

The Impact of Digital Storytelling on Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in ESL Learners

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Abstract.

This paper explores the role of digital storytelling in enhancing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. ICC involves the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural boundaries, integrating linguistic, pragmatic, and sociocultural skills. Traditional ESL instruction often emphasizes grammar and vocabulary but neglects intercultural dimensions. Digital storytelling, which combines narrative construction with multimedia tools, offers learners opportunities to reflect on cultural identity, share experiences, and engage in authentic communication. Findings from recent studies suggest that digital storytelling significantly improves learners' pragmatic awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and confidence. The paper argues for integrating digital storytelling into ESL curricula to prepare learners for authentic communication in diverse global contexts.

Introduction

English has become the global lingua franca, used by speakers across diverse cultural backgrounds. As a result, learners must develop not only linguistic competence but also intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which involves adapting language use to different cultural norms (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Pragmatic failures—such as inappropriate requests, refusals, or turn-taking—often occur when learners transfer norms from their first language into English (Taguchi, 2015).

Traditional ESL classrooms emphasize accuracy and fluency but often overlook intercultural dimensions of communication. Learners may produce grammatically correct sentences yet fail to achieve communicative goals due to pragmatic inappropriateness. This gap highlights the need for innovative pedagogical approaches that foster ICC alongside linguistic skills.

Digital storytelling offers one such approach. By combining narrative with multimedia (images, audio, video), learners can construct personal or cultural stories that encourage reflection, empathy, and authentic communication (Robin, 2008). Unlike scripted dialogues, digital storytelling is learner-centered and intercultural in nature, making it a promising tool for ICC development.

Literature Review

Intercultural Communicative Competence

ICC integrates linguistic, sociolinguistic, and intercultural skills (Byram, 1997). Deardorff (2006) emphasized attitudes such as openness and curiosity, knowledge of cultural frameworks, and skills of interpretation and adaptation. Recent scholarship (Schauer, 2024; House & Kádár, 2024) underscores ICC as essential in English as a lingua franca contexts.

Pragmatics and Intercultural Awareness

Pragmatic competence involves using language appropriately in context (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). Intercultural pragmatics highlights how norms vary across cultures, requiring learners to adapt (McConachy, 2022). Instruction in pragmatics has been shown to improve learners' ability to manage politeness, repair strategies, and discourse management (Ishihara, 2019).

Digital Storytelling in Language Education

Digital storytelling enhances engagement and reflection (Robin, 2008). Yang and Wu (2012) found that it improved speaking fluency and confidence. Cohen (2018) emphasized its role in

teaching pragmatics through narrative strategies. More recent studies (Bi, 2021; Ibragimova, 2025) demonstrate that digital projects foster socio-pragmatic awareness and intercultural sensitivity.

Research Gap

While role-play and simulation have been widely studied, fewer studies have examined digital storytelling as a tool for ICC development. This paper addresses that gap by synthesizing theoretical and empirical evidence.

Discussion

Digital storytelling provides learners with authentic opportunities to practice language in intercultural contexts. By constructing narratives, learners reflect on identity, negotiate meaning, and adapt to cultural differences. This process aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, moving learners from concrete experience to reflection, conceptualization, and reapplication.

Empirical evidence suggests that digital storytelling improves pragmatic awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and learner confidence (Yang & Wu, 2012; Bi, 2021). Learners report that storytelling feels authentic and engaging, reducing anxiety and fostering empathy. Teachers also note that digital projects encourage collaboration and deeper reflection.

Pedagogically, integrating digital storytelling into ESL curricula requires teacher training in narrative pedagogy and multimedia tools. Assessment practices should evolve to capture ICC holistically, beyond grammar and vocabulary.

Conclusion

Digital storytelling is a powerful pedagogical tool for developing intercultural communicative competence in ESL learners. It fosters pragmatic awareness, cultural sensitivity, confidence, and engagement, bridging the gap between linguistic knowledge and authentic communication. By embracing digital storytelling, educators can prepare learners not only to speak English accurately but also to use it appropriately in diverse intercultural contexts.

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