

# Enhancing English Proficiency and 21st Century Skills in Tourism Through Digital Storytelling: A Pedagogical Study

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## Abstract

This study investigates the integration of digital storytelling (DS) as a pedagogical tool within an English for Tourism course for tourism students at a Japanese university. With the primary objective of enhancing students' readiness for careers in a dynamic, technology-driven tourism industry, the research builds upon existing literature on DS's effectiveness in language learning and skill development. The study posits DS within the evolving educational landscape, emphasizing its potential to cultivate critical 21st-century skills, such as collaboration, creativity, adaptability, and digital literacy. Students produced DS projects focussing on key tourism trends, such as animation location and wellness tourism, critically analysing their impacts on local communities and broader global contexts. Overtourism emerged as a recurring theme, with students providing actionable solutions to mitigate its challenges.

The methodology involved a 14-week group project supplemented by reflective surveys to assess language proficiency and key skill acquisition. Results indicate significant progress in digital literacy, teamwork, and critical thinking, although challenges in communication skills, particularly fluency and pronunciation remain. The findings underscore the necessity for continued curricular innovation, incorporating emerging technologies like artificial intelligence to align with industry demands. This research highlights the transformative potential of DS in fostering authentic language use and vocational preparedness, offering valuable insights for future pedagogical practices.

## Introduction

This study explores the integration of a digital storytelling assignment into the curricula of English language programs in the field of tourism at a Japanese university - the primary objective is to enhance students' readiness for their future careers in the tourism industry. This research seeks to build upon extensive inquiry into the application of digital storytelling as a language learning task

and furthermore aims to reframe, expand, and advance the discourse within the context of an ever-evolving professional landscape, heavily influenced by rapidly progressing technology and artificial intelligence (AI).

Considerable research spanning from the 1990s to the present day has explored the role and potential of multimedia and digital storytelling as tools to cultivate 21st-century key competencies and its positive impact upon second language learning. However, in the specific context of higher education in Japan, in these very rapidly changing times - it is apparent that there remains a dearth of comprehensive research in this area – specifically in the field of English for Special Purposes/ Tourism.

Continued investigation into tourism task-based learning, facilitated by digital storytelling, is anticipated to encourage curricular revisions at the micro-level of educational institutions. Moreover, it is crucial to raise awareness, particularly among educators, of the necessity to advance scholarly discourse concerning the integration of artificial intelligence tools. This progression is essential for the revision of pedagogical strategies, ensuring a more adept preparation and empowerment of students for the contemporary professional landscape.

## **Background**

At the outset of the 21st century, the integration of digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool within educational settings garnered increasing attention due to its potential to enhance English language proficiency, motivation and engagement. (Smeda et al., 2014; Nishioka, 2016) and furthermore to cultivate essential 21st century vocational and technological competencies (van Laar et al., 2017).

### **Emerging Technologies, Evolving Digital Stories**

During these initial stages, the pedagogical use of digital storytelling, characterized by its combination of multimedia elements, demonstrated promise in promoting language learning that is both authentic (Barnes et al., 2012) and engaging (Hegland, 2007). Since its inception during the late 1990s and through the 2000s much inquiry has been undertaken into the potential of DS as a tool that engages not only the students, but the teacher as well (Robin, 2008). With the ever-evolving emergence of new technologies during the early 2000s DS enabled educators to provide more variations in their teaching approaches (Van Gils, 2005) and thus further differentiating variations in DS genre, production and creation (Garrety, 2008). The continued growth of the internet, software tools and social media platforms offered a powerful framework for students of English language to create digital narratives and use a second language actively and meaningfully (McLellan, 2008).

### **Diversification, Accessibility and Student Agency**

The progression of user-friendly tools, mobile devices, and open-source software/applications has facilitated and aided students in their creative processes. Academic exploration has evolved beyond examining the potential educational benefits of digital technologies to exploring strategies for students to effectively use a more diverse array of available tools (McLellan, 2008). Concurrently, the emergence of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has not just facilitated easier access to social sharing and the creation of second language stories, perspectives and narratives, but has also lessened the financial obstacles linked to these activities (Oduor et al., 2016). Given the increase of multimedia alternatives, the concept of usability emerged as pivotal, prompting an escalated exploration of the actual user experience itself (Alexander, 2011). This trajectory prompted the formulation of more precise methodologies and an enhanced or alternative emphasis on articulating voice and message (Hartsell, 2017). Consequently, creators found it important to conceptualize, deliberate and critique their creative projects, fostering improved collaborative engagement in the given pursuit (Peng, 2017).

Educators universally acknowledge the significance of digital storytelling pedagogy, not only for the enhancement of linguistic abilities, but also for the cultivation of group collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, student/individual agency, motivation and joyful learning (Niemi et al., 2019) – These attributes are inherently interconnected with the competencies commonly referred to as 21st-century vocational skills.

### **Future Directions**

The current state of pedagogy related to Digital Storytelling (DS) finds itself in a thought-provoking juncture with calls to reassess what it means in the academic discussion. (Liguori et al., 2023). The rate of scholarly discourse appears to be slowing down, whilst the rate of progress is hastening. With that in mind, this research intends to aid and add to the discussion – albeit specifically in the context of a tourism content based English language class. Furthermore, this research finds itself uniquely positioned in the Japanese higher education system – with specific cultural nuances to be consider and evaluated.

The advent of innovative technologies such as Virtual Reality/Augmented Reality (VR/AR) and, more notably, Artificial Intelligence (AI) have the potential to become impactful tools within the creative process (Rebolledo Font De La Vall & González Araya, 2023). In the realm of generative language models, platforms such as ChatGPT, Bing, and Bard have the potential to facilitate and support learners throughout their studies – specifically in the context of writing and content creation. (Godwin-Jones, 2022).

The tourism sector has adapted in response to technological advancements, particularly in the realm of global advertising and the marketing of key tourist destinations. Augmented Reality (AR)

and Virtual Reality (VR) have proven highly beneficial in fostering cultural engagement and advancing the promotion of various locales (De La Nube Aguirre Brito, 2015). Within the specific scope of this study, the introduction and application of new technologies via digital storytelling are strategically aimed at enhancing students' employability and augmenting their knowledge pertaining to the intricacies of the tourism industry.

On a macro level, such further enquiry into the fusing of AI tools as a means of creativity and language use might serve as a catalyst for scholars to reconceptualize and restructure the role of DS within the language classroom and to anticipate the evolving requirements of employers in the 21st century.

### **Digitally 'Sharing' Japanese Cultural Tourism Stories**

Numerous justifications exist for this research endeavor, tailored specifically for students majoring in tourism at a Japanese university. The fundamental rationale behind this pursuit is rooted in the necessity to provide tourism students with an educational environment that mirrors and adapts to the current industry, in terms of technology and communicative skills, thereby affording them a more authentic and up-to-date learning experience.

Previous industry studies point out that DS of cultural tourism insight, explanation, persuasion and opinion can effectively enhance the motivation of users/consumers to visit and experience such locations (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2015). Furthermore, DS imparts and may indeed promote cultural values and sustainability (Cahyani et al., 2023) thus in turn this may afford tourists a sense of connection with local communities (Lambert, 2018). Raising awareness of these techniques and developing cross-cultural understanding, gives consumers and end users a personalized account of the place they are visiting (Pascale et al., 2017). Raising awareness of the positives of DS as a communication/promotional/marketing tool and building such skills, collaboratively, amongst students is imperative to prepare effective and valued workers within in the industry (Chan, Brown & Ludlow, 2013).

### **A Tool for Language Development**

Digital storytelling functions as a mediational tool that facilitates language production. Research demonstrates that the process of creating short, multimedia videos enable students to engage in creative English language use (Laely et al., 2024). Multiple studies highlight the advantages of digital storytelling to foster more authentic language production (Nurhikmah, 2024, Charpin, 2023, Akdoğan, 2023). Furthermore, Kim et al. (2018) argue that the production process enhances students' awareness of audience engagement, prompting them to craft compelling narratives to achieve improved outcomes. This project seeks to build upon these promising findings by steering the research focus towards fostering the development of 21st-century skills through the

process of language acquisition and enhancement.

## **Task and Procedure**

Digital storytelling (DS) is a pedagogical approach that integrates multimedia elements such as video, text, images, audio and interactive features into cohesive narratives. It serves as an innovative tool to enhance second language learning by guiding learners to use authentic language use, stimulate creativity, and raise awareness of the audience to which they are speaking to. In the context of second language teaching, DS enables students to practice and apply vocabulary, express opinions, and support their reasoning using real-world examples. For instance, in this study, students created digital stories focusing on a wide range of tourism issues and topics, incorporating key tourism terminology and course input language. Students were guided to frame their narratives with narrative hooks to engage viewers, support their ideas with well-reasoned arguments, and craft impactful conclusions. This process not only fostered linguistic development but also encouraged deeper learning and engagement with course content as well as greater awareness of the target audience needs. By combining these elements, DS becomes an effective medium for enhancing both language proficiency and 21st-century skills in a dynamic, authentic and meaningful way.

The task was to produce a digital story on a feature of Japanese tourism of choice. Fundamentally the study aimed to explore the effectiveness of creating digital story as an authentic expression of English language and how might this process better enable students to practice and display the 21<sup>st</sup> century key skills that inherently needed to equip graduates for their future careers in the tourism sector. To this end the two research questions aligned in

### **Language Proficiency**

*'How does the creation of digital stories on tourism influence the development of English language proficiency among students preparing for careers in the tourism sector?'*

### **21st-Century Skills**

*'How does the process of creating digital stories on tourism contribute to the development of key 21st-century skills among students in the tourism industry?'*

The prerequisites of creating the digital story and reflections on the key skills needed to effectively proceed with the task aligned in the following.

### **Language and DS Guidelines:**

*1. A clear story 'type'. The following options were offered - opinion, persuasion/promotion, explanation and call to action.*

- 2. The DS should feature a 'hook' or an impactful start to attract and engage the audience.*
- 3. The DS should incorporate multimedia elements at the student's choice - text, graphics, still photography, moving imagery, BGM, audio, ASMR and commentary.*
- 4. The DS should consider the power of voice, tone, diction and inflection.*
- 5. The students should try to 'personalize' the DS with reference to their own or others' lived experience and how these stories are connected to the tourism feature.*
- 6. The DS, in the creation process, should consider the economy of language and balance of media to better effectively communicate the central message.*
- 7. The DS should have a dramatic, thought-provoking, impactful conclusion.*
- 8. The DS should be 5 - 7 minutes in length.*

### **Key 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills**

In the process, students were required to use English creatively, impactfully, and authentically to convey their message. Additionally, they reflected on essential skills for effectively completing the term's group work. These key skills guided students throughout the process, aiming to raise awareness of the importance of these attributes for their future career development:

- 1. Collaboration and Leadership*
- 2. Creativity and Critical Thinking*
- 3. Adaptability and Digital Literacy*
- 4. Cultural Awareness*

As part of the in-class course curriculum, the students in class developed week by week a corpus of communicative strategies and vocabulary that enabled them to discuss ideas and develop deeper critical understanding on tourism issues. A language resource folder was made available to the participants on specific tourism terminology and vocabulary. To aid the process of video production and creation a further shared resource was compiled that offered students a wealth of AI tools that could assist with the creative process and make the production process more efficient should they chose to utilize such tools.

A global audience was imagined for the students, comprising of viewers who have no prior knowledge of Japan or Japanese language. This approach aimed to guide the participants towards considering the international community and to encourage critical and objective thinking about their own culture and its perceived global interpretations.

The study was conducted with three 1st year English communication classes of mixed gender with a class size of approximately 25. Also, the study included two second year English for Tourism classes, also of the same size and demographic. The total number of participants in this project was 118. The digital story was set as a group task comprising of 3 to 4 members in each group, it was administered as an 'out of class' fourteen-week task. The students were offered weekly guidance, checklists, meetings, and instruction on how best to achieve the task

prerequisites. Three reflection surveys were set during the process as a reflective task for the students to give feedback on the process and to assess their input and performance. These surveys gathered both quantitative and qualitative data.

## **Methodology**

### **Data Collection and Methodology**

Over the course of this study, the sample in this project provided timely reflective surveys to ascertain their perceptions, progress, and achievements towards the digital story task itself. From the view of the author/main researcher the ontological undertakings were subjective/ and or interpretative – with the aim of abductively arriving at better research design throughout the process.

### **Semi-Sequential Data Retrieval**

The study set out three reflection tasks per class. At the outset in reflection one - participants familiarized themselves with the process of project based critical thinking and addressed the issues they have encountered during the first weeks of the task. The reflection questions pertained to the transfer of course input language to the task and the key skills they thought they were and were not developing. Data was collected in quantitative form thorough Likert scale responses.

For reflection 2, students were again asked to review the key skills that they thought they had or hadn't been displaying though the process of the group task. In the final reflective task 3, students were asked to respond in short paragraph form and evaluate their work, the skills they had learned and which they thought most important to task achievement.

The sample of responses for the reflections were uneven with some participants neglecting to complete the survey - the responses ranged from 90 to 131 across the three reflection tasks.

## **Results and Discussion**

The students explored a range of potential topics that appealed to them. To illustrate the work produced, some common choices made were animation location tourism, over-tourism, and eco-tourism. Specifically, one group examined the impact of over-tourism on Kyoto's historic sites, integrating course input vocabulary such as 'preservation', 'initiatives' and 'preservation'. During the semester the students analysed and researched case studies of overtourism (Kyoto and Kamakura featuring often) and used these insights to create narratives in their videos. Furthermore, students transferred the language skills practiced in their class discussions, such as expressing opinions and supporting them with reasoning and relevant tourism examples. For instance, students



justified their proposed solutions to over-tourism by referencing real-world strategies such as implementing better infrastructure or promoting alternative destinations. Similarly, another group created an explanation video on eco-tourism by showcasing a rural area's efforts to promote green initiatives in Yakushima, employing course input vocabulary such as 'sanctuary' and 'vibrant' whilst using notional functional language to express their opinions clearly. By integrating course-specific terminology, and applying real-world scenarios, students synthesized academic content with creative storytelling techniques, producing authentic and meaningful work.

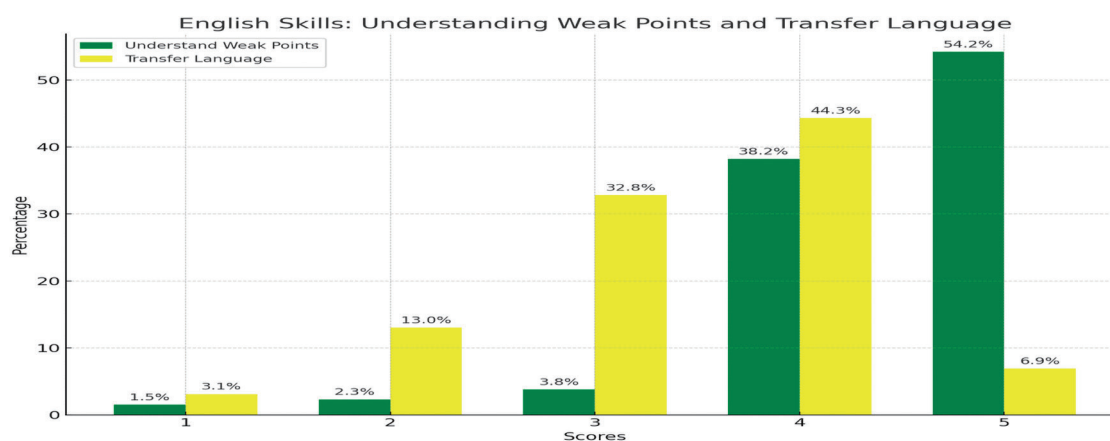
### Reflection Period 1

To give more precise context, for the initial stage only, example questions in reflection through weeks 1 to 4 aimed to gather data on the following prompts. 131 Respondents answered in Likert form from 5 (strong agreement) to 1 (strong disagreement).

### Language Development

The responses to statements 1 and 2 are illustrated in Figure 1. Statement 1: *'I understand my weak points in English, and I want to focus on improving them - even though it is difficult'*.

Figure 1



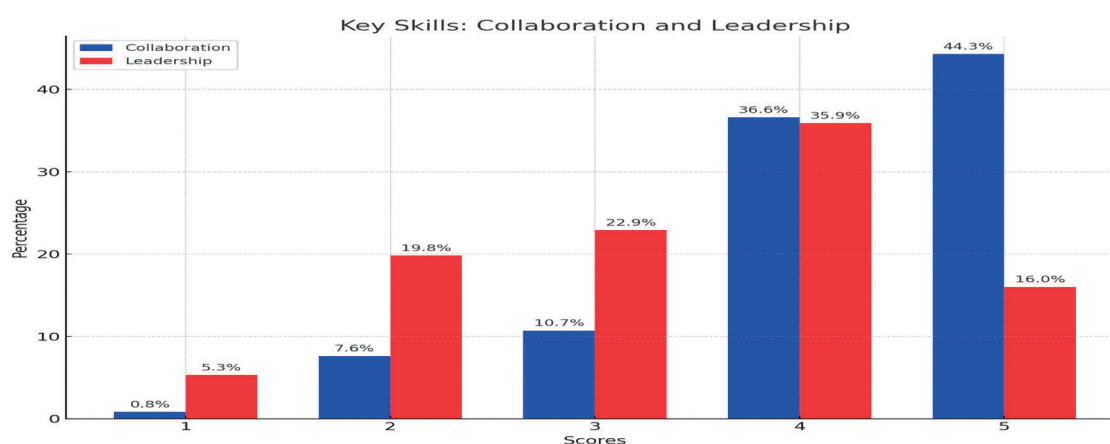
The chart indicates that the majority of respondents preferred to focus on the areas of English which they deemed they were lacking with 92% of participants answering affirmatively. This gave hope that the task itself would offer an opportunity for students to utilize this group work task as a way for them to proactively and critically take control of their learning. Statement 2: *'I can transfer/ use the language we learn in class to the DS we are creating.'* Responses to statement 2 suggest that the language input in class was appropriate for the task and the language resources available to the students enabled them to meaningfully transfer to their own authentic work with 51% percent in agreement to the prompt. A third of respondents (33%) replied indifferently - this may be due to the

early stages of the task and most groups had not yet begun to fully develop the spoken/textual content.

### **Key Skills, Collaboration and Leadership**

The responses to statements 3 and 4 concerning collaboration and leadership are illustrated in Figure 2. **Statement 3: Collaboration.** *'I was able to collaborate with my group members at the first stage and listen to / and give my opinions on what to do.'*

Figure 2



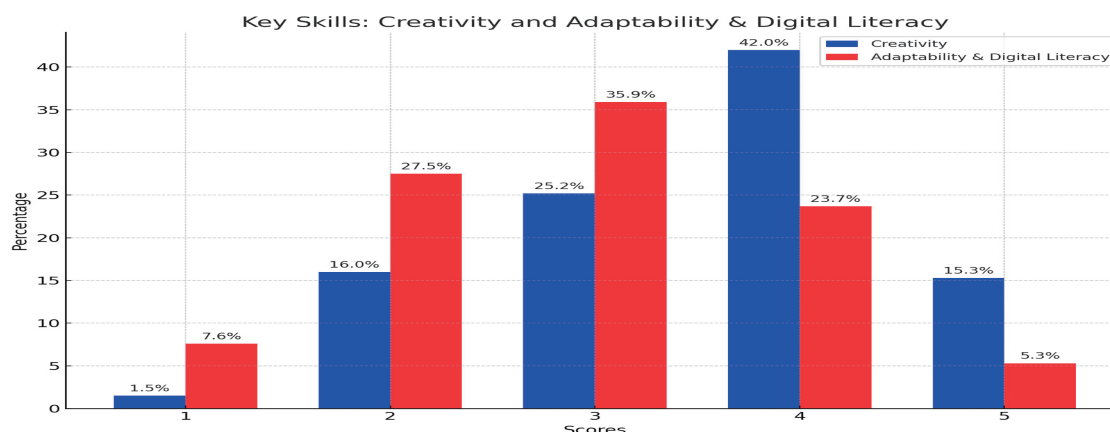
The sample provided very strong responses in agreement to the prompt with 80.9% answering in agreement. The nature of the course input language at that stage of the term (expressing and supporting opinions) appears to have played a significant role in fostering a collaborative learning environment, potentially influencing the group dynamics at the initial stage. Additionally, anecdotal observations suggest enhanced group cohesiveness and increased motivation to engage with the task.

**Statement 4: Leadership.** *'I am speaking up and making efficient decisions.'* In consideration of the 'groupthink' dynamic often observed among Japanese university students, the distribution of leadership scores suggests that while many are viewed as competent leaders, the variability reflects their difficulty in breaking away from conformity. The relatively high mid-range scores indicate that while students have leadership potential, they may struggle with consistently asserting themselves, especially when critical decisions are needed to keep a project on track during its early stages.

### **Key Skills, Adaptability/Digital Literacy and Creativity**

The responses to statements 5 and 6 are illustrated in Figure 3. **Statement 5: Adaptability and Digital Literacy.** *'I have researched / learned of some new ways/tools to create our DS'.*

Figure 3



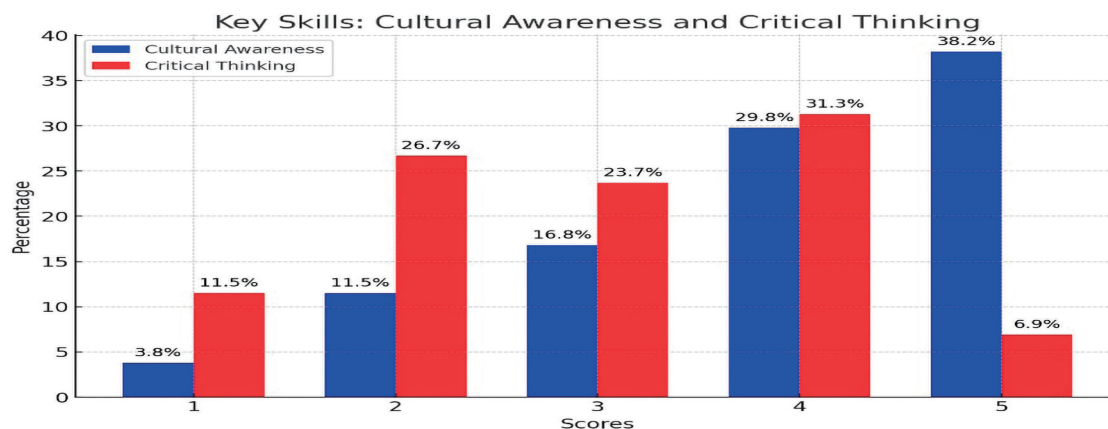
The students were given a resource of digital tools they could explore and try to use to aid the creative/productive process. The results indicate that many Japanese university students have limited digital literacy, particularly in scores 2 and 3. This task and process may better prepare them for the 21st-century workplace, where proficiency in evolving technologies is becoming increasingly essential.

**Statement 6: Creativity.** *'I feel I am contributing to this video creatively'*. In review of the statement, it can be deduced that the students' creativity levels are varied. This suggests that while many students might have a strong creative foundation, they may still benefit from further development. Engaging in projects like creating digital story videos can enhance their creativity even further, while also equipping them with essential digital skills. This dual focus will better prepare them for the demands of the 21st-century workplace, where creativity and digital literacy are critical.

#### **Key Skills, Critical Thinking and Cultural Awareness**

The responses to statements 7 and 8 are illustrated in Figure 4. **Statement 7: Critical Thinking.** *'I tried to express the negatives / possible downsides of ideas so we could find a better way'*.

Figure 4



The statement intends to ascertain the participants' perceptions of their critical thinking skills displayed during the task process. Notably answers erred to neither strong agreement nor disagreement. This may suggest that many students are unfamiliar with critiquing one's or others work or may not have fully developed critical thinking abilities, likely due to an education system that does not prioritize this skill. It is hoped that through constant self-reflective activities and progress meetings with the course lecturer, students will be placed in an environment where they can critique their own work, a steppingstone to the development of better critical thinking skills. This process will not only help them improve their projects but also prepare them to approach problems more analytically in their future careers.

**Statement 8: Cultural Awareness.** *'I have considered our 'global' audience (not just Japanese viewers)'*. The responses to statement 5 represent the cultural awareness of the students, indicating agreement to the prompt at 62%. Although challenges in tailoring the video content and language specifically for an international audience are notable with 38.2% answering in disagreement. Positively this reflects the fact that many students, particularly the participants in tourism majors, are exposed to global tourism initiatives and are encouraged to adopt a worldly, international outlook. However, there may be a disconnect between classroom / lecture-based learning and to the realistic application of creating material/content for global consumption.

## Reflection Period 2

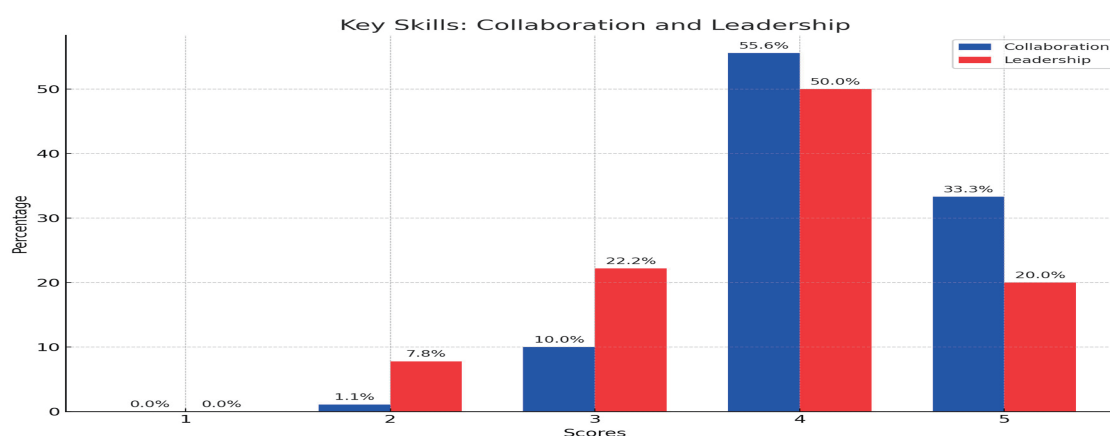
Ninety participants answered in Likert form. Responses were gathered from 5 (strong agreement) to 1 (strong disagreement). The prompts and themes from reflection 1 were revisited in reflection 2 to evaluate perceived changes over time, aiming to determine whether the students showed improvement or a decline in performance. This analysis will discuss the average scores and highlight the standard deviation on results as presented below.

Table 1

Skill	Average (Reflection 1)	Standard Deviation (Reflection 1)	Average (Reflection 2)	Standard Deviation (Reflection 2)
Collaboration	4.25	0.89	4.08	0.73
Leadership	3.49	1.03	4.08	0.86
Creativity	3.54	0.98	3.65	0.89
Adaptability and Digital Literacy	2.92	1.01	3.00	0.80
Critical Thinking	2.95	1.15	3.69	0.81

### Collaboration and Leadership

Figure 5



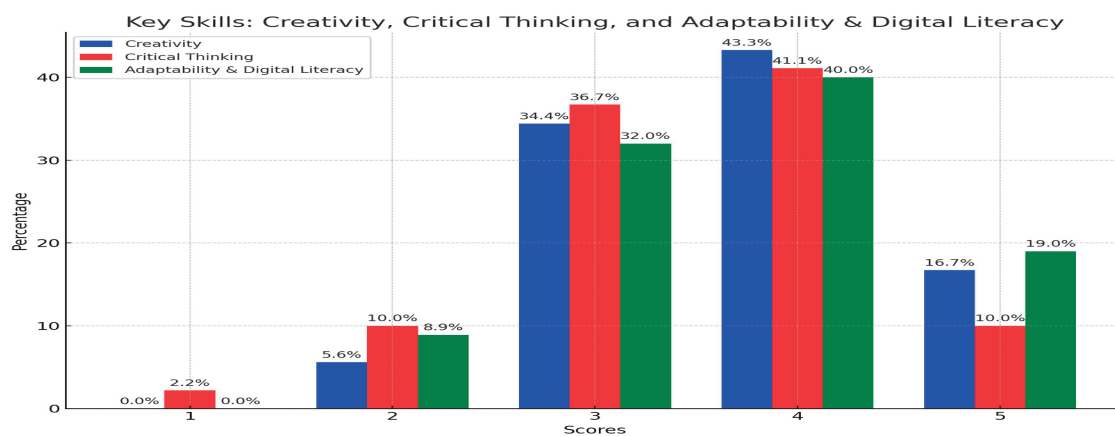
The average score for collaboration in reflection 1 was slightly higher (4.25) compared to reflection 2 (4.08). This indicates that, on average, students scored higher in collaboration during the first reflection. The standard deviation in reflection 1 was higher (0.89) than in reflection 2 (0.73). A higher deviation indicates more variability in the scores for reflection 1, meaning there was a wider range of collaboration skill levels among the students. In contrast, reflection 2 had less variability, suggesting that the scores were more concentrated around the mean. While the average collaboration score was slightly higher in reflection 1, the scores in reflection 2 were more consistent with less variability. This could indicate that more students are moving toward a similar level of collaboration skill, even if fewer students reached the very highest level compared to reflection 1.

The responses are illustrated in Figure 5. The average leadership score saw an increase from 3.49 in reflection 1 to 4.08 in the second round of surveys. This suggests that there was an overall enhancement in leadership skills among the students across the two reflections. The standard deviation decreased from 1.03 in reflection 1 to 0.86 in reflection 2. This indicates that the leadership scores were more consistent in 2, with less spread around the mean, indicating that a

greater number of students achieved scores closer to the average. The data reveals an improvement in leadership skills between reflection 1 and reflection 2, with the average score shifting higher. Additionally, the reduced deviation in reflection 2 suggests that students' leadership abilities became more uniformly stronger, indicating that the interventions or experiences between the two reflections effectively enhanced leadership skills across the student group. This could be due to the progress meetings whereby students were encouraged to all report on the process and the decisions they had made. By taking these initiatives, participants may feel they are taking more of an active than passive role in the process.

### ***Creativity, Adaptability and Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking***

Figure 6



The responses are illustrated in Figure 6. The average creativity score increased slightly from 3.54 in reflection 1 to 3.65 in reflection 2, indicating a modest improvement in creativity among the students. The standard deviation decreased from 0.98 to 0.89, suggesting that creativity scores became more consistent in reflection 2, with less variability among students. The results indicate a modest improvement in creativity between the reflections with a slight increase in the average score and a decrease in variability. This suggests that not only did more students improve their creativity, but the differences in creativity levels among students also became less pronounced, pointing to a more consistent development across the group.

The responses are illustrated in Figure 6. The average digital literacy score increased significantly from 2.92 in reflection 1 to 3.00 in reflection 2, revealing a small improvement in students' digital literacy skills. The deviation decreased from 1.01 in reflection 1 to 0.80 in reflection 2, inferring that the digital literacy scores became more consistent in reflection 2, with reduced variability among the students. This suggests that students' digital literacy skills became more consistent, with fewer extremes. I propose that the task process and production activities between the two reflections effectively enhanced digital literacy across the student group, leading

to a higher perceived skillset.

Illustrated in Figure 6, the average critical thinking score increased significantly from 2.95 in reflection 1 to 3.69 in the next data collection, indicating a marked improvement in students' critical thinking skills. The standard deviation decreased from 1.15 to 0.81 in reflection 2, this may indicate that the distribution of critical thinking scores became more consistent, with less variability among students subsequently. A significant enhancement in critical thinking skills was observed between both surveys. The average score increased notably, highlighting substantial progress in developing critical thinking abilities. The decrease in deviation further suggests that these skills became more uniformly developed across the student group, with fewer extremes in performance.

### Reflection Period 3

Ninety respondents answered in short answer form on Google Forms. This qualitative data was analysed by thematic frequency. The first question asked students to reflect on the skills that they thought they developed during the process. 'Which skills have you developed the most through this process of creating a DS?'.

Table 2

Theme	Frequency
Collaboration and Teamwork	18
Digital Literacy and Video Editing Skills	13
Communication Skills	13
Leadership	8
Content Creation and Structure	8
Creativity and Critical Thinking	4

The results indicate that the students perceived they had improved the key skills of collaboration, teamwork, adapting and utilizing new technologies. The following comments highlight the participants' opinions:

*"I developed these skills by proactively communicating with team members and editing all the videos collected from everyone".*

*"I developed this skill by collaborating with others, even on tasks that weren't my responsibility, by providing advice and help".*

*"I developed these skills by discussing the video structure and editing process with team members and by being mindful of gathering their opinions".*

Conversely, participants were prompted to review which skills they had least displayed during the task.

Table 3

Theme	Frequency
Creativity and Critical Thinking	12
Speaking skills	10
Pronunciation	10
Vocabulary	9
Leadership	6
Expressiveness	6
Digital Literacy and Adaptability	4
Listening skills	4
English proficiency (general)	3
Planning skills	2

The analysis of responses to the question ‘Which skills have you developed the least?’ indicates that critical thinking posed a challenge for students, as they struggled to engage with and demonstrate this skill effectively. Furthermore, speaking skills and pronunciation were mentioned as areas of concern, highlighting learners’ anxiety about communication and their awareness of the critical role that the power of the ‘voice’ in commentary plays in effective communication. The following comments highlight the trend in results:

*“Because I am not good at speaking up for myself.”*

*"I struggle to speak loudly and confidently during voice-over for videos."*

*"It's about my expressive skills. I had things I wanted to convey in the video, but I couldn't do it well, which made the viewers bored."*

Further comments indicated struggles with fluency, pronunciation, confidence, and the ability to express oneself effectively in English, all of which may be indicative of anxiety related to speaking.

## Conclusion

This study underscores the potential of digital storytelling (DS) as a pedagogical tool in the context of English language education, particularly within tourism programs at a Japanese university. The integration of these creative tasks into the curriculum not only encouraged the development of students’ English language proficiency but also significantly enhanced their 21st-century key skills, such as collaboration, creativity, adaptability, and digital literacy.

The students' work focused on key trends within the tourism industry, particularly niche tourism segments such as animation location tourism and wellness tourism. The videos critically analysed the impacts of these emerging trends on local communities and within a broader global context. Overtourism emerged as a recurring theme, with the digital stories not only highlighting the challenges confronting the tourism industry but also providing concise and actionable



recommendations for addressing these issues effectively.

The findings reveal that students demonstrated substantial progress in these competencies, particularly in areas most important for their future careers in the tourism industry. The reflective surveys indicate that while students perceived improvements in teamwork, technological adaptability, and creative abilities, challenges remain in communication skills, particularly fluency, pronunciation, and confidence in English expression.

The insights gained from this research emphasize the need for continued curricular innovation, particularly in emerging technologies to further enrich the learning experience. Future iterations of this DS task will address these gaps, particularly in enhancing students' speaking skills, by incorporating more targeted use of English in the classroom and support structures. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of aligning educational strategies with the evolving demands of the global workforce, ensuring that students are not only linguistically competent but also equipped with the critical skills required to navigate and succeed in the 21st-century professional landscape. The application of DS in educational settings offers a unique approach to achieving this balance, fostering a more holistic and dynamic learning environment that prepares students for real-world challenges.

In conclusion, the integration of digital storytelling into the tourism curriculum at the Japanese university has proven to be a valuable and effective method for cultivating both vocational skills and more authentic use of English language. As technology continues to advance and reshape the professional landscape, educational practices must evolve accordingly, ensuring that students are well-prepared to meet the demands of the future. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on DS in language education and serves as a foundation for further exploration and refinement of pedagogical approaches in this rapidly changing field.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

### **Critical Thinking in the Creation Process**

Many students struggled to develop critical thinking skills, a key component in crafting meaningful and engaging digital stories. Whilst the project required students to research and analyse tourism issues and propose solutions or offer opinions, responses from reflective surveys indicated that they often lacked the ability to critique their own ideas or engage deeply with alternative perspectives. This may stem from educational systems that traditionally prioritize rote learning over analytical and evaluative skills. As a result, some digital stories may have lacked the depth and nuance necessary to effectively address complex issues such as over-tourism. To foster stronger critical thinking, future projects could incorporate more scaffolded and structured activities aimed at developing these skills, such as peer review sessions or exercises focused on identifying

strengths and weaknesses in narratives.

### **Cultural Awareness for Global Audiences**

Although the project encouraged students to consider an international audience, many of the students found it difficult to adapt their content for viewers unfamiliar with Japanese culture. In some cases, digital stories included terminology that may have been difficult for non-Japanese viewers to understand, limiting the broader applicability. This disconnect likely highlights a gap between classroom instruction and the practical application of cross-cultural communication skills in real-world contexts. To mitigate this, future iterations of this project aim to provide more explicit instruction on cultural adaptation strategies, such as avoiding culturally specific vocabulary or incorporating universal themes that resonate with the global audience.

### **Student Challenges with Digital Literacy**

Limited digital literacy among students presented challenges in the initial stages of the project. Whilst the task involved creating multimedia content, many students lacked experience with the tools needed to produce high-quality digital stories. Reflective surveys revealed that students struggled with video editing software and integrating multimedia elements effectively. As the course instructor, I realized I needed to offer extensive guidance and technical support, along with help in developing scripts and narratives. Although some progress was made during the project, these initial difficulties may have restricted students' creativity and the overall sophistication of their final videos. Addressing this limitation could involve offering foundational digital skills training earlier in the course or conducting workshops with technical project stakeholders on specific tools and techniques before the project begins.

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