

Performing English online: The use of Instagram Reels for developing basic speaking and multimodal awareness

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ABSTRACT

Growing use of short-form video platforms has transformed how undergraduates encounter English, yet classroom speaking tasks rarely exploit these multimodal, audience-oriented spaces. Previous EFL studies on TikTok and Instagram report higher motivation but give limited accounts of how learners coordinate gesture, on-screen text, and voice, and rarely link this to gains in speaking performance. This study addresses that gap by examining how Instagram Reels-based storytelling tasks support basic speaking development and multimodal awareness in a first-year EFL class. Using a classroom-based mixed-methods design, the research involved 38 undergraduates in a Speaking course. Students completed three Instagram Reels narrative tasks alongside in-class speaking activities. Data comprised speaking tests rated with an analytic rubric, 114 student videos analysed through multimodal discourse analysis, and reflective journals plus interviews. Quantitative results show a moderate increase in speaking scores (mean gain 1.1/5), with the largest improvements in fluency and discourse management. Multimodal analysis indicates a shift from static monologues to more coordinated use of gaze, framing, and captioning aligned with spoken content. Learners reported that opportunities to rehearse, edit, and address an imagined online audience reduced anxiety and encouraged more extended speech. The study is limited by its single-institution context, modest sample, and reliance on researcher-designed rubrics, constraining generalizability. Nevertheless, it offers practical implications for integrating short-form video as a multiliteracies-oriented task in speaking syllabi and highlights the need for guidelines on ethics, privacy, and assessment. Future research could compare alternative platforms, incorporate peer feedback, and track impacts on EFL learners' identities as English users.

Keywords: basic speaking skills; multiliteracies pedagogy; multimodal literacy; Indonesian EFL learners; Instagram Reels

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of mobile internet and social media has changed how Indonesian EFL learners encounter English, shifting everyday exposure from printed texts and classroom audio to short-form

videos, memes, and interactive platforms such as Instagram Reels. In this environment, speaking is no longer practiced only as face-to-face dialogue or formal presentation, but increasingly as performance in front of a camera, curated through filters, captions, music, and editing choices that require both linguistic and semiotic decision-making. For undergraduate students in Basic Speaking courses, this shift is double-edged: on the one hand, students consume vast amounts of English content passively; on the other hand, classroom tasks often remain limited to rehearsed dialogues, controlled role-plays, or test-oriented drills that do not fully exploit the performative and multimodal nature of contemporary communication. Research on social-media-based language learning suggests that Instagram can function as a legitimate learning space where learners negotiate vocabulary, pronunciation, and interactional norms in authentic, interest-driven communities (Hasani et al., 2025; Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021; Pujiati et al., 2019). However, despite the growing visibility of Reels in everyday language exposure, classroom-based research that systematically designs Instagram Reels as pedagogical speaking tasks and documents how such tasks develop beginning-level speaking alongside multimodal awareness remains limited. This study responds to that gap by framing Instagram Reels not as a motivational add-on, but as a structured site where learners can perform English in ways that align course objectives, digital literacies, and students' existing social media practices.

Within EFL pedagogy, digital storytelling has been widely recognised as a promising framework for integrating technology with oral language development. A large-scale systematic review concludes that digital storytelling “has evolved into a useful instructional tool that can be utilised in the teaching and learning process” to improve students' speaking skills across educational levels (Nair & Yunus, 2021). The same review indicates that digital stories, typically short multimodal narratives of approximately three to ten minutes, enable learners to rehearse, record, and rework their speech while orchestrating images, texts, and sounds, thereby encouraging planning and reflection on language use (Nair & Yunus, 2021). Empirical studies in diverse EFL contexts report gains in fluency, accuracy, confidence, and willingness to communicate when students script, voice, and publish their own digital stories rather than only delivering live presentations (Azizah et al., 2024; Murad et al., 2023; Nair & Yunus, 2021). These studies consistently show that digital storytelling shifts learners from passive recipients of teacher talk to active designers of meaning whose voices and experiences become central to the speaking task, an important consideration for beginners, who often struggle with anxiety and limited lexical resources. At the same time, most digital storytelling research has relied on platforms such as PowerPoint, desktop video editors, or closed learning management systems; comparatively few studies have examined how micro-video formats native to social media, such as Instagram Reels, can function as digital stories in their own right, and how their affordances (brevity, remixing, algorithmic circulation, and imagined public audiences) might reshape learners' sense of audience, performance, and responsibility for revision.

Parallel to the growth of digital storytelling, multiliteracies and multimodal literacy frameworks have become influential in rethinking language teaching beyond print-centric practices. Multiliteracies pedagogy argues that contemporary learners must be supported to interpret and produce meanings through multiple modes, linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial, because “students need skills to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world” (Dewi et al., 2023a). Syntheses of multiliteracies research suggest that tasks involving the production of multimodal texts, including short videos and digital stories, can foster critical thinking, creativity, and agency by requiring deliberate design choices about images, sound, and layout alongside language (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015; Mirra et al., 2018; Nabhan & Hidayat, 2018; Paesani & Allen, 2020). In Indonesian EFL-speaking classrooms, Dewi et al. (2023a) report that teachers who implement multiliteracies-based speaking tasks using videos, visuals, and students' own recordings observe improvements not only in participation but also in higher-order thinking as learners connect topics to their lifeworld and social concerns. Yet these studies also emphasise that many classrooms continue to rely on monomodal tasks, prompting calls for research that documents feasible models of multimodal speaking activities within existing curricular constraints and assessment regimes (Dewi et al., 2023a). Instagram Reels, with built-in tools for layering captions, stickers, music, filters, and voice-over onto short clips, offers

a ready-made environment for operationalising multiliteracies principles in Basic Speaking courses, but its pedagogical potential, particularly for beginning-level speaking, remains underexplored.

Research on Instagram in language education has so far focused predominantly on motivation, vocabulary, and writing rather than sustained, systematically scaffolded speaking development. Studies of Instagram use with EFL learners suggest that image-caption posts and Stories can increase motivation and perceived relevance because tasks are embedded in familiar social media practices (Al-Ali, 2014; Handayani, 2017; Saputra, 2023; Pujiati et al., 2019). More recent work that explicitly addresses Instagram Reels indicates that short, attention-grabbing videos and remixing tools may support English learning and provide exposure to authentic spoken English in context (Hasani et al., 2025; Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021; Yang, 2020). There is also emerging evidence that Reels can serve as an authentic tool for practising speaking by enabling students to record and share short performances that resemble real-world digital communication more closely than traditional oral tests (Dewi et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the Reels-focused literature remains relatively small and tends to emphasise perceptions, motivation, or incidental exposure rather than providing detailed accounts of task design, scaffolding, and assessment criteria that would make Reels-based speaking work sustainable in core speaking courses. Moreover, multimodality is often treated as a background feature rather than analysed as part of speaking competence; few studies trace how students' choices of visuals, text overlays, and audio in Reels relate to spoken performance and the development of multimodal meaning-making in English.

The Indonesian tertiary EFL context adds further urgency to these questions. Basic Speaking courses are often expected to introduce fundamental interactional routines, such as introducing oneself, describing experiences, and narrating events, while also preparing students for participation in digital academic and professional environments. Yet lecturers frequently report tensions between covering required functional expressions and creating space for more open-ended tasks that draw on students' everyday digital practices (Zein et al., 2020). Dewi et al. (2023a) note that even teachers who endorse multiliteracies-based speaking tasks struggle to design activities that are both meaningful and manageable, in part because research on implementation in Indonesian EFL contexts remains limited. At the same time, Indonesian university students are heavy users of Instagram and short-video platforms, which suggests they may already possess tacit multimodal competencies in filming, editing, and curating content—competencies that are rarely recognised or assessed as part of formal speaking development (Hasani et al., 2025; Odgers et al., 2020). This disconnect signals a missed opportunity: if Basic Speaking courses harness students' familiarity with Reels through structured digital storytelling, they may simultaneously strengthen core speaking skills and cultivate a more reflective stance toward participation in online media cultures.

Against this backdrop, the present study positions Instagram Reels as a pedagogical vehicle for performing English in a Basic Speaking course through carefully designed digital storytelling tasks. Building on evidence that learners' "speaking skills can be improved through digital storytelling due to its ability to facilitate and support the process of language learning" (Nair & Yunus, 2021), the study conceptualises each Reel as a mini-story in which students plan, script, and record short monologues or dialogues tied to course themes, then enhance them with multimodal resources that must be justified and reflected upon. The study moves beyond enthusiasm for "fun technology" by examining how Reels-based tasks reshape preparation, rehearsal, and revision; how they influence students' sense of audience and accountability for clarity and accuracy; and how they contribute to emerging awareness of multimodal design as part of speaking competence (Dewi et al., 2023a; Mirra et al., 2018; Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021). The contribution of this research lies in connecting three strands that are often discussed separately: Instagram Reels as a short-video platform, digital storytelling as a structured pedagogical framework for oral production, and multiliteracies as a lens for analysing students' multimodal meaning-making.

Consequently, this study addresses three interrelated gaps: (1) the scarcity of empirical classroom research that operationalises Instagram Reels as digital storytelling tasks for beginning-level speaking rather than as informal, extracurricular practice; (2) the limited attention to aligning Reels-based tasks

with multiliteracies principles to foster multimodal awareness in EFL learners; and (3) the lack of detailed accounts of task design, scaffolding, and assessment that can inform lecturers seeking feasible models for Indonesian Basic Speaking courses. To respond to these gaps, the study investigates how Instagram Reels–based digital storytelling tasks are implemented in a Basic Speaking class at an Indonesian university and how these tasks contribute to students’ development of basic speaking skills and multimodal awareness. Specifically, the research aims are:

1. To describe the design and implementation of Instagram Reels–based digital storytelling tasks in a Basic Speaking course.
2. To explore how participation in these tasks influences students’ spoken performance and their awareness of multimodal meaning-making in English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital storytelling and speaking development

Research on digital storytelling, multiliteracies pedagogy, and social media–based speaking tasks has expanded in the last decade, yet the literature remains fragmented across theory-building work, classroom interventions, and platform-focused studies. In speaking-oriented EFL research, digital storytelling is increasingly treated as a multimodal composition practice rather than a mere technical add-on: learners design meaning by coordinating script, voice, image, and sound in ways that foreground performance and revision. In an Indonesian context, [Puspitasari et al. \(2024\)](#) define digital storytelling as “a combination of storytelling and the use of digital media”, underscoring its shift from conventional narration to short digital films that integrate spoken voice with visual and audio resources. For beginning speakers, this multimodal workflow matters because it creates repeated opportunities to rehearse and refine pronunciation, pacing, and intelligibility before a product is shared. From this perspective, speaking development is inseparable from processes of planning, recording, editing, and re-recording, which reposition learners as authors and performers of their own oral texts.

Classroom studies and syntheses generally agree that digital storytelling can support measurable and perceived gains in oral performance. [Nair and Yunus’s \(2021\)](#) review of digital storytelling for speaking reports consistent improvements across contexts, especially when tasks require scripting, iterative recording, and purposeful revision rather than one-shot delivery. Empirical work also specifies which dimensions tend to change: in an Indonesian junior high school case study, “students who engage in all stages of the Genre-based approach (GBA) through traditional story-based digital storytelling demonstrate improvements in English vocabulary, word pronunciation, accuracy, and speaking fluency” ([Puspitasari et al., 2024](#)). Such findings align with claims that collaborative scripting, repeated takes, and peer feedback can reduce anxiety and increase willingness to speak. At the same time, meta-analytic discussions caution that many interventions are short-term and sample-limited, leaving open questions about transferability across genres, platforms, and assessment regimes ([Nair & Yunus, 2021](#)).

Multiliteracies pedagogy and multimodal oral production

Multiliteracies pedagogy provides a complementary lens for explaining why digital storytelling is productive for speaking: it treats literacy as multimodal design across linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial resources, shaped by diverse communication channels ([Cope & Kalantzis, 2015](#)). In this view, speaking tasks should not be evaluated only as verbal output, because meaning emerges from how speech is staged, framed, and sequenced with other semiotic resources. Indonesian classroom research supports this shift. [Dewi et al. \(2023a\)](#) argue that multiliteracy-oriented teaching invites learners to move among “experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing, and applying” multimodal texts rather than merely reproducing written forms. When applied to oral production, multiliteracies foregrounds learners’ responsibility to make design choices, what to show, what to caption, what to voice, and how to synchronize modes so that the message is intelligible and contextually appropriate. This orientation is especially relevant to beginner speaking courses, where scaffolding can turn

multimodal planning into a pathway toward clearer organization, more confident delivery, and more purposeful audience awareness.

However, multiliteracies scholarship also highlights an implementation problem: teachers may endorse multimodal approaches while still relying on conventional, monomodal speaking routines because workable models and assessment rubrics are scarce. [Dewi et al. \(2023a\)](#) note that “there is still a lack of research on the actual implementation of this approach in EFL contexts, particularly in speaking classrooms”, indicating a gap between policy-level enthusiasm and classroom realities. For research design, this point matters because multiliteracies is not only a rationale but also a demand for transparency: studies must specify how learners are scaffolded to connect modes (e.g., spoken narration, visuals, captions, and sound) and how evaluative criteria recognise multimodal meaning-making alongside pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy. It also requires attention to learners’ reflective and critical stances, how they justify design choices, anticipate audiences, and revise in response to feedback. Without such detail, claims about “multimodal speaking” risk remaining aspirational rather than instructional.

Social media micro-video and Reels-based speaking tasks

Social media platforms extend these pedagogical concerns by normalising short-form, camera-facing performances as everyday communication. Micro-video genres on TikTok and Instagram Reels compress storytelling into brief clips, inviting users to rehearse delivery, coordinate gesture with framing, and layer captions or audio for emphasis, features that plausibly intersect with speaking pedagogy. Emerging classroom research has begun to test this potential for speaking development. In a quasi-experimental study of Reels-based speaking projects, [Chadafi and Khasanah \(2024\)](#) propose that “the use of Instagram Reels in a structured manner ... can improve fluency and pronunciation more significantly than conventional methods”, linking platform affordances to targeted oral outcomes. However, much of the evidence foregrounds test scores or affective responses (e.g., enjoyment, confidence) while leaving the multimodal dimension underspecified. As a result, it remains unclear how learners’ design decisions, visual framing, captioning density, and audio selection interact with intelligibility, organization, and pragmatic appropriateness in spoken English.

Taken together, prior work suggests three partial insights: digital storytelling can support speaking development through iterative production; multiliteracies offers a robust account of multimodal meaning-making; and Reels-style micro-video may increase opportunities for rehearsed, audience-oriented oral performance. Nevertheless, the strands are rarely integrated in classroom research, particularly in Indonesian tertiary Basic Speaking contexts. As [Puspitasari et al. \(2024\)](#) observe, “only a few studies examine the learning design for incorporating traditional storytelling into teaching and learning through digital storytelling”, and this design scarcity is even more pronounced for Reels-mediated tasks. Additionally, Reels-based studies tend to report outcome gains without analysing how students negotiate platform constraints, multimodal aesthetics, and audience imaginaries as part of speaking competence. The present study addresses these gaps by examining an Instagram Reels-based digital storytelling project explicitly framed by multiliteracies pedagogy, detailing task design, scaffolding, and assessment while tracing how oral performance and multimodal awareness co-develop across cycles of planning, production, feedback, and reflection.

METHOD

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to examine both measurable changes in students’ Basic Speaking performance and students’ experiences of producing Instagram Reels as course-based digital storytelling tasks. Mixed methods is defined as the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches within a single study design ([Creswell & Clark, 2017](#)), and mixed-methods studies typically include the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data ([Creswell & Clark, 2017](#)). A sequential explanatory logic was appropriate because the study first needed an outcome-oriented account of speaking development (pre/post performance scores) and then an interpretive explanation of how learners prepared, rehearsed, recorded, edited, and reflected

during the Reels cycles. The choice also reflects practical and ecological constraints of classroom-based applied linguistics research, where interventions are commonly embedded in existing syllabi and implemented with intact cohorts to preserve instructional continuity.

The study was conducted in a Basic Speaking course in the English Department of an Indonesian public university and involved a single intact class of thirty-eight second-year undergraduates. Convenience sampling was used to reflect the natural classroom setting in which the intervention took place. Students were provided with a clear explanation of the study aims and procedures, assured that participation was voluntary and would not affect course grades, and asked to sign informed-consent forms. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in transcripts and multimodal excerpts, data were handled in de-identified form for reporting, and institutional ethical clearance procedures were followed prior to data collection.

The intervention extended across six weeks and was integrated into the existing Basic Speaking syllabus. In Week 1, students completed a baseline monologic speaking task in which they narrated a short personal experience aligned with the course theme; performances were video-recorded and rated using an analytic rubric covering fluency, pronunciation, lexical range, grammatical accuracy, and discourse management. Weeks 2 to 5 introduced three Instagram Reels–based digital storytelling tasks that required students to script, rehearse, record, and edit one-minute narratives using their mobile phones, with prompts progressing from individual self-introductions to collaborative mini-sketches of everyday campus situations. To reduce performative pressure and safeguard privacy while still leveraging platform affordances, students submitted their Reels through a closed class account rather than posting publicly. Alongside the video tasks, students wrote brief reflective journals after each cycle. At the end of the intervention, eight volunteers representing high, mid, and low initial proficiency participated in semi-structured interviews focusing on their experiences of producing Reels and their perceptions of speaking development and multimodal design.

Data analysis combined quantitative and qualitative procedures consistent with sequential explanatory integration at the interpretation stage. For the quantitative strand, pre- and post-intervention rubric scores were compiled in a spreadsheet, and descriptive statistics and paired-samples t-tests were used to identify changes in overall performance and in each rubric dimension. For the qualitative strand, the 114 student-produced Reels, journal entries, and interview transcripts were treated as a single corpus. Coding followed the view that “a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes or ‘translates’ data” and that “coding is deep reflection about and, thus, deep interpretation of the data’s meanings” (Miles et al., 2019). First-cycle coding documented recurring patterns in narrative staging, rehearsal and revision practices, multimodal choices (e.g., captioning, visuals, and audio layering), and learners’ accounts of anxiety, confidence, and audience awareness; second-cycle coding clustered these patterns into higher-level themes related to fluency work, multimodal scaffolding, and shifts in learner agency. Quantitative and qualitative findings were then merged in the discussion through explicit points of convergence and divergence to address how Reels-based tasks support speaking development and how they reshape students’ sense of what counts as successful oral performance in this classroom context.

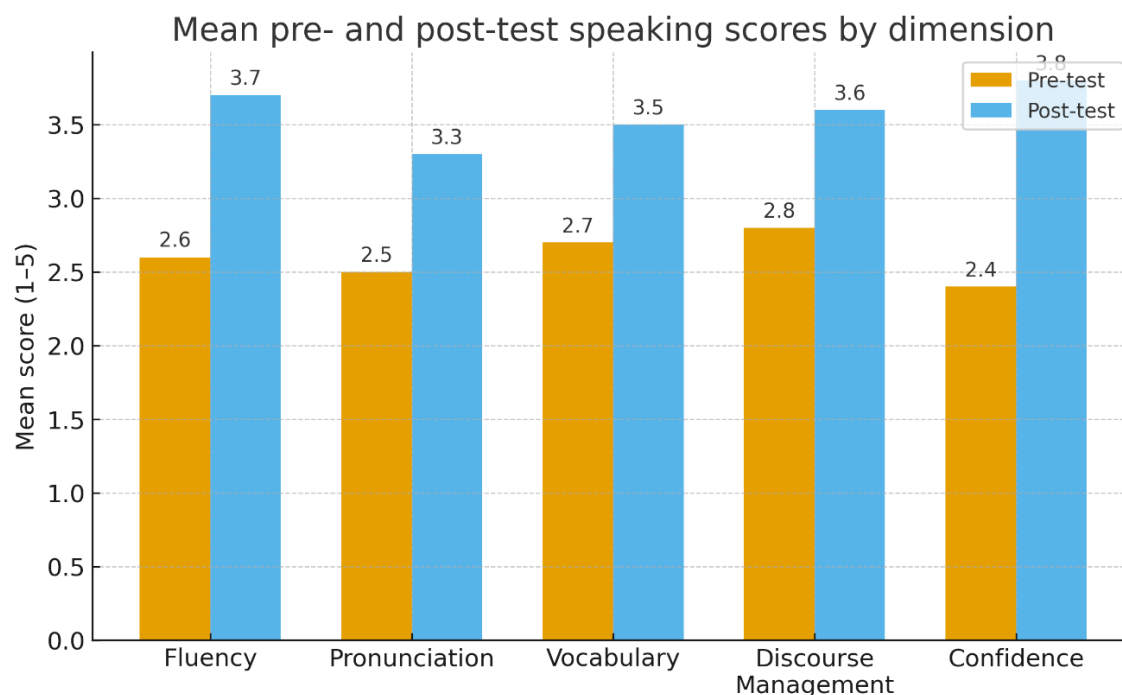
FINDINGS

The quantitative analysis showed a consistent and substantial improvement in students’ speaking performance after six weeks of Instagram Reels–based digital storytelling, and this pattern was reinforced by qualitative evidence from the videos, journals, and interviews. Across the thirty-eight participants, the mean composite speaking score increased from 68.2 (SD = 6.9) in the pre-test to 79.1 (SD = 6.7) in the post-test, with a paired-samples t-test indicating that this gain was statistically significant at $p < .001$. The largest gains appeared in fluency and discourse management, suggesting that repeated rehearsal and the one-minute constraint encouraged learners to plan their utterances more carefully and to sustain oral production with fewer pauses and breakdowns. In classroom observation notes, students who initially produced very short, fragmented responses were able by the final task to maintain thirty to forty-five second monologues with recognisable openings, transitions,

and closings, even when talking about everyday topics such as commuting, procrastination, or family routines. Taken together, these results indicate that the Reels-based tasks did not merely generate a set of attractive videos, but systematically reshaped the way learners prepared and organised their spoken messages in English.

Figure 1

Mean Pre- and Posttest Speaking Scores by Analytic-Rubric Dimension



Note. Values represent mean scores on a five-point scale (1–5), with higher scores indicating better performance; $N = 38$. Dimensions include fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, discourse management, and confidence.

A closer look at the analytic rubric dimensions helps to clarify which aspects of speaking benefited most clearly from the intervention and how these gains relate to the affordances of Instagram Reels. Mean fluency scores rose from 2.6 to 3.7 on a five-point scale, and the descriptor associated with confidence and audience engagement increased from 2.4 to 3.8, reflecting raters' perceptions that students spoke with fewer long pauses, a more stable pace, and greater willingness to look at the camera instead of reading from notes. Students themselves frequently attributed these changes to the possibility of multiple takes, writing in their journals that they felt "safer" when they could delete unsatisfactory clips and record again until their speech sounded acceptable to them. Pronunciation scores moved from 2.5 to 3.3, and several participants described how watching and listening to their own recordings repeatedly made them notice mispronounced words, monotone intonation, or awkward phrasing that they would not have detected in real-time classroom speaking. Vocabulary and discourse management also improved, with mean lexical scores increasing from 2.7 to 3.5 and more frequent use of cohesive devices such as "at first," "however," and "in the end," especially in the final task where a problem–solution structure was explicitly required. Learners who drafted relatively long scripts and then trimmed them to fit the sixty-second limit often demonstrated the largest lexical and organisational gains, suggesting that the temporal constraint functioned as a productive push toward concision and clarity when coupled with explicit planning and revision rather than as a mere source of pressure.

Beyond measurable scores, the qualitative data reveal a gradual but important shift in how students positioned themselves in relation to English-speaking tasks and how they understood the role of multimodal design in communication. At the beginning of the course, many characterised

speaking assignments mainly as obligations tied to grades and teacher judgment, and they framed their own role as “following instructions” or “trying not to be wrong” in front of the class. By the end of the Reels project, a recurring theme in journals and interviews was the idea of “owning the story,” with students emphasising that having some choice over topics, angles, and visual style made them care more deeply about both the content and form of what they produced. Several participants explained that they wanted their Reels to be “beautiful, not only correct,” signalling a shift from a narrow focus on grammatical accuracy towards a broader concern with crafting a coherent, aesthetically satisfying spoken narrative. One student remarked that classroom presentations felt like “speaking to the teacher,” whereas Reels felt like “speaking to friends,” even though the actual audience was the same group of peers; this suggests that the change in medium re-framed the social situation in ways that reduced perceived formality and fear of negative evaluation. Such changes in stance and agency are particularly salient in the final Reels, where students increasingly integrated gestures, facial expressions, camera framing, and background elements to support their spoken messages rather than treating speech and visuals as separate layers.

At the same time, the findings also show that the benefits of Instagram Reels-based digital storytelling were not distributed evenly and that the same affordances that empowered some learners risked overwhelming others. A small group of students, especially those with lower initial proficiency or limited experience with video editing, showed only marginal improvements in their speaking scores and reported feeling “confused” or “tired” by having to think about content, language, filming, and editing simultaneously. Their Reels tended to be visually polished but linguistically thin: many relied on memorised scripts delivered in a relatively flat tone, with limited variation in sentence structure and intonation, and in a few cases, the spoken component was reduced to brief phrases layered over long segments of music and on-screen text. In interviews, these students acknowledged that they enjoyed experimenting with filters and transitions but admitted that they often “focused on the look first, English later,” implying that the visual dimension had started to overshadow the language-learning goals of the task. This imbalance suggests that, without deliberate scaffolding, weaker speakers may invest disproportionately in the visual aesthetics of their Reels as a way to compensate for insecurity about their oral performance, thereby slowing their linguistic development even as their videos appear sophisticated on the surface. In this cohort, the most noticeable progress occurred when the teacher provided structured support for scripting—such as sentence stems, functional phrases, and model mini-dialogues—and when peer feedback sessions explicitly asked classmates to comment on clarity, detail, and pronunciation rather than only on “creativity.”

A further layer of complexity emerges when considering how students negotiated audience, privacy, and platform norms inside what was formally a closed classroom project. Although the design required only that Reels be shared within a class account, several students voluntarily posted selected videos to their personal profiles, explaining that wider visibility made them more “serious” about accuracy and clarity because many different people could potentially see and judge their English. For these volunteers, likes and informal comments from friends, siblings, or followers operated as an additional source of motivation and as a kind of parallel assessment that complemented teacher feedback. Other students, however, explicitly chose to keep their Reels restricted to the class, citing fear of ridicule from non-English-speaking peers and concerns that relatives or friends might mock their accent or mistakes. One participant stated that she was “afraid that my relatives would see and laugh,” highlighting the emotional risk involved in public performance even on a familiar platform. This divergence indicates that Instagram’s affordances can be experienced as empowering or threatening depending on learners’ social histories, and it suggests that future implementations need to treat decisions about public sharing as pedagogical questions rather than simply technical settings. Across the board, though, students valued structured opportunities to watch and comment on each other’s Reels in class: peer feedback cycles led some groups to adjust the balance between speech and text, lower overly loud background music, or rethink camera angles so that facial expressions became more visible, and these revisions often coincided with small but noticeable improvements in fluency and intelligibility.

Overall, the findings portray Instagram Reels–based digital storytelling as a double-edged but promising pedagogical tool for a Basic Speaking course in an Indonesian university context. On one side, the quantitative gains in fluency, confidence, and discourse organisation, supported by students' own accounts of increased comfort and ownership, suggest that short, iterative, low-stakes video performances can provide the kind of frequent, meaningful practice that traditional one-off presentations often fail to deliver. On the other side, the uneven benefits across proficiency levels, the temptation for some learners to prioritise visual spectacle over linguistic experimentation, and the ambivalent feelings about public visibility point to the need for careful task design, explicit language scaffolding, and sensitive handling of privacy. These tensions do not negate the observed positive outcomes; rather, they frame them as contingent on Reels' embedding within a broader multiliteracy-oriented pedagogy that gives equal weight to language development, multimodal design, and students' emotional safety.

DISCUSSION

The pattern of results indicates that Instagram Reels–based digital storytelling did more than create a “fun” speaking activity; it reorganised students' opportunities to rehearse, perform, and re-watch their own oral production in ways that systematically strengthened key micro-skills. The steady gains in fluency, lexical range, and grammatical accuracy between pre-test and post-test, supported by students' comments about needing “several takes” before uploading, suggest that the affordances of short-form video promoted iterative practice rather than one-shot performance. This resonates with [Nair and Yunus' \(2021\)](#) observation that “digital storytelling... can be used as a useful tool by educators in improving students' speaking skills” across educational levels, but the present data show how that claim translates into concrete score progression when the stories are tightly constrained to a Reels format. Students' reflections describing how they “deleted and re-recorded” clips until pronunciation sounded “natural enough” point to a form of low-stakes self-monitoring that is rarely available in live classroom presentations. Rehearsal becomes woven into the production process itself, and the improved scores suggest that this private cycle of recording, watching, and editing gradually stabilised more fluent and accurate speech patterns. Rather than treating performance anxiety as a fixed barrier, the Reels tasks leveraged the affordance of re-takes to transform anxiety into a resource for self-editing, aligning with findings that digital storytelling can “support the process of speaking among students” by providing multiple chances to shape their output ([Nair & Yunus, 2021](#)).

At the same time, the findings show that the intervention worked not only because students spoke more often but because they learned to orchestrate different modes as part of a multiliteracies process. When students storyboarded, scripted, filmed, captioned, and sometimes subtitled their Reels, they were forced to think about how words, gestures, gaze, background, and on-screen text would work together to make meaning. [Dewi et al. \(2023a\)](#) underline that digital storytelling “utilises diverse modes of communication, promotes creativity and global communication, and integrates technology” in ways that make it a particularly “valuable tool for multiliteracy pedagogy”. The qualitative data here echo that claim: students described how camera framing, the choice of on-screen text, or soundtrack selection quietly pushed them to reconsider which words needed emphasis or which lines should be simplified for clarity. Multimodal design decisions fed back into language decisions, so that planning a shot sequence often led to revising the script to maintain coherence between what is said, what is shown, and what appears as text on screen. This interplay is in line with Cope and Kalantzis' argument that multiliteracies pedagogy should “equip students with the skills and knowledge to navigate and communicate effectively in a rapidly changing, diverse, and globalised world” ([Cope & Kalantzis, 2015](#)), because learners here were not only practising English but also learning how to position themselves as speakers in a visually saturated social media environment. The speaking gains, therefore, cannot be separated from this broader expansion of semiotic resources and audience awareness.

Another striking dimension of the results is the affective shift, particularly in students who initially described themselves as “too shy” or “afraid of mispronunciation” in conventional classroom speaking tasks. Interview data showed that several participants felt more comfortable speaking to their

phone than to a live class, especially in the early weeks, an experience that resonates with Dewi et al.'s claim that Instagram Reels can function as “an authentic tool to enhance English speaking skills” precisely because it allows learners to perform for real audiences while remaining physically alone (Dewi et al., 2022). Pratiwi (2023) similarly reports that most students in her study perceived Instagram as a “valuable platform for learning and practicing English academic speaking skills” when used with clear pedagogical guidelines, and the present study strengthens that argument by linking positive perceptions to measurable gains in analytic speaking scores. Students in this project repeatedly framed Reels tasks as less intimidating than formal presentations yet more serious than ordinary social media posting, because their output would be graded and sometimes viewed by peers or invited audiences. That ambivalent space, between classroom and platform, between assignment and performance, seems to have created a productive level of pressure. It was “serious enough to try hard,” as one student put it, but the ability to re-record, filter, and edit increased their sense of control. Over time, the fear of being judged for mistakes shifted toward pride in producing “good content,” and this repositioning of identity, from weak speaker to competent creator, helps to explain why improvements were not limited to scripted tasks but also appeared in more spontaneous speaking activities reported by students in their journals.

The discussion of authenticity also needs to be situated within wider work on social media and speaking. Saifuddin et al. (2024) note that students appreciate Instagram's “interactive features, such as stories, live sessions, and language exchange groups, which provide opportunities for direct engagement” and flexible practice. In this study, the Reels tasks did not simply mimic informal social media use; they redirected those interactive features toward specific learning goals. For example, some students reported using existing Reels as models to imitate intonation, timing, or gesture, which parallels Dewi et al.'s (2022) finding that following English-learning accounts can expand vocabulary and improve pronunciation when learners consciously engage with captions and audio. When participants here browsed Reels tagged with certain hashtags to find inspiration, they were in effect performing informal genre analysis: identifying recurring openings, hooks, or calls to action and then appropriating these rhetorical moves for their own stories. This process aligns with multiliteracies' emphasis on “situated practice” and “critical framing,” where learners move from immersion in authentic texts to more reflective production (Dewi et al., 2023a). The data suggest that students did not feel they were abandoning “real” English in favour of textbook language; rather, they experienced classroom tasks as an extension of the digital linguistic styles they already encountered daily, but with more explicit attention to clarity, coherence, and accuracy.

Nevertheless, the gains documented in the findings are not reducible to motivation or novelty effects. The analytic rubric highlighted specific areas where progress was uneven, such as grammatical accuracy lagging slightly behind fluency gains for lower-proficiency participants, and this asymmetry deserves attention. Nair and Yunus (2021) emphasise that digital storytelling “facilitates discussions” and enables learners to “enhance their speaking skills” by providing rich contextual support, but the present results suggest that without focused feedback on form, learners may prioritise intelligibility and engagement over syntactic precision. In several Reels, students used gestures, emojis, text overlays, or background visuals to compensate for limited grammar, and raters sometimes judged these performances as communicatively successful despite persistent morphological errors. From a multiliteracies perspective, this is not necessarily a deficit; Cope and Kalantzis (2015) argue that new literacies value “transformation of meaning across modes” rather than strict adherence to traditional correctness. Yet for programmes that still assess speaking according to conventional accuracy standards, the tension between multimodal success and grammatical accuracy needs deliberate pedagogical negotiation. The modest but real gains in accuracy observed here likely stem from the combination of repeated drafting, peer feedback, and targeted teacher comments in the caption and script stages. Future iterations of the intervention could embed more explicit micro-lessons on recurring grammatical issues drawn from the students' own Reels to make this connection even tighter.

A further layer of interpretation emerges when the results are viewed alongside recent work on short-form video platforms beyond Instagram. Annapis describes TikTok as “an educational tool to

improve English speaking skills among EFL students” because its short, repeatable clips let learners rehearse language without the prolonged exposure of long presentations (Annapi, 2024). Similarly, Yang (2020) reports that students using TikTok to practice English perceived the platform as both motivating and supportive of their confidence in language learning. The present study, however, foregrounds Reels not merely as a platform but as a structured multiliteracies environment in which students move through knowledge processes of experiencing, conceptualising, analysing, and applying (Dewi et al., 2023a). The combination of scripting, storyboarding, filming, editing, and sharing positions learners as designers rather than consumers, and this design orientation may help explain why the intervention appears to have had sustained effects rather than fading once the novelty of using Reels wore off. Journal entries from later weeks show students experimenting with more complex narrative structures, humour, shifts in perspective, and more deliberate audience targeting. These developments indicate that learners were not only repeating formulaic language but also gradually inhabiting more agentive, rhetorically aware speaking identities.

At the same time, the study’s limitations temper how broadly the findings can be generalised and point to structural issues that any Reels-based pedagogy must confront. A single intact class in one Indonesian university, working within a specific institutional timetable and infrastructure, cannot stand in for the extreme diversity of EFL contexts, and the absence of a control group means that some improvement might be attributable to maturation or concurrent coursework. Cohen et al. (2018) remind us that classroom-based interventions are inevitably “embedded in complex institutional and social contexts” that shape what counts as success, and this project is no exception. Unequal access to stable internet connections and sufficiently capable smartphones created practical barriers, even in an urban setting; several students relied on borrowed devices or campus Wi-Fi, which complicated their production schedules and occasionally limited the visual quality of their Reels. There is also the unresolved question of algorithmic visibility: some students felt discouraged when their public Reels attracted few views or likes, while others became preoccupied with chasing engagement metrics. These experiences mirror wider concerns that social media-based learning can inadvertently reinforce attention economies and self-comparison cultures rather than purely supporting language development (Pratiwi, 2023). Addressing such concerns may require explicit critical media literacy components that help learners read platform logics and detach their sense of achievement from algorithmic feedback.

Finally, the implications of the study point toward curricular integration rather than one-off experimentation. The gains in speaking and confidence, alongside evidence of deeper multimodal and audience awareness, suggest that Reels-based digital storytelling can function as an organising thread across multiple speaking courses, rather than a novelty activity confined to a single module. Dewi et al. (2023a) argue that digital storytelling enables students to “practise speaking in an authentic context, develop their language skills... and receive feedback from peers and teachers”, and the present findings support embedding such cycles of authentic production and feedback at several points in a programme. Carefully designed assessment rubrics that value multimodal design choices alongside traditional criteria could legitimise these practices within institutional cultures that still privilege monologic oral exams. At the same time, the study underscores the need for professional development that helps teachers move from merely assigning Reels to systematically scaffolding students’ multiliteracies work, as recommended in multiliteracies implementation research that highlights the centrality of teacher learning (Dewi et al., 2023b). Future research might extend this work by comparing different task types (narrative, argumentative, expository) within Reels-based storytelling, by tracking longer-term changes in spontaneous speaking outside the platform, or by examining collaborative Reels projects that distribute roles such as scriptwriter, camera operator, editor, and performer. Such extensions would clarify whether the gains observed here are primarily task-specific or whether they contribute to durable shifts in learners’ repertoires for speaking English in and beyond the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Instagram Reels-based digital storytelling can be productively integrated into a Basic Speaking course through a multiliteracies framework, with students demonstrating clear improvement in fluency, discourse organisation, confidence, pronunciation, and lexical range. The findings indicate that these gains were supported by the iterative nature of short-form video production, which encouraged rehearsal, self-monitoring, revision, and more deliberate multimodal design. The project also shifted students' understanding of speaking from a one-time classroom performance to an ongoing process of composing spoken meaning for real or imagined audiences. These results suggest that Reels can strengthen EFL speaking pedagogy when supported by explicit scaffolding, peer feedback, guided reflection, and assessment practices that recognise multimodal competence alongside linguistic performance. At the same time, uneven outcomes among lower-proficiency and less digitally confident students show the need for careful task design and stronger language support. Since the study was limited to one class in a single university over a relatively short period, further research is needed to test its longer-term impact across different contexts, task types, and learner backgrounds.

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