**A PhD proposal**

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1. **Introduction**

In my experience of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), I have noticed how poor the students’ English language is, particularly among those who are at the beginning stages. Nearly 25% of each class is unable to conduct a completely error-free conversation, not to mention their other English language skills. Students have been studying English for at least six years before going to the university, so at the university level, they should be able to understand and conduct simple conversations.

1. **The problem**

First-year students who start with a low level of the English language can face a fundamental problem when communicating with their teachers at higher levels. All courses after the third semester are English literature, linguistics, and translation. Therefore, it is essential for students to reach an acceptable level of language-speaking proficiency in their first year.

1. **Literature review**

Implementing digital storytelling to foster speaking competence can be beneficial in these circumstances. Numerous studies have been conducted internationally and in Saudi Arabia into the effectiveness of digital storytelling to foster second language oral production and other skills.

First, some international researchers have researched and published articles about digital storytelling. A Korean researcher, Kim (2014), conducted a study on developing autonomous learning for oral proficiency using digital storytelling. The goal of this study was to ascertain whether the use of digital storytelling could improve the oral proficiency of students. This study was an opportunity for five second-language English students who were at advanced and intermediate levels at the City College of San Francisco. The students provided recorded stories weekly about different topics beyond the classroom. Self-study resource results showed that the speaking skills of the participants improved. The study also revealed that digital storytelling built the students’ self-confidence and increased their autonomy in oral proficiency.

A study by Torres et al. (2012) is encouraging in terms of analyzing the usefulness of implementing digital storytelling. The aim of this study was to work on specific linguistic aspects such as greeting each other. The target students were in their first year at the University of Valencia, Spain. This study consisted of numerous workshops that led to the final project, which was the students’ digital storytelling creations. The result was a clear improvement in their use of linguistics routings. Students also used more complex language structures as well as diverse expressions for opening and closing dialogues.

Evidence of the effectiveness of digital storytelling is found in the research of Razmi et al. (2014). Sixty Iranian undergraduate students were divided into two groups. One group created a digital storytelling item based on Perrine’s Literature, which was presented in class. The other group was asked to read the stories and present them to the class. The results showed better development in the oral skills of the students who used the digital storytelling technique.

Another study was conducted by James et al. (2019) in a public school in Malaysia. This study pointed out that students had an imbalance in their language skills. Their written skills were good, but when it came to speaking, many students were not able to speak English fluently. Twenty students from secondary schools in the suburb of Pahang, Malaysia, participated. Their language level was in the intermediate to advanced range. All the students were asked to create digital stories and the results showed an improvement in their oral production. The researchers recommended using digital storytelling as a tool to motivate students to speak English.

The highlight of the effectiveness of using digital storytelling in learning was noticeably clear in the findings of a study by Smeda et al. (2014). The study was conducted in Australian primary and secondary schools, and they noted:

Digital storytelling is a powerful tool to integrate instructional messages with learning activities to create more engaging and exciting learning environments. It is a meaningful approach for creating a constructivist learning environment based on novel principles of teaching and learning. Thus, this approach has the potential to enhance student engagement and provide better educational outcomes for learners. (p 1)

This study highlighted the significance and the powerful implications of digital storytelling as a learning tool. Implementing digital storytelling in previous studies proved successful for adults and young students as well.

Second, in the Saudi context, digital storytelling fosters intrinsic motivation, as we can see in the study by Al Amri (2020). The participants were 32 female Saudi students in the 10th grade. They engaged in a 12-week project creating digital stories. The findings emphasized the positive effects on student motivation and willingness to participate through digital story creation. Students also showed a notable improvement in communicative competence, particularly in phonology, lexicon, and grammar.

The next study focused on 60 Saudi female university students who were divided into groups of about eight. The goal of this socially-oriented digital storytelling study was to shed light on the benefits and challenges that EFL students experienced. The findings showed the students’ willingness to engage in the learning process, as well as their improvements in digital and academic literacy (Al Khateeb, 2019).

Another study was conducted at the Northern Borders University in Saudi Arabia. The aim was specifically to improve speaking skills. Participants in this study were male students between the ages of 18 and 22. The experiment lasted for about six months and the instructor met with the students for 90 minutes twice a week. The researcher began by explaining to the students how to create and develop a digital story. Then, the students were trained in using computer programs related to digital storytelling. The results showed an improvement in the students’ speaking skills, and they were better motivated to learn in a fun environment. This study also recommended that EFL teachers should change their regular methods of language teaching (Essa, 2019).

Utilizing digital storytelling in language learning can produce a satisfying outcome as seen in the study completed by Juraid & Ibrahim (2016) at Taibah University, Saudi Arabia. The participants were 46 female students, all majoring in English language education. They were divided into a control and an experimental group. The results revealed great development in written and oral communication in the experimental group. Moreover, students showed a positive attitude toward applying digital storytelling to improve their oral production.

Finally, a similar study by Al Sahli (2014) on 46 first-secondary-level female students at a public school in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, revealed improvements in vocabulary as well as other language skills. The researcher stated that using online tools such as YouTube and digital storytelling led to a motivated and low-stress learning environment.

Having reviewed the relevant work completed and published by international and Saudi researchers, I have identified some research gaps that follow.

1. **The research gaps**

In my proposed project, I plan to implement digital storytelling as a tool to engage and motivate students to develop their English oral communication skills. This research aims to present a creative method to improve the speaking skills of undergraduate students. The participants of this research will be first-year male students with low speaking competence. In addition, it aims to shed light on the questions that remain unanswered by previous studies about language learning and digital storytelling.

1. **Research questions**

* What is the effect of using digital storytelling on undergraduate students’ second language oral production?
* How can technology and digital storytelling engage and motivate students to speak the target language?
* How can students designing digital stories improve their implicit and explicit language learning?
* How can technology give students space and time to build their confidence in speaking the target language?

1. **Methodology**

There will be mixed qualitative and quantitative research methods e.g., semi-structured interviews and surveys to measure students’ attitudes toward digital storytelling. In addition, there will be the observation of scripts, recordings, and participants observation. Moreover, a quasi-experimental method will be implemented in this research.

* 1. **Participants**

The participants will be 15 to 25 first-year male students ranging in age from 19 to 22 years majoring in English language education at a Saudi University.

* 1. **Data collection**

Data will be collected through questionnaires, training sessions, and observation. In addition to interviews, there will be before and after tests and learning portfolios. I will need a computer to record interviews. In addition, I must use an English lecture period to explain and teach the students how to design digital stories as well as to show them at the class.

The aim is to implement a practical digital storytelling course for students. I intend to collect data by teaching a spoken-English course at a Saudi university using digital storytelling.

The number of students involved in the study will depend on how many have enrolled at the time. It should be between 15 and 25.

First, I must seek permission from the institution and the students. Then, I will start by giving the students an introductory lecture on digital storytelling. Later, I will record interviews with the university students during class-time and ask them to introduce themselves. I will also ask questions about digital storytelling. The duration of an interview should be five to ten minutes.

* 1. **Interview questions**

1. Do you think digital storytelling is an effective method to improve speaking skills?
2. Do you think telling a story helps speaking practice?
3. Would you like to tell a story to your classmates in English?
4. Do you like to use technology in learning English?
5. Do you think learning to design digital stories is interesting?
6. What aspect of language does digital storytelling help you acquire?
7. Do you like to record and hear yourself speaking in English?
8. Do you think speaking through technology is easier than speaking face-to-face?

All these questions will be covered, and, with further research, I may add more questions. It should be enough to formulate a clear idea of a student’s language level, vocabulary use, and common mistakes. Additionally, I will have a general description of their current language ability in terms of sentence structure, verb usage, and tenses. I will be able to compare their language levels at the end of the course.

Afterward, I will present an experimental course on designing digital stories to the students. When they are ready to create their own digital stories, I will ask students to produce individual digital stories every week for at least eight weeks. This will enable me to record and analyze their progress.

During this time, all the students’ digital storytelling projects will be dated and collected for later analysis.

The participants’ observations and written notes are especially important at this stage and must be present in every class. Their notes should consist of new expressions, idioms, and language features that they took from other resources to design their digital stories. The idea is to see if they will be able to produce these newly acquired language features at the end of the course.

In the end, I will record an interview with each of the students. I will ask them whether they like digital storytelling as a medium for improving oral production. I will ask how it is different from other regular classes. What did they like the most, what they did not like, and so on? Did they feel more comfortable and less anxious while they were speaking the target language alone? I might have to increase the questions to make an accurate judgment of the students’ language levels and linguistics features.

* 1. **Data analysis**

I plan to use multiple software applications to analyze the data. A Likert-based survey can be a good approach to show the students’ attitudes toward digital storytelling. I also intend to use NVivo 12 to analyze qualitative data as well as Excel, HubSpot, Tableau, and SPSS.

I will study their language, compare it to the first interview, and analyze changes and improvements. All new language features that the students acquire during this course and all the disappearing mistakes must be collected before analysis.

I expect this experiment to have a significant impact on the students’ speaking levels. I am eager to find out how technology and narrating speeches can influence oral production.

1. **Research timeline**

First Year:

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| Research Phases | May–Jul  2023 | | | Aug–Oct  2023 | | | Nov–Jan  2023/2024 | | | Feb–Apr  2024 | | |
| Literature review |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Proposal development |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Second Year:

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| Research Phases | May–Jul  2024 | | | Aug–Oct  2024 | | | Nov–Jan  2024/2025 | | | Feb–Apr  2025 | | |
| Development of tools |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Data collection |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Third Year:

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| Research Phases | May–Jul  2025 | | | Aug–Oct  2025 | | | Nov–Jan  2025/2026 | | | Feb–Apr  2026 | | |
| Dissertation write-up |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Defending and submitting dissertation |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

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