewison et al. (2007) have also expressed similar views. A key characteristic of critical reading is that readers move beyond simply understanding the content of a text. Critical readers actively interrogate texts by questioning whose voices and perspectives are represented, whose voices are marginalized or absent, and how meaning is constructed. Rather than accepting information at face value, they examine the underlying assumptions, power relations, and intentions that shape the text (O'Neil-Pirozzi, 2003; Wallace & Wray, 2011; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

In many educational contexts, including one in Indonesia, reading instruction is often still transmission-based which implies the delivery of knowledge that does not enhance the critical engagement of the students. It limits the students' opportunities to work towards agency and critical consciousness (Freire, 2004; Pennycook, 2001; Shor, 2019). In other words, students tend to receive information passively, instead of actively being able to interpret it. This problem is further aggravated in the vocational school Settings. The focus of vocational education is usually on practical competence and useful education for a job. As a result, it often prioritizes functional literacy over critical literary. Although students can follow instructions

and read for detail, they often do not learn how to analyse arguments, evaluate claims or interpret text in any depth. This creates a disconnect between the skills that schools teach and the demands of the real-world, where people must decipher complex, multimodal and often persuasive information. In this way, critical reading in vocational education is thus not an optional enrichment it is a competence with which students prepare themselves both professionally as well as a citizen.

One teaching method with significant promise for addressing this gap is digital storytelling. The digital storytelling process transforms the author and the audience into active participants along with the story, message, or content. It integrates text with images, audio, video and design to capture and convey a compelling and meaningful story (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Robin, 2008). The process of storytelling has been democratized in a larger perspective allowing different voices to create and share stories by not being confined to the traditional barriers (Lakshmi, 2025; Zafar et al., 2024). This change has changed the relationship of the readers and writers making the audience to perform their participation in active skills (Parashari, 2014). From a teaching perspective, the transformation is significant as it takes present-day literacy practices into consideration it entices learners to interact with a text in a more active and critical manner.

Through the years of studies on the use of digital storytelling have showed a powerful impact on students' language skills and thinking skills. Digital storytelling produces an engaging and cognitive learning environment that enhances students' learning by allowing students to use technological tools (Cao, 2024). Critical reading with digital storytelling offers the learner the possibility to interface text and image, simultaneously, in an integrated way (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Nitami, et al., 2026; Puspitasari, et al. 2026; Robin, 2008). According to O'Halloran et al., (2017), the use of multimodal tools leads to deeper understanding and analysis by requiring students to make meaning across different representational modes. Moreover, the digital storytelling has been proven to increase motivation and learning since children were more engaged in the interactive and meaningful learning (Al-Shaye, 2021). The awareness also creates critical literacy that enables the learner to analyse assumptions, perspectives and meaning-making (Afroz, 2025; Shelby-Caffey et al., 2014).

However, digital storytelling's potential must be understood in the realities of classroom practice. A preliminary study, derived from early observations and comments of teachers, yielded some issues in the target context. Eleventh grade students were not good at identifying main ideas, drawing conclusions, and evaluating arguments. The further analysis of them did not reflect deep practices of reading. On top of this, learners do not seem highly motivated to write critically. Moreover, conventional text-based practices were used during lessons. In the education system, the involvement of technology was also minimal. According to these findings, the students are not just having reading performance difficulties, but also not having access to higher order thinking skills development. If teachers don't intervene appropriately, these patterns of use will likely persist and inhibit students' engagement with texts.

The difficulties mentioned above, it has been argued that it (community digital storytelling) can render reading instruction a more interactive, contextualised, reflective affair. Incorporating narrative, multimedia, and student-centred engagement may help students move

from surface comprehension to deeper critical analysis. Despite that, scholarly work specifically delving into digital storytelling's impact on critical reading in a vocational school context remains limited despite the latter's theoretical pedagogical promise. Most existing studies focus on engagement, language development or general literacy outcomes, not on specific critical reading dimensions, such as interpretation, evaluation, and argument analysis. Thus, this study investigates the effect of digital storytelling on students' critical reading skills at a vocational school. Moreover, it also aims at finding out how students react to the implementation of it. By considering cognitive outcomes and learner experience, the study will contribute to a nuanced understanding of digital storytelling as a meaningful pedagogical approach for developing critical literacy in contexts of pressing need.

METHOD

Design

This use of mixed methods study consists of the explanatory sequential type (Ivankova et al., 2006) which is performed in a vocational school to see the impact of digital storytelling on critical reading skills. The quantitative phase was first carried out to examine the effectiveness of the intervention, followed by a qualitative phase to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and responses toward the implementation of digital storytelling in critical reading activities (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). To measure not just the achievement of learning, but also the learning process and experience leading to the achievement, this design was opted for. Initially, quantitative data were collected to see whether there was a significant effect of digital storytelling on students' critical reading performance. The qualitative data collection followed to understand how and why such effect happened from the viewpoint of students. Through the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, the study advanced beyond a simple statistical comparison and developed a more contextualized understanding of the instructional intervention (Dawadi et al., 2021)

Participant

The participants for the study were the students of grade eleven of a public vocational secondary school in the 2024/2025 academic year. The study used cluster random sampling to select the participants because intact classes in a school provide feasible and realistic settings for educational research, particularly when individual random assignment is difficult to implement in naturally existing classroom contexts (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Cluster random sampling is commonly employed in educational studies to maintain the natural classroom structure while still reducing selection bias and increasing the representativeness of the sample (Ary et al., 2010). Two classes with a relatively similar academic profile were chosen on the basis of homogeneity. One class was assigned as the experimental group that was taught through digital storytelling while another class was designated as the control group that continued with the normal text instruction. The sample was typical of a vocational school cohort regarding exposure to English and levels of ability.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

Group	N	Gender (M/F)	Age Range	Grade	Prior Exposure to Digital Media
Experimental	42	20/22	16-17	XI	Moderate-High
Control	42	21/21	16-17	XI	Moderate-High
Total	84	41/43	16-17	XI	-

Procedure

The stages for the research procedure were created. During the preparation stage, the investigator examined the literature in order to define the critical reading construct to the document's instructional strategies. The digital storytelling learning materials were developed for the experimental group by the researcher based on this. Meanwhile, instruments, which measure critical reading skills, classroom engagement and students' responses, were designed. To ensure that all instruments are in line with the instructional objective, clear and relevant, an expert validation was done.

While the development stage, group experimented on the use of digital storytelling in eight meetings. The period was established as the right one for learners to interact with multimodal texts and exhibit changes in their reading practices. The lessons included audio-visuals like pictures, narration, audio, and context to promote students' interpretation, analysis and evaluation of meaning. On the other hand, the control group received instruction in traditional ways that relied on printed texts, teacher explanation, and questions on comprehension. This comparison was important in order to understand the effect of the digital storytelling intervention.

Data Collection

Data were collected with the help of three main techniques. Initially, a post-test was given to both groups towards the end of the treatment to measure the critical reading skills of students. The 30 items included in the test aimed to measure different dimensions of critical reading such as identifying the main ideas and making inferences, and so on. The design of the post-test-only was useful to reduce testing effects and for the results of the intervention. Classroom observations were conducted during instruction to find out how students engaged in the learning activities with the practical implementation of digital storytelling. The non-participant observation method was found most suitable for this study. To find out the perceptions, experiences and responses of students towards instructional methods, semi-structured interviews were conducted post-test. These interviews showed how students understand the learning process and how this process influences their reading behaviour.

The instruments which were used for the study were properly constructed to ensure validity. The reading comprehension test and critical literacy frameworks provided the basis for the development of the critical reading test pertaining to interpretation analysis evaluation and reflection. The observation sheet was designed to identify indicators of engagement, participation, and interaction during learning based on the digital storytelling implementation model (Alismail, 2015; Robin, 2016). The questions in the interview guide were open-ended so that the students could express their views freely. It assures that students' responses are not pre-categorised and reflect authentic experience. Moreover, the analysis of various documents including instructional materials, lesson plans and curriculum guide of the intervention would ensure it is in consonance with LOs.

Data Analysis

The sequence of the research design was followed in data analysis. Quantitative data obtained from the post-test was then analyzed using an independent samples t-test to determine

whether or not the experimental group and control group differ significantly. The study involved two independent groups experiencing different instructional treatment conditions which is why this analysis was chosen. The effect size was calculated to determine how large the intervention effect is. The descriptive qualitative technique was used for the analysis of observations and interviews data. The researcher categorized the data, located common themes, and interpreted themes related to student engagement, learning processes, and perceptions of digital storytelling. In the end, triangulation was used to validate the findings. The qualitative evidence was checked against the quantitative results to check the consistency of results. The researcher used post-test scores, observational data, and interview responses to confirm whether improvements in critical reading were supported by observable classroom behaviour and students' own reflections. By using this process, the study aimed at producing findings that are pedagogically meaningful besides statistically significant.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The digital storytelling method was proven effective for improving critical reading skills with the research results above in this vocational school. Results Based on Quantitative Data or Statistics, it was found that the post-test score of the experimental group was higher than that of the control group. The difference was specifically in the ability to interpret the main idea, draw inferences and evaluate arguments. As students must routinely process information across various modes and convey meaning in all of those modes when they view digital stories, the thesis argues that digital storytelling strengthens students' analytical and evaluative capacities. These findings were further confirmed by qualitative data. The classroom observation showed that the experimental group involved more in the discussions, asked more interpretive questions, and showed a greater willingness to go beyond the text. The interviews also revealed that students found digital storytelling more interesting, more relatable, and easier to connect with life compared to conventional storytelling. The above responses indicate that digital storytelling has improved cognitive outcomes and addressed motivational obstacles behind critical reading development. Nevertheless, the results further suggest that this approach requires further thought and consideration in the instruction design as first students required help to move through the multimodal content and not only focus on the visual elements.

1. The Impact of Digital Storytelling on Students Critical Reading Skills

The first finding of this study seeks to find out whether the use of digital storytelling gives a better impact on student's critical reading competency than conventional instruction. In order to answer this question, both the experimental group and the control group have been given a post-test consisting of 15 essay-based items after treatment. The tests sought to measure critical reading of choice with particular reference to literal comprehension, interpretive comprehension and critical evaluation. The tasks were contextualized in the theme of environmental awareness, allowing the students to meaningfully engage with the content and showcase their analysis and evaluation skills.

Prior to the main statistical analysis, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to determine the normality of the data. The findings reveal that, as indicated in Table 1, the data follow a normal distribution ($p=1.000$), thereby meeting the condition for parametric testing.

Hence, it was considered appropriate to conduct further analysis using an independent samples t-test.

Table 2. Normality Test Results

Component	Value
Test Method	Kolmogorov-Smirnov
Sample Size (N)	84
D Value	0.000
Sig. (p-value)	1.000
Decision	Normally Distributed ($p > 0.05$)

Following the verification of normality, descriptive statistics were analyzed for initial comparison of both the groups. As indicated in Table 2, the digital storytelling experimental group had a higher mean score (M=91.00) than the control group (M=80.90). The experimental group's standard deviation is slightly higher, meaning the performance varies moderately in this group, but overall, students exposed to digital storytelling had better critical reading performance.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Post-Test Scores

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Digital Storytelling	42	91.00	3.457	0.533
Conventional Method	42	80.90	2.261	0.349

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to examine the significance of this difference. Levene's test indicated a violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variances ($F=11.256$, $p=0.001$). Thus, the interpretation followed based on the results in row with the heading equal variance not assumed. The outcome of the analysis, which is demonstrated in table 3, reveals that there is a significant difference in both groups, $t(70.652) = 15.838$, $p < 0.001$, with the mean difference of 10.095. The confidence interval of 95% [8.824, 11.366] indicates that the difference is consistent and not due to chance.

Table 4. Independent Samples t-Test Results

Assumption	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval
Equal variances assumed	11.256	0.001	15.838	82	< 0.001	10.095	0.637	8.827 - 11.363
Equal variances not assumed	-	-	15.838	70.652	< 0.001	10.095	0.637	8.824 - 11.366

The implication of this result is that digital storytelling has a significant and substantial effect on the critical reading competency. "I believe the mean difference has not only statistical significance but also practical significance, suggesting that the teaching method had a meaningful impact on students' ability to comprehend, analyze and evaluate texts." From the perspective of pedagogy, this finding demonstrates that digital storytelling facilitates deep learning by enabling students to engage with information through the combination of narrative and multimedia elements. The opportunity to engage with the issue through multiple modalities activates interpretive and evaluative thinking, prompting students to move beyond literal meaning. When we see how digital storytelling compare with traditional methods, digital

storytelling offers a more contextualized and interactive learning environment, encouraging the active co-construction of meaning. In conclusion, the findings affirm that digital storytelling is an effective instructional approach for enhancing students' critical reading competency. The results of both the description and inferential analysis consistently show that students exposed to this method managed to score much higher than the others. Thus, it has the potential to be a pedagogical tool to develop higher order literacy skills in vocational education.

2. Students' Response on the Implementation of Digital Storytelling

The second finding of this study explores the students' views on the use of digital storytelling (DST) for critical reading. Although the quantitative results indicated that the students' performance significantly improved, qualitative data was collected to understand students' experiences of learning and how DST affected their engagement, comprehension, and thinking. Through classroom observation of eight-session lessons and semi-structured interviews of selected experimental group students, the researcher collected data. The Braun and Clarke thematic analysis involved becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting patterns across the database.

Repeated themes were evident in the analysis that revealed positive responses toward DST among students. The themes were not mutually exclusive; instead, the themes that emerged from the study show the ways engagement comprehension and critical thinking developed in conjunction with the use of the multimedia narrative. Table 4 presents the findings that detail the themes, codes, descriptions, and representative excerpts of the participants.

Table 5. Detailed Thematic Coding of Students' Responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Theme	Code	Description	Excerpts (Participant Code)
Increased Engagement and Motivation	Enjoyment	Students perceived DST as enjoyable and entertaining	"It feels like learning while watching a movie, so I don't feel bored." (S3)
	Increased Interest	DST attracted students' attention more than traditional methods	"I am more interested because the story is shown, not just read." (S7)
	Reduced Boredom	DST reduced monotony in reading lessons	"Usually reading is boring, but this is different." (S5)
	Sustained Attention	Students were able to stay focused longer	"I can focus until the end because I want to know the story." (S9)
Enhanced Comprehension through Multimodality	Visual Support	Images helped students understand content	"The pictures help me understand the story faster." (S2)
	Audio Support	Narration clarified meaning and pronunciation	"The voice explains the story clearly." (S6)
	Easier Understanding	Multimedia made complex ideas simpler	"It is easier to understand compared to reading text only." (S8)
	Memory Retention	Students remembered content better	"I remember the story because I see and hear it." (S4)

Theme	Code	Description	Excerpts (Participant Code)
Development of Critical Thinking	Interpreting Meaning	Students tried to understand deeper meaning	"I think about what the story really means." (S10)
	Questioning Ideas	Students questioned the message of the text	"I start to ask if the story is true or not." (S1)
	Making Inferences	Students inferred implicit information	"Sometimes the meaning is not written, but I can guess it." (S11)
	Evaluating Arguments	Students assessed validity of ideas	"I try to see if the problem in the story makes sense." (S6)
Active Participation and Interaction	Asking Questions	Students were more willing to ask questions	"I ask more questions because I want to understand." (S12)
	Group Discussion	Students engaged actively in group work	"We discuss the story together in groups." (S14)
	Sharing Opinions	Students expressed their perspectives	"I like sharing my opinion about the story." (S5)
	Collaborative Roles	Students took roles in group activities	"I help explain to my friends what I understand." (S8)
Emotional and Contextual Connection	Real-life Relevance	Students connected stories to real situations	"The story reminds me of problems in real life." (S2)
	Emotional Engagement	Students felt emotionally connected	"I feel concerned about the issue in the story." (S13)
	Personal Reflection	Students reflected on their own experiences	"It makes me think about my own actions." (S7)
Challenges in Implementation	Technical Issues	Internet and device limitations affected learning	"Sometimes the internet is slow and the video stops." (S9)
	Pacing Issues	Speed of video affected comprehension	"The video is too fast sometimes." (S4)
	Need for Repetition	Students needed to replay content	"I need to watch again to understand." (S11)

Table 5 indicates that students had a positive and multidimensional response toward DST. The most prevalent theme was heightened engagement and motivation, where the students were consistent in describing the process of learning as fun and less tedious than normal teaching. Students were not just behaviorally but cognitively involved as a result of this greater engagement; they were more likely to participate, ask questions, and focus. In addition, improved understanding through multimodality was another important theme. Students mentioned the mix of seeing and hearing help them to understand abstract or complex idea better. In this sense, DST helps comprehension because it lends itself to multiple representations of meaning which helps them to process. This enhanced comprehension appeared to foster enhancing thinking.

The centralized outcome DST implementation was the development of critical thinking. According to the students, they were motivated to examine the story, interrogate the message, and interpret the meaning This means that DST creates the condition for the students to move beyond the reading literal to interpretive and evaluative. The students' interpretation of the narratives improved further due to the emotional and contextual connection weaved through the narratives. Students could relate the stories to real-life situations. The active engagement theme shows how there is a change in the dynamics of the classes because of DST. Students were engaged in discussions and collaborative tasks and were no more passive recipients of information. This shift indicates that DST promotes a more student-centered learning space in which meaning is constructed through interaction and dialogue.

While there were some challenges experienced, with a couple of issues of a technical nature and pacing, they did not hamper the effectiveness of the DST in any major way. They stress that correct implementation and technological support are essential to getting benefits from it. The thematic analysis reveals that digital storytelling fosters engagement and motivation among students. It also promotes deeper understanding of the subject matter and critical thinking. These finding complement the quantitative findings, thereby providing a further understanding of how the DST impacts the cognitive and affective dimension of learning.

Based on the findings of this study, we have established that digital storytelling (DST) improves students' critical reading skills and offers constructive learning experiences. Nevertheless, it is necessary to critique the results, situating them within existing theoretical and empirical debates, rather than only accepting the results at face. An approach such as this reveals not only points of consonance but also tensions and contradictions that deepen our knowledge of DST as a pedagogical practice. In theory, the findings imply that reading in the digital era calls for deciphering and evaluative skills in addition to comprehension (Eagleton & Dobler, 2007; Ng & Graham, 2017). The notable enhancement in the performance of students indicates that DST allows learners to engage more critically with texts. This is in line with critical literacy by Fairclough (2013) that involves question, reflection and interrogation of meaning. Upon closer inspection, there seems to be a contradiction. Despite the critical literacy perspective of reading as a dialogic and socio-political act, the implementation of DST in this study still took place under teacher direction and provided story. This raises a significant question: how far are students actually enabled as critical agents through designing for translation, and how far are they reliant scaffolded towards pre-determined meanings? In this light, DST may offer students sufficient interpretive freedom to promote as well as constrain critical reading.

The findings are, empirically, in line with past research emphasizing digital storytelling for increasing engagement as well as motivation (Al-Shaye, 2021; Cao, 2024). During this study, students reported increased levels of interest and involvement in lessons which shows DST can transform the classroom atmosphere. Nonetheless, this framework shows something that the current literature cannot. Many studies, including the present study, assume that more engagement means more learning. However, engagement does not necessarily result in deliberation. Content that is rich in multimedia and engaging may (ironically) encourage more of a superficial way of processing rather than a deep one. In this study some students were more intrigued by the aesthetics and story of the narratives than the meanings of the story. It suggests that engagement is required but it is not enough. Without careful pedagogical mediation, DST risks diverting focus towards entertainment rather than investigation.

Multimodality similarly give rise to tensions. Studies in the past have shown that multimodal texts are able to present information through various pathways to meaning in order to help people make sense of it (Sapan, 2024; Tan et al., 2024). Evidence from the present research supports this claim. Students recalled that both visual and aural facilitated understanding and retention. This ease of understanding might remove the cognitive struggle, which is sometimes necessary for deeper critical engagement. When the meaning is made too explicit by the images and the narration, the students rely on such props and do not do any active construction of interpretation. It creates a paradox: the very things that help us understand also hinder our capacity to think critically independently. Multimodality can facilitate critical reading but under certain circumstances can also undermine critical reading.

The technology in learning has different views as per findings. Numerous studies point the faults in technologies, whether lack of access, teacher readiness, or technical difficulties to be obstacles in the way of implementing digital storytelling (Banzato, 2014; Beck & Neil, 2021). In other words, although the students faced some technical issues but these issues did not affect the learning substantially. This indicates that whether DST might work is less about ideal technology conditions and more about how fruitfully the technology is integrated into pedagogy. Nonetheless, this revelation does arouse a serious query. The findings from this study cannot be applied to other contexts, particularly smaller resource contexts because it is rather smooth. The overestimation of scalability of DST and its potential impacts is risky if contextual constraints go unacknowledged.

A further important contradiction arises with regard to vocational education. The result of the study indicates that vocational students can think critically and creatively when given adequate teaching assistance. This challenges the suggestion made by some education discourses that critical literacy is simply something for academic students. But it raises a more fundamental problem. Should students of vocational education perform extremely well on critical reading in DST, it will indicate that their earlier performances were not due to their shortcomings but due to the method of teaching used. In this regard, the study not only demonstrates how effective DST can be, but simultaneously questions the standard methods which may have underestimated students' level of cognition. There is tension between emotional engagement and critical or academic thinking. The results indicate that the stories' emotional connection with students helped them interpret as well as evaluate texts. According to Beck and Neil (2021), learning involves affect which is giving attention to the feelings. Nonetheless, sentiment connection would cause prejudice too. When a story has high identification, students are less likely to question its assumptions and critically evaluate the story. This creates a dilemma: although emotional engagement can lead to understanding, it also limits critical distance. This content is redundant, we will get back to it later.

All things considered; these contradictions indicate that digital storytelling is not necessarily transformative. The degree effective depends on how classroom design and implementation is mediated. If used uncritically, digital screen time (DST) can lead to passive engagement but it can also advance critical reading. While it can help engage us into deeper thought, it can also oversimplify meaning. It may strengthen the students' capabilities but can also direct them to pre-set meanings. The most significant finding of this study revealed these complexities. The study did not find DST to be a one-size-fits-all solution. Rather, it should be seen as a pedagogical tool with strengths and limitations. It is worth stems not from the technology itself but from the alteration of reading conditions that can potentially allow for

engagement, interpretation and evaluation. It also requires careful instructional design to make this possible.

This study provides evidence that digital storytelling (DST) has the ability to identify critical reading skills among students. However, various limitations are present in this study. Prior to the intervention, students' baseline competencies were not determined since a quasi-experimental post-test-only design was utilized. Without any kind of the pre-test, it is practically not possible to attribute the observed differences in the groups to the treatment solely, even though the comparability of the groups was taken into consideration. Furthermore, the research was limited to one particular vocational school with a relatively small sample; it was a relatively small sample, limiting the extent to which the results can be generalizable. The limitation of the intervention period, eight sessions instruction, is that as critical reading is a complex skill that slowly develops over time, it may need a longer duration to bring about any sustained effect. expected to show significant differences in the engagement and responses of students if environmental awareness or a different narrative approach was adopted. Ultimately, the qualitative data collected through observations and interviews were not triangulated, which makes the analysis interpretive, and subject to researcher bias.

In light of the above limitations, future studies must utilize better and more comprehensive designs to enhance the validity and applicability. The development and sustainability of critical reading skills require long-dimension studies adding pretest-posttest measures. The skills not only need to be developed but also need to be sustained over time. By extending the study across various schools, as well as different context, whether with access and non-access to technology, would provide greater robustness to the scalability of DST. In future research, we need to look at other narrative themes and levels of content complexity and whether they engage students critically. Furthermore, the use of multiple coders and methods in qualitative analysis would be beneficial in confirming these interpretations. Further research should take into account individual learner differences such as digital literacy, prior reading ability and learning preferences when looking at DST impacts. To go beyond showing effectiveness towards explaining how, for whom, and under what conditions digital storytelling can most effectively support critical reading development, future research should focus on these areas.

CONCLUSION

The results of this research indicate that the use of a digital storytelling (DST) is able to improve students' critical reading competency significantly, although it should not be overstated. The findings indicate that DST works not due to its condition as either digital or innovative but due to an adaptation of the conditions of reading. This means that the DST encourages students to interpret meaning rather than just receiving text. Students are better at interpreting, evaluating, and relating texts to their own lives Multimodal instruction and narration can help with higher-order thinking. The research shows an important tension at play: engagement doesn't automatically mean criticality.

Due to the increase in motivation and participation due to DST, it turns out that without proper pedagogical guidance, students risk evaluating the story and visuals rather than the content. So, the effectiveness of DST strongly relies on the instructional design, teacher mediation and how critical questioning is incorporated in the learning. Consequently, the DST

should not be viewed as a panacea, but rather as an approach to teaching that requires a critical and conscious use.

The study has implications for both theory and practice. The need to move beyond text level pedagogies to those which have a multimodal, interactive and contextual relevance, especially in the case of such context of vocational education where critical literacy is often missing. Not only should teachers adopt digital storytelling but should also design learning activities that explicitly instruct students to analyze, question and evaluate texts. From a theoretical standpoint, the work adds to the existing body of scholarship on digital literacy by showing how critical reading can be improved by working with multiple modes while also drawing attention to the interplay between cognition and affect in learning. Nonetheless, the study also warns us that the absence of critical pedagogy will reinforce superficial ways of being instead of deep learning. For this reason, future educational research and practice should explore how digital tools can be integrated into critical literacy. Therefore, whenever technological innovation happens, there is also pedagogical depth.

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