

Digital storytelling in English language teaching: A critical literature review of empirical trends and pedagogical gaps

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ABSTRACT

Research on digital storytelling (DST) in English language teaching (ELT) has grown rapidly. However, existing reviews often adopt an overly celebratory tone, creating a pedagogical gap by obscuring empirical weaknesses and digital inequities. To address this issue, this critical review evaluates a curated corpus of peer-reviewed articles published between 2012 and 2025. It interrogates the methodological robustness and theoretical grounding of current scholarship. Synthesizing the corpus reveals three key contributions: enhanced language proficiency, learner autonomy, and digital literacy. Nevertheless, these outcomes are frequently overstated due to short-term interventions and small convenience samples. The main limitation of this review stems from restricted data boundaries that exclude grey literature, affecting qualitative generalizability. Practically, these findings imply that educators must integrate DST into structured curricula with multimodal rubrics to solve real-world engagement issues. Socially, this review promotes equity by demonstrating how minimizing the digital divide prevents DST from reinforcing inequalities among marginalized students. Ultimately, this study guides future research toward longitudinal designs in under-resourced settings.

Keywords: critical pedagogy teaching, critical review, digital storytelling, English language teaching (ELT)

First Received:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
May 8 th , 2026	August 31 st , 2026	September 11 th , 2026	September 15 th , 2026

How to cite (in APA style):

Aminulloh, A., Machfudi, M. I., Ramendra, D. P., Mahbub, M. A., & Giffari, W. M. (2026). Digital storytelling in English language teaching: A critical literature review of empirical trends and pedagogical gaps. *Journal of Research on English and Language Learning (J-REaLL)*, 7(2), 628–644. <https://doi.org/10.33474/j-reall.v7i2.25396>

INTRODUCTION

Digital storytelling (henceforth DST) has emerged as a significant pedagogical innovation in English language teaching (ELT) over the past two decades. At its core, DST integrates the ancient human practice of storytelling with the multimodal affordances of digital technology, enabling learners to create narratives that combine text, image, sound, and video. The method has been lauded for enhancing student motivation, fostering creativity, and cultivating 21st-century literacies (Robin, 2008;

Yang & Wu, 2012). With the increasing emphasis on multimodal communication in a globalized and digitalized world, DST has been positioned as a particularly suitable pedagogical tool for language learning, where narrative, identity, and expression intersect with linguistic competence.

The enthusiasm surrounding DST in ELT is reflected in a growing body of research reporting a range of positive learning outcomes. Empirical studies have documented its potential to support language development, particularly in speaking and writing (Meletiadou, 2022; Yu & Wang, 2025), as well as learner autonomy and motivation (Ribeiro, 2015). Research has also highlighted DST's role in promoting digital literacy, as learners engage with multimodal forms of communication and technologically mediated learning environments (Jawarneh et al., 2023). Beyond these specific outcomes, the processes involved in DST may also engage several competencies commonly associated with the 4Cs of 21st-century skills, including communication, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking (Neokleous, 2022). These competencies are not necessarily examined or measured explicitly across all DST studies. Therefore, rather than assuming that DST automatically develops all four dimensions of the 4Cs, it is important to distinguish between the competencies that are directly evidenced in previous research and those that are theoretically or pedagogically associated with the DST process.

Despite its apparent promise, the existing literature on DST also raises several issues that warrant closer critical examination. Previous reviews have primarily mapped the applications, implementation practices, learning outcomes, and general trends of digital storytelling across educational and language-learning contexts (Wu & Chen, 2020; Rahman & Bakar, 2020; Ong & Aryadoust, 2023; Yu & Zeng, 2026). While these reviews have contributed substantially to establishing what has been studied and what outcomes have been reported, comparatively less attention has been given to bringing together three related questions concerning how the pedagogical value of DST is conceptualized, evidenced, and theoretically explained. First, the novelty of DST as a pedagogical tool has often been overstated. Narratives and project-based learning approaches have long been part of language education (Dooly & Sadler, 2016). The integration of digital technologies introduces additional multimodal affordances; however, it remains crucial to distinguish these affordances from the pedagogical processes inherent in storytelling itself. Second, claims about the effectiveness of DST require critical examination of the methodological robustness of the evidence on which they are based, particularly where studies rely on small-scale interventions, short-term projects, or self-reported data (Ong & Aryadoust, 2023). Third, theoretical engagement in DST literature is often superficial. While concepts such as autonomy and digital literacy are frequently invoked, they are rarely interrogated in depth or situated within broader educational theories.

The lack of critical engagement with these issues reflects a broader tendency in educational technology research to adopt celebratory narratives that emphasize potential while underplaying challenges and limitations (Selwyn, 2016). This review therefore adopts a critical stance, moving beyond descriptive accounts of DST to interrogate its pedagogical, methodological, and theoretical dimensions. Unlike systematic reviews, which emphasize exhaustive coverage and replicable procedures (Page et al., 2021), a critical review seeks to question assumptions, highlight gaps, and propose new directions (Snyder, 2019). This approach is particularly relevant for DST, where the pace of technological innovation demands cataloging of existing studies and critical reflection on their implications for pedagogy and equity.

Depending on the theoretical perspective, three lenses guide this critical review. They are not used merely to provide theoretical background; rather, each perspective provides a distinct basis for examining how DST is conceptualized, implemented, and interpreted across existing studies. The first lens is multiliteracies pedagogy (Dragonas et al., 2015), which emphasizes multimodal meaning-making, cultural diversity, and critical engagement in contemporary literacy practices. From this perspective, the review examines whether DST research treats multimodality merely as the combination of different modes of representation or also engages with its broader cultural, contextual, and critical dimensions. The second lens is socio-constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Prakash, 2023), which underscores the vital roles of social interaction, collaboration, and scaffolding

in the learning process. This lens is used to examine how DST studies conceptualize collaborative learning and whether interaction and scaffolding constitute meaningful components of the learning process rather than simply organizational features of digital storytelling projects. The third lens is critical digital pedagogy (Selwyn, 2016), which challenges the treatment of technology as a neutral pedagogical tool and draws attention to issues of power, access, agency, and inequality. This perspective enables the review to examine how DST research addresses the social and structural conditions surrounding digital technology use and whether such conditions are incorporated into explanations of its pedagogical value. Combined, these three lenses provide complementary perspectives for a critical examination of DST research. They highlight not only what the research reports, but also how its pedagogical processes and outcomes are conceptualized, and which theoretical dimensions require further development.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this article is to provide a critical literature review of DST in ELT, synthesizing empirical findings while interrogating their limitations. Specifically, this review aims to: (1) identify recurring themes and contributions of DST research in ELT, (2) critically examine the methodological robustness of existing studies, and (3) explore theoretical blind spots and underdeveloped dimensions in the literature. An integrated examination of these dimensions is essential; evaluating the pedagogical value of DST requires a simultaneous analysis of its distinctiveness, the robustness of its evidenced benefits, and its theoretical foundations. Consequently, an integrated examination enables this review to highlight established contributions in the literature, while simultaneously exposing critical gaps in DST's pedagogical processes, empirical evidence, and theoretical frameworks. Based on this critical synthesis, the review further identifies implications and directions for future research in DST and ELT.

By addressing these aims, the review seeks to move beyond celebratory accounts of DST to develop a more balanced and critical understanding of its role in ELT. Rather than dismissing DST as a passing trend or uncritically embracing it as a transformative pedagogy, this article argues for a middle ground: recognizing its affordances while also acknowledging its constraints. Such a perspective is necessary to guide educators and researchers in making informed decisions about integrating DST into language education in ways that are pedagogically meaningful, theoretically sound, and socially equitable.

METHOD

Research design

Grounded in the principles of epistemological reflexivity and interpretive critique, a robust research design in literature-based educational inquiries operates not merely as a mechanism for data aggregation, but as a critical tool to map conceptual trajectories, deconstruct systemic orthodoxies, and interrogate underlying ideological assumptions. Within the specific setting of digital storytelling (DST) paradigms in English language teaching (ELT), the exponential expansion of technology over the past decade demands a research design capable of navigating highly heterogeneous methodologies and diverse theoretical landscapes. However, conventional systematic or descriptive reviews in this domain face inherent structural limitations; their rigid procedural frameworks and checklist-driven syntheses frequently engender an overly celebratory, techno-optimistic narrative that masks empirical fragility and glosses over systemic socio-cultural inequities. This descriptive encapsulation directly weakens the implications for future research directions, leaving profound gaps regarding how subsequent studies can address digital equity, structural power relations, and pedagogical sustainability. To transcend these methodological constraints and carve out a more generative path forward for the field, the current study justifies the strategic adoption of a critical literature review design (Snyder, 2019). Consequently, this study operationalizes a critical review stance through a comprehensive, iterative qualitative thematic synthesis of a curated corpus spanning from 2012 to 2025, specifically designed to evaluate the empirical trends, theoretical alignments, and methodological rigor of DST integration within global ELT contexts.

Rationale for a critical review

The rationale for adopting a critical review approach stems from three main considerations. First, the body of research on DST in ELT is highly fragmented, with studies varying widely in terms of scope, methodology, and theoretical framing. An exhaustive systematic review risks producing an overly descriptive synthesis that fails to capture deeper tensions. Second, existing literature is heavily biased toward positive results, highlighting the need for a more critical evaluation of the evidence. Finally, the pace of technological change means that the relevance of older studies must be evaluated on empirical grounds and in terms of their ongoing theoretical and pedagogical significance. A critical review allows for this level of reflection.

Data sources and search strategy

The review commenced with a comprehensive search of five international academic databases, namely Scopus, Web of Science, Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, and ERIC. The rationale for selecting these specific databases stems from their complementary indexing strengths and specialized academic coverage. Scopus and Web of Science were utilized to ensure a high-quality global baseline, as they index peer-reviewed, high-impact journals across multidisciplinary fields, including educational technology. Taylor & Francis Online and SpringerLink were included to capture extensive, specialized publication lists from leading academic publishers known for cutting-edge digital learning research. Lastly, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) was selected since it represents the premier discipline-specific database for education, ensuring that relevant pedagogical and English language teaching literature was exhaustively covered. Boolean combinations of keywords such as “digital storytelling”, “English language teaching”, “learner autonomy”, “writing skills”, “speaking proficiency”, and “digital literacy” were used to identify relevant literature within these sources. The initial search yielded 94 studies published between 2012 and 2025. During the initial screening phase, 62 publications (consisting of non-peer-reviewed conference abstracts, book chapters, or opinion papers) were excluded, leaving 32 full-text articles to be assessed for eligibility.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To ensure a transparent, rigorous, and replicable selection process, clear screening parameters were applied to filter the initial search results. The corpus reduction from the initial 94 identified records to the final 10 selected studies progressed through three distinct sequential stages: identification, full-text assessment, and critical eligibility synthesis. In the first stage (identification), all 94 records were screened based on publication type and indexing status. At this point, 62 records were excluded because they were non-peer-reviewed sources, such as conference abstracts, book chapters, or opinion papers, leaving 32 full-text articles for deeper evaluation. In the second stage (full-text assessment), these 32 articles were read in full and measured against the inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria required that studies: (1) focus explicitly on the use of DST within ELT or EFL contexts; (2) report empirical findings, conceptual frameworks, or pedagogical evaluations; and (3) provide explicit descriptions of implementation procedures, reported outcomes, and encountered challenges to support an interpretive synthesis (Page et al., 2021). During this full-text assessment stage, 22 articles failed to meet these criteria and were excluded based on three specific reasons: the absence of empirical or pedagogical depth (50% of excluded full-texts, $n = 11$), an irrelevant research context outside the main ELT domain (31.82%, $n = 7$), and inadequate methodological clarity or missing measurable outcomes (18.18%, $n = 4$). By applying these parameters, a final corpus of 10 methodologically sound and pedagogically relevant peer-reviewed journal articles was retained for the critical synthesis. To ensure complete transparency, the step-by-step study selection process and the exact reasons for exclusion are systematically detailed in the following table.

Table 1*Study Selection Process*

Stage	Screening Phase	Number	Action and Specific Reasons for Exclusion
Stage 1	Initial Identification	94	Total records retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, Taylor & Francis, SpringerLink, and ERIC.
	First Screening	62	Excluded (n = 62): non-peer-reviewed publications, conference proceedings abstracts, book chapters, and opinion pieces.
Stage 2	Full-Text Assessment	32	Full-text peer-reviewed journal articles were assessed for eligibility against the inclusion criteria.
	Full-Text Exclusion	22	Excluded (n = 22) based on specific criteria: • Absence of empirical/pedagogical depth (50.00%, n = 11) • Irrelevant context outside ELT/EFL (31.82%, n = 7) • Inadequate methodological clarity / missing outcomes (18.18%, n = 4)
Stage 3	Final Corpus	10	Retained for critical qualitative synthesis. Peer-reviewed articles meeting 100% of the inclusion parameters.

Analytical framework

To maximize interpretive depth and eliminate selection bias, a clear distinction was maintained between the baseline eligibility criteria for corpus selection and the subsequent criteria used for critical evaluation. The framework did not automatically exclude studies for lacking an explicit theoretical framework or utilizing non-constructivist approaches; rather, these theoretical variations were treated as vital data points to be critically evaluated. The analysis was structured into three iterative stages, specifically mapped to answer the review's core research objectives. Initially, a Familiarization stage involved intensive close reading of the 10 selected studies to grasp their specific research aims and empirical contexts. Subsequently, a Thematic Coding stage was operationalized. In this stage, the criteria for evaluating 'methodological rigor' and 'theoretical framing' were systematically connected to the study's objectives through three distinct analytical dimensions: (1) pedagogical contributions: tying directly to objective 1 (identifying trends and contributions), text segments were coded for impacts on language proficiency, learner motivation, autonomy, and digital literacy. (2) methodological rigor: addressing objective 2 (examining methodological robustness), studies were evaluated based on objective parameters: sample size adequacy, intervention duration, research design validity (e.g., presence of control groups), and the reliability of data collection instruments (e.g., self-reports versus triangulated data). Studies with smaller samples or short-term designs were not excluded from the corpus, but the review systematically cataloged their limitations to assess the strength of the field's evidence base. (3) theoretical framing: directly serving objective 3 (exploring theoretical blind spots), this dimension evaluated the extent to which studies actively engaged with foundational educational frameworks. Although constructivism, multiliteracies, and critical digital pedagogy were the main benchmarks (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015; Selwyn, 2016), this review also included studies with alternative frameworks or no explicit theoretical stance. This approach allowed the review to systematically map the depth of theoretical engagement across the literature. Rather than disqualifying studies lacking explicit framing, their absence was treated as a critical pedagogical gap for subsequent discussion. Finally, a critical synthesis was conducted to synthesize and contrast these findings. By systematically linking methodological rigor and theoretical framing to the review's objectives, this framework provided the necessary qualitative mechanism to answer the final objective: proposing a transparent, systematic, and theoretically grounded future research agenda for DST in ELT (Ahmad, 2025; Alghamdi & Malekan, 2020; Zheng et al., 2024).

Justification of scope

The publication timeframe for this review was deliberately restricted to a specific period starting from 2012, with a strict cut-off date for database retrieval set in December 2025. The rationale for excluding literature published prior to 2012 stems from a major technological and pedagogical shift in English language education. Around 2012, the widespread accessibility of Web 2.0 technologies, user-

generated content platforms, and mobile learning applications fundamentally transformed DST from a specialized, desktop-bound multimedia production into an accessible, collaborative, and mobile-mediated classroom practice. Studies before 2012 largely focused on technical software navigation or basic computer-assisted language learning (CALL) motivations, which do not align with the modern multi-literacies and digital citizenship frameworks examined in this review. Furthermore, to address the status of newer publications, the database search was strictly concluded at the end of the 2025 publication year. Consequently, any studies published or indexed from early 2026 onward were not considered in this review. This predefined cut-off was methodologically necessary to lock the final corpus ($n=10$), ensuring a stable dataset for the subsequent three-stage qualitative synthesis and preventing continuous database updating from disrupting the analytical process. Limiting the scope to this distinct 2012–2025 window thus guarantees both historical depth, by tracing the evolution of modern DST from its Web 2.0 expansion to contemporary pedagogical reframing, and methodological control over the corpus integrity.

Distinction from systematic review

It is important to clarify how this critical review fundamentally differs from a systematic review in execution. Systematic reviews seek to minimize bias through rigid procedural transparency and replicability, often prioritizing inclusion checklists and strict PRISMA flow diagrams. While these features enhance procedural clarity, they frequently reduce literature analysis to a neutral, overly descriptive summary that glosses over deeper conceptual tensions. By contrast, this critical review foregrounds systematic interpretive critique to challenge the status quo of the field. Specifically, this study operationalized three core critiques across the selected corpus: (1) a methodological critique challenging the prevailing fragility of empirical evidence, which heavily relies on short-term interventions, small convenience samples, and self-reported measures; (2) a conceptual critique interrogating the superficial, unproblematized valorization of 'learner autonomy' and 'digital literacy' that ignores cultural specificities and institutional boundaries; and (3) a socio-political critique exposing the field's techno-optimistic blindness toward structural inequities, digital divides, and critical media ethics. Rather than presenting a neutral synthesis, this distinction underscores the epistemological positioning of the review: to offer a disruptive critical narrative that exposes theoretical blind spots, dismantles celebratory discourses, and highlights underexplored power relations within ELT settings.

Ethical consideration

Since this critical review focuses exclusively on the analysis of publicly available, peer-reviewed published literature, it did not involve direct intervention with human participants, animals, or the collection of institutional raw data. Consequently, formal institutional ethical clearance was not required. However, rigorous academic and ethical integrity were strictly maintained during the analytical process. Care was taken to ensure the accurate and transparent representation of the selected studies, avoiding selective quoting or distortion of the original authors' findings. Furthermore, balanced and objective critiques were applied across the corpus to ensure that the evaluation contributes constructively and ethically to the broader scholarly conversation in ELT.

FINDINGS

The period between 2012 and 2025 was selected because it traces the progression of DST research from early enthusiasm to critical reconsideration. In the foundational years, 2012–2016, DST was viewed as a motivational and innovative tool, though evidence was limited by small samples and weak theorization (Ribeiro, 2015; Yang & Wu, 2012). Research was dominated by short-term exploratory interventions and small-scale case studies. During 2017–2020, studies expanded to geographically and methodologically diverse contexts and connected DST with collaboration and digital citizenship, yet often treated autonomy uncritically. Most of the literature framed DST through task-based language teaching (TBLT) and social constructivism (Al Khateeb, 2019; Reinders & Benson, 2017). In addition,

the analysis broadened from individual skills to peer collaboration, learner autonomy, and early notions of digital citizenship. More recent work, 2021–2025, framed DST within multi-literacies pedagogy and 21st-century skills, highlighting critical thinking and intercultural competence while also acknowledging challenges of teacher readiness, digital equity, and sustainable integration. Specifically, this phase is clearly characterized by an emerging critical stance, questioning technical operationalization, highlighting teacher readiness, and scrutinizing digital equity, ethics, and systemic constraints in under-resourced contexts (Beazidou et al., 2024; Sapan, 2024).

This critical review synthesized findings across ten purposively selected empirical studies on digital storytelling in ELT, revealing three major thematic contributions: enhancement of language proficiency, promotion of learner autonomy, and development of digital literacy. Despite the apparent consistency of these themes across diverse geographical and educational contexts, a closer, critical examination reveals significant variability in the methodological rigor, theoretical grounding, and contextual responsiveness of the studies reviewed.

Multiple studies corroborate DST's potential to positively impact learners' language proficiency, particularly in speaking, writing, and vocabulary acquisition. For instance, Yang and Wu (2012) demonstrated that collaborative DST projects significantly enhanced speaking fluency and critical thinking capabilities among participants, aligning with constructivist learning paradigms that emphasize interaction and reflection. Similarly, Meletiadou (2022) reported notable improvements in academic writing skills and intercultural communicative competence through DST interventions. However, the predominance of short-term study designs, with limited longitudinal follow-up, raises questions about the durability and sustainability of such gains. The predominance of small-scale, non-randomized samples further impedes the generalizability of these findings.

Moreover, the studies rarely employed robust assessment frameworks that comprehensively evaluate multimodal communicative competence beyond linguistic accuracy. The predominance of quantitative gains often overlooks the nuances of learner engagement, narrative coherence, and critical language awareness that DST is theoretically posited to enhance. These lacunae illustrate a broader methodological fragility, where DST's contributions to language proficiency are proclaimed with insufficient empirical backing, warranting more robust experimental designs, mixed-methods approaches, and multi-dimensional assessments in future research.

DST is widely celebrated for fostering learner autonomy, agency, and motivation, as evidenced in Ribeiro's (2015) articulation of DST as a student-centered pedagogical tool that prioritizes personal expression and meaningful learner engagement. Al Khateeb (2019) further substantiated these claims by documenting Saudi EFL learners' development of digital citizenship and self-regulation through DST activities. Notwithstanding these positive reports, the conceptualization of autonomy in many studies suffers from over-simplification and lacks critical interrogation of the socio-cultural and institutional constraints that mediate learner independence.

Autonomy is often treated as a universally beneficial goal without recognition of how cultural expectations, educational norms, and power dynamics might circumscribe learners' capacity for self-directed learning. This theoretical oversight results in an ahistorical and decontextualized view of autonomy, whereby learner agency is uncritically valorized without grappling with structural inequities or pedagogical boundaries. Additionally, the assessment of autonomy tends to rely on self-reported measures of motivation or engagement, which may be susceptible to social desirability biases and do not necessarily capture deeper shifts in learner identity or critical consciousness.

The reviewed studies consistently identify DST as a conduit for enhancing digital literacy, particularly in fostering multimodal awareness, collaborative skills, and creativity in digital content production. For example, Neokleous (2022) and Yu and Wang (2025) highlighted learners' gains in navigating digital tools and engaging in cooperative storytelling practices that require coordination, planning, and shared authorship. However, the extant literature largely circumscribes digital literacy within technical competencies, with insufficient attention to critical dimensions such as media ethics, power relations, digital citizenship, and equitable access.

Such a narrow framing overlooks important sociocultural and political aspects of digital literacy, including issues of platform governance, algorithmic bias, and the digital divide that perpetuate educational inequities. The lack of robust, theoretically informed models for assessing digital literacy in DST contexts further weakens claims about its transformative potential. Moreover, pedagogical practices tend to prioritize digital skill acquisition at the expense of fostering critical media literacy or encouraging learners to challenge dominant narratives encoded in digital content.

While the three identified themes articulate key pedagogical affordances of DST in ELT, the critical review reveals substantial gaps in methodological rigor, theoretical depth, and contextual sensitivity. DST's contributions to language proficiency are promising yet under-evidenced beyond immediate intervention phases; learner autonomy is uncritically assumed rather than rigorously problematized; and digital literacy is often narrowly conceived, neglecting its broader critical and political implications.

These findings highlight the urgency of embedding DST research within multiliteracies and critical digital pedagogy frameworks that more fully address issues of equity, identity, and power. Future studies should prioritize longitudinal designs, mixed methodologies, and culturally responsive approaches that examine DST's impacts over time and across diverse learner populations. Furthermore, the development of innovative, multimodal assessment tools that balance linguistic, digital, and critical literacies is essential to advancing the field.

In sum, this synthesis underscores the need for a balanced appreciation of DST's pedagogical promises alongside a sober recognition of its current empirical and theoretical limitations. By adopting more nuanced, rigorous, and contextually attuned research practices, scholars and practitioners can better harness DST's transformative potential within the evolving landscape of English language teaching. For further details, we present the findings in the following table.

Table 2

Empirical Trends and Pedagogical Gaps in DST Research (2012–2025)

Author(s) & Year	Title	Focus / Findings (Empirical Trends)	Identified Gaps (Pedagogical Issues)
Yang & Wu (2012)	Digital storytelling for enhancing student academic achievement, critical thinking, and learning motivation: A year-long experimental study (Computers & Education)	Improved speaking fluency, motivation, and critical thinking through collaborative DST.	Short-term impact not tested beyond the study; no critical lens on equity or sustainability.
Ribeiro (2015)	Digital storytelling: An integrated approach to language learning for the 21 st century student (Teaching English with Technology)	Promoted personal expression, engagement, and student-centered learning.	Autonomy assumed as universally positive; lacks theoretical depth and cultural contextualization.
Christiansen & Koelzer (2016)	Digital Storytelling: Using Different Technologies for EFL (MEXTESOL Journal)	Demonstrated DST as a tool for multimodal literacy and language development.	Focused on digital skills; overlooked critical literacy dimensions such as ethics and equity.
Reinders & Benson (2017)	Research agenda: Digital learning beyond the classroom (Language Teaching)	Positioned DST within constructivist and task-based frameworks.	Lacked comparative evidence with other pedagogies (e.g., PBL, drama pedagogy).
Al Khateeb (2019)	Socially oriented digital storytelling among Saudi EFL learners (Interactive Technology and Smart Education)	Encouraged autonomy, collaboration, and digital citizenship in EFL classrooms.	Autonomy not problematized; access to digital tools not critically examined.
Neokleous (2022)	Fostering Digital Literacies in Primary English Language Education (Springer)	Improved awareness of multimodality, purpose, and audience in academic English.	Narrow framing of digital literacy as technical skills; limited attention to social/ethical dimensions.
Meletiadiou (2022)	Using Educational Digital Storytelling to Enhance Multilingual Students' Writing	Enhanced writing competence, vocabulary, gains.	Short-term design; no follow-up on sustainability of writing gains.

Author(s) & Year	Title	Focus / Findings (Empirical Trends)	Identified Gaps (Pedagogical Issues)
	Skills in Higher Education (IAFOR Journal of Education)	and intercultural competence.	
Beazidou et al. (2024)	Teachers' perceptions about digital storytelling and its pedagogical usage (Education 3-13)	Teachers observed higher learner motivation and self-efficacy in writing tasks.	Teachers lacked training; systemic constraints (time, curriculum) hinder implementation.
Sapan (2024)	Exploring the Impact of Digital Storytelling on Reading and Critical Thinking (International Journal of Modern Education)	Fostered reflective thinking and a deeper understanding of texts.	Context limited to motivation and comprehension; overlooked digital equity and access.
Yu & Wang (2025)	Using digital storytelling to promote language learning, digital skills and digital collaboration among English pre-service teachers (System)	Enhanced digital literacy, collaboration, and language skills among pre-service teachers.	Framed digital literacy in technical terms; neglected power, equity, and critical pedagogy.

This critical review synthesizes insights from ten peer-reviewed academic studies published from 2012 to 2025 that evaluate the pedagogical implications of DST in ELT. The review reveals three core themes across the literature: enhancement of language proficiency, promotion of learner autonomy, and development of digital literacy (Arthi & Gandhimathi, 2025; Meyers et al., 2013).

First, DST has shown a consistent positive impact on students' language development, particularly in speaking fluency, writing competence, and vocabulary acquisition (Christiansen & Koelzer, 2016; Meletiadou, 2022; Yang & Wu, 2012). These outcomes are frequently associated with increased engagement and the multimodal nature of DST, which supports both expressive and receptive language skills.

Second, several studies report that DST fosters learner autonomy and motivation through student-centered tasks that emphasize self-expression, reflection, and creative ownership of learning (Ribeiro, 2015; Beazidou et al., 2024; Al Khateeb, 2019). By positioning learners as active content creators, DST enhances their sense of agency and responsibility in the learning process.

Third, the integration of DST in ELT contexts has contributed significantly to students' digital literacy, including their understanding of audience, purpose, and multimodal communication strategies (Neokleous, 2022; Sapan, 2024; Yu & Wang, 2025). Furthermore, DST aligns with constructivist and task-based learning paradigms, offering pedagogical flexibility and relevance to contemporary classroom demands (Reinders & Benson, 2017).

The synthesis of academic studies demonstrates that DST holds significant pedagogical value in ELT by enhancing students' language proficiency, promoting learner autonomy, and fostering digital literacy. DST engages learners through multimodal, student-centered tasks that improve speaking, writing, and vocabulary skills and support motivation, self-efficacy, and critical thinking. Moreover, it aligns well with constructivist and task-based learning frameworks, offering flexibility and relevance for contemporary language classrooms. However, despite these promising findings, there remains a need for further empirical research, particularly longitudinal studies, exploring the long-term impact of DST, teacher preparedness, and implementation across varied educational contexts.

Methodological and theoretical constraints in DST scholarship

A critical synthesis illustrates that motivational and language improvements are reported in the included empirical studies. However, current DST scholarship demonstrates methodological weaknesses and theoretical limitations. Our findings revealed that most interventions are short-term and involve small convenience samples without control or comparison groups, limiting external validity and leaving long-term skill retention unaddressed (Meletiadou, 2022; Yang & Wu, 2012). In addition, most of the data comes from self-reported surveys and interviews. Therefore, the results may be affected by social desirability bias (Beazidou et al., 2024). Assessment practices also lack

validated, multidimensional, multimodal rubrics and tend to prioritise traditional linguistic accuracy over multimodal communicative competence (Neokleous, 2022).

In addition to these empirical limitations, the literature also evidences significant theoretical gaps. Socio-constructivist paradigms (Vygotsky, 1978) and multiliteracies pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015) are frequently cited, yet they are rarely applied in depth. Learner autonomy is frequently assumed as a natural result of digital creation, without considering socio-cultural norms, institutional constraints, or power dynamics (Al Khateeb, 2019; Ribeiro, 2015). Digital literacy is typically defined as the ability to use software, rather than as critical media literacy (Christiansen & Koelzer, 2016; Yu & Wang, 2025). By overlooking critical perspectives on digital pedagogy (Selwyn, 2016), current DST literature fails to address essential aspects of technology integration, such as digital equity, ethics, and the reproduction of socio-economic divides in under-resourced contexts (Sapan, 2024).

DISCUSSION

This critical discussion delves into four interrelated dimensions that cover pedagogical, methodological, theoretical, and contextual aspects that frame the current empirical and conceptual understandings of DST in ELT. By juxtaposing DST with established pedagogical models such as TBLT, project-based learning (PBL), and drama pedagogy, while critically investigating its methodological shortcomings, theoretical positioning, and contextual constraints, this assessment seeks to illuminate both the promise and the limitations of DST as an innovative educational practice within ELT. This comprehensive evaluation facilitates a nuanced understanding of DST's multifaceted role and offers insights into its effective integration and future research directions.

Pedagogical analysis

DST shares several pedagogical affordances with TBLT, PBL, and drama pedagogy, particularly in emphasizing learner-centeredness, authentic communication, creativity, and collaboration. TBLT focuses on meaningful language use through task completion, fostering real-world communicative competence (Ellis, 2003). PBL extends this by involving longer-term projects requiring problem-solving and interdisciplinary collaboration (Guo et al., 2020). Drama pedagogy leverages role-play and improvisation, fostering immersive experiential learning and identity exploration (Aris et al., 2025). DST intersects these approaches by combining narrative construction with multimodal digital tools, encouraging learners to craft personalized stories with linguistic and digital elements integrated (Robin, 2008). It additionally foregrounds multimodality, incorporating visual, auditory, and textual modes, offering a distinct experiential and expressive dimension not always explicit in TBLT or PBL (Setyono & Widodo, 2019). However, DST does not fundamentally redefine pedagogical paradigms; rather, it repackages foundational constructivist principles through digital media affordances (Moradi & Chen, 2019).

Compared to drama pedagogy, DST's narrative format provides structured storytelling scaffolding but may constrain improvisational spontaneity and embodied learning that drama facilitates. Unlike PBL's emphasis on extended inquiry and public product creation, many DST applications are relatively short-term and confined within classroom boundaries, limiting sustained engagement or interdisciplinary connections (Yang & Wu, 2012; Meletiadou, 2022). In sum, while DST offers motivational and multimodal richness, it remains pedagogically consonant with existing student-centered and creative learning frameworks rather than a radical departure. Its transformative potential lies in nuanced integration within broader curriculum designs that value authentic tasks, reflection, and multimodal literacy rather than mere technological novelty.

Methodological analysis

Methodological rigor in DST research exhibits critical shortcomings that undermine the strength and generalizability of its pedagogical claims. Most reviewed studies employ small, convenience-based samples lacking randomization or control groups, severely limiting external validity (Ribeiro, 2015; Al

[Khateeb, 2019](#)). Such small-scale designs impede statistical power and increase vulnerability to bias, constraining the robustness of conclusions drawn.

Additionally, interventions are frequently short-term, spanning days to a few weeks, which restricts evaluation of the sustainability of observed gains in language proficiency, autonomy, or digital literacy ([Yang & Wu, 2012](#); [Meletiadou, 2022](#)). The scarcity of longitudinal follow-up studies leaves unanswered questions about how deeply and enduringly DST impacts learners.

A dominant reliance on self-reporting instruments further aggravates validity concerns. Surveys and questionnaires measuring learner motivation, engagement, or autonomy are susceptible to social desirability bias and may not capture complex, authentic behavioral or cognitive changes ([Al Khateeb, 2019](#); [Yu & Wang, 2025](#)). Few studies adopt triangulated data sources such as classroom observations, linguistic performance analysis, or digital artifact review, which would enhance interpretive depth and reliability.

Experimental designs often lack appropriate comparison conditions, for instance, contrasting DST with typical instruction rather than other innovative pedagogies like TBLT or drama. This restricts the ability to isolate DST's unique contributions or examine its comparative efficacy ([Yang & Wu, 2012](#)). Taken together, these methodological limitations call for future research employing larger, randomized samples, mixed methods combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, and longitudinal frameworks to capture the nuanced, evolving impacts of DST.

Theoretical analysis

A salient theoretical gap in DST research is its prevailing superficial treatment of digital literacy and learner autonomy, often reduced to tool proficiency or self-expression without critical interrogation. Few studies adequately situate DST within multiliteracies pedagogy, which expands literacy beyond linguistic competence to encompass multimodal, cultural, social, and critical dimensions of meaning-making in digital contexts ([Cope & Kalantzis, 2000](#)).

By neglecting critical digital pedagogy frameworks, DST research risks perpetuating techno-optimistic discourses that uncritically endorse digital skills without addressing how socio-political structures mediate access and representation. Critical digital literacy involves producing digital content and analyzing and challenging dominant narratives, digital divides, and ethical concerns ([Pangrazio et al., 2020](#)).

Similarly, the construct of learner autonomy is often treated as a priori positive without reflecting on its cultural specificity or structural constraints. Critical perspectives highlight how autonomy intersects with institutional power, cultural norms, and socio-economic factors shaping learners' agency. Theoretical blindness to these dimensions contributes to an ahistorical, decontextualized portrayal of DST's benefits. Consequently, future DST scholarship must deepen theoretical engagement by integrating multiliteracies and critical pedagogy lenses. This would entail designing research frameworks that examine how DST fosters technical skills or learner motivation and how it can promote critical consciousness, equitable participation, and transformative learning in diverse educational settings.

Contextual analysis

Contextual constraints critically condition DST's pedagogical implementation and outcomes. Inequitable access to digital infrastructure, hardware, and reliable internet connectivity in under-resourced or rural settings poses fundamental barriers to DST integration ([Selwyn, 2016](#); [Fitzgerald et al., 2024](#)). Without addressing digital divides, DST risks reproducing educational inequities, privileging learners in well-equipped environments while marginalizing others.

Teacher preparedness further complicates DST adoption. Many educators report insufficient training or confidence in integrating digital storytelling effectively, limiting fidelity of implementation and pedagogical innovation ([Beazidou et al., 2024](#)). Professional development tailored to building digital pedagogical skills, curriculum alignment, and assessment literacy is essential to realize DST's full potential.

Moreover, systemic factors such as curricular rigidity, assessment mandates, and institutional digital policies may constrain teachers' capacity to embed DST meaningfully. These contextual barriers emphasize the need for multi-level stakeholder engagement, infrastructural investment, and policy support to foster sustainable DST practices beyond isolated projects. In this light, critical DST research should probe learner outcomes and contextual dynamics shaping access, equity, and scalability. Investigations into how DST might serve as a democratizing tool or conversely exacerbate inequalities are urgently needed.

Assessment of digital storytelling in ELT

Digital Storytelling offers several benefits in ELT, from enhancing language skills to promoting student engagement and digital literacy. However, its implementation also comes with challenges, such as time demands, technology access, and assessment difficulties (Padmadewi & Artini, 2020). The following assessment outlines the key strengths and limitations of DST across five critical areas in ELT (Bacon, 2017; Ghimire, 2023).

Table 3

Strengths and Limitations of Digital Storytelling in ELT

Aspect	Strengths	Limitations
Language Skills	Integrates all four skills	May neglect accuracy if poorly guided
Motivation	High student engagement	Time consuming
Digital Literacy	Builds 21 st century skills	Technology access issues
Pedagogy	Encourages active learning	High demand on teacher expertise
Assessment	Fosters creativity and reflection	Difficult to assess objectively

Strengths

DST provides a dynamic and integrated approach to language learning by meaningfully combining the four essential language skills. The process of scripting a story encourages learners to engage in careful composition, organization, and revision, thereby strengthening their writing proficiency (Barkhoda et al., 2025; Zhou, 2023). Simultaneously, recording voiceovers provides an authentic context for practicing pronunciation, intonation, and fluency in speaking. Activities such as peer reviewing and analyzing digital stories enhance listening and reading comprehension, cultivating receptive skills. Through embedding all language modes within a single communicative task, DST fosters holistic language development in an engaging and purposeful learning environment (Venditti et al., 2023).

This tool significantly boosts learner motivation and engagement by offering personally relevant and creatively rich experiences (Evans et al., 2023; Prasetya et al., 2024). Learners are given the opportunity to share their own stories, which increases task authenticity and emotional involvement. The inclusion of multimedia elements such as images, music, and effects transforms language learning into an enjoyable and expressive process. This creative freedom elevates learner satisfaction and leads to greater persistence and deeper involvement, resulting in improved learning outcomes. Motivation driven by meaningful content thus becomes a powerful catalyst for language acquisition (Chinpakdee, 2024; Dooly & Sadler, 2016).

Another major advantage of this tool is its contribution to the development of multiliteracies and digital competence, essential in 21st-century education. Beyond improving traditional linguistic skills, students also cultivate visual and media literacy, along with information and communication technology (ICT) proficiency (Nation, 2008; Mouboua et al., 2024). Through the process of designing and producing digital narratives, learners are exposed to the conventions of multimodal communication and are better prepared to navigate real-world digital environments. These competencies support broader educational goals such as critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving, core components of modern literacy frameworks.

DST promotes collaborative learning and reflective practice, both of which are vital to communicative language teaching (CLT). Many DST projects are group-based, requiring learners to

plan, storyboard, and produce content together, which fosters teamwork, communication, and a sense of community. This interaction supports peer learning and aligns with social-constructivist principles. At the same time, the reflective dimension of DST encourages learners to revisit personal experiences, select meaningful moments, and articulate them coherently. This metacognitive engagement supports deeper learning at both cognitive and affective levels, reinforcing long-term language development (Karimah et al., 2025; Van Horn, 2024).

Limitations

The implementation of DST in language classrooms faces significant challenges due to its reliance on technology and resources (Jain, 2019; Gosavi & Arora, 2022). Successful DST projects require access to digital devices such as computers or smartphones, a stable internet connection, and multimedia editing software. In under-resourced settings, particularly in low-income areas, students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds may struggle to access these tools, resulting in inequality in educational opportunities. This resource gap creates logistical challenges, potentially hindering the full inclusion of DST as an effective language learning tool and exacerbating existing educational disparities (Fitzgerald et al., 2024).

In addition to resource dependency, the integration of DST presents challenges related to teacher expertise and workload. Teachers must possess proficiency in language pedagogy and the technical knowledge to use various multimedia tools for creating and assessing digital stories (Sari et al., 2022). The planning, supervision, and assessment of DST projects add substantial demands to an educator's workload, which can lead to teacher burnout if adequate support and professional development are not provided. Furthermore, without sufficient training, teachers may implement DST superficially, failing to fully harness its potential for enhancing language skills and critical thinking (Yang & Wu, 2012).

The time-intensive nature of DST projects further complicates their integration into traditional curricula. The process of brainstorming, scripting, editing, and finalizing a digital story typically spans several weeks, making it difficult to fit into short-term courses or rigid academic programs that prioritize exam preparation. In such settings, the time required for DST may conflict with the pace of curricula focused on content delivery and assessment, thereby limiting its applicability in highly structured environments.

Synthesizing methodological, theoretical, and conceptual gaps in DST

Although many empirical studies on DST in the ELT field highlight immediate improvements in motivation and language skills among learners, a critical review reveals several important constraints. From a methodological perspective, much of the research relies on short intervention periods. It also uses small, non-random samples that often lack appropriate control groups, making it difficult to generalize findings. There is also a reliance on self-reported data, which can introduce bias, and on print-based assessment criteria that do not adequately capture students' ability to communicate using multiple modes and technologies. Theoretically, while scholars frequently reference concepts such as socio-constructivism and multiliteracies, these frameworks are rarely applied in depth. Instead, learner autonomy is often treated as an inevitable outcome of DST projects, rather than as a complex, socially and culturally negotiated process. Furthermore, much of the literature equates digital literacy with basic technical proficiency (e.g., knowing how to use software) without addressing deeper aspects of digital pedagogy. As a result, critical issues including ethical considerations and the structural challenges encountered by teachers and learners in resource-constrained English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts are often neglected.

CONCLUSION

Through a multifaceted critical lens, this review concludes that while digital storytelling (DST) in English language teaching (ELT) offers valuable pedagogical, motivational, and multimodal affordances, its empirical and theoretical foundations require substantial strengthening to fulfill its

transformative educational promises. The primary limitation of this study stems from its restricted search parameters, which excluded non-peer-reviewed literature, alternative language databases, and studies published after the December 2025 cut-off date, potentially limiting the inclusion of very recent emerging technologies or marginalized grey literature. To overcome these empirical boundaries and advance the field, future research must transition toward rigorous longitudinal designs with larger randomized samples and develop robust, context-sensitive assessment models to evaluate the multimodal nature of DST. Ultimately, embedding multiliteracies and critical digital pedagogy frameworks into future designs is crucial to address underlying technological inequities and ensure that DST evolves from a celebratory technological novelty into a meaningful, equitable, and sustainable pedagogical approach in the global landscape of language education.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT:

There is no conflict of interest among the authors.

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