

DIGITAL STORYTELLING AS A MULTIMODAL TOOL FOR INTERCULTURAL LEARNING IN EFL HIGHER EDUCATION

Veronica Baltag

PhD

Universitatea Pedagogica de Stat Ion Creanga

Chisinau

Romania

Abstract: This article examines digital storytelling as a multimodal humanities-oriented practice for developing intercultural learning in university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Drawing on published empirical studies, conceptual work, and doctoral dissertations, the review focuses on the ways digital stories connect language learning with personal narrative, cultural reflexivity, identity negotiation, and critical interpretation. The synthesis shows that digital storytelling is most productive when learners compare cultural perspectives, make explicit choices about image, voice, sequence, and stance, and reflect on how these modes shape meaning. At the same time, the literature warns that technological novelty alone does not generate intercultural competence; purposeful scaffolding, ethical attention to representation, and reflective discussion remain essential. The article concludes with implications for university courses in language, culture, and the humanities.

Keywords: digital storytelling; EFL; intercultural competence; multimodality; cultural reflexivity; identity; higher education.

1. Introduction

Digital storytelling has developed from a relatively simple practice of combining recorded narration with still images into a broad educational form that integrates voice, image, music, written language, sequencing, and digital editing. In language education, its value lies not only in the use of technology but in the requirement that learners organize experience into a meaningful narrative. Robin (2008) described digital storytelling as a powerful classroom tool because it can connect subject knowledge, technological literacy, and personal expression. In EFL settings, this combination is especially important: students can rehearse language while also deciding how to position themselves in relation to cultural memories, social values, and audiences.

The intercultural dimension of digital storytelling has become increasingly visible in recent research. Intercultural communicative competence is not reducible to factual knowledge about another country; it involves attitudes of openness, skills of interpreting and relating, and the ability to reflect critically on one's own and others' cultural assumptions (Byram, 1997). Deardorff (2006) likewise emphasizes that intercultural competence develops through attitudes, knowledge, skills, and internal as well as external outcomes. Digital narratives can activate these processes because learners must select culturally meaningful episodes, translate them for an audience, and evaluate the assumptions embedded in their representations.

Recent studies support this connection. Kahanurak, Dibyamandala, and Mangkhang (2023) argue that intercultural communicative competence can be integrated with digital storytelling in multilingual EFL education

through projects that connect local and global cultures. Do, Vo, and Nguyen (2026) report that digital storytelling in Vietnamese higher education supported intercultural awareness, social critique, self-exploration, and connectedness. Wang (2026) similarly found that embodied digital storytelling created opportunities for Chinese university students to articulate intercultural insights. The present article synthesizes these findings with earlier dissertation research on cultural reflexivity and identity negotiation in digital narratives.

II. Methods and Methodology of Research

The study employs a structured narrative review. The analytical corpus was assembled from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and doctoral dissertations that address digital storytelling in language education, intercultural learning, identity, or multimodal literacy. Priority was given to works that explicitly connect digital narrative production with EFL/ESL learning or with cultural reflexivity. Seminal conceptual sources on intercultural competence and digital storytelling were retained to provide a theoretical frame, while recent empirical studies were used to identify current pedagogical tendencies.

The review was guided by three questions: (1) What intercultural learning processes are associated with digital storytelling in language education? (2) Which narrative and multimodal features appear to support these processes? (3) What limitations and pedagogical conditions are repeatedly identified across the literature? Sources were read comparatively and coded for recurring categories: reflexivity, perspective-taking, identity, multimodal meaning-making, audience awareness, collaboration, technological affordances, and constraints.

The methodological orientation is interpretive rather than meta-analytic. The aim is not to calculate a pooled effect size but to compare how different studies conceptualize the educational work performed by digital stories. This is appropriate because the reviewed studies employ heterogeneous designs, including qualitative narrative inquiry, classroom-based mixed methods, literature review, and multimodal analysis. Doctoral dissertations by Vinogradova (2011) and Dell-Jones (2018) were included because they provide extended qualitative accounts of identity negotiation, cultural reflexivity, and teacher education that are often compressed in journal publications.

III. Results

The first recurring result is that digital storytelling supports intercultural learning by converting abstract cultural content into situated narrative experience. Learners do not simply list cultural differences; they select episodes, characters, settings, conflicts, and moments of recognition. In Do et al. (2026), students' digital stories became spaces for reflecting on social practices, inclusion, and connectedness. In Kahanurak et al. (2023), the pedagogical potential of digital stories is linked to multilingual learners' ability to present local and Western cultural perspectives. These studies suggest that narrative structure itself is pedagogically significant: cultural understanding becomes a process of interpretation rather than memorization.

A second theme is reflexivity. Dell-Jones (2018) used digital storytelling in language teacher education to investigate how personal narratives could support reflection on intercultural competence and culturally responsive pedagogy. The extended trajectory of the dissertation shows that digital stories may function as reflective artifacts to which learners and future

teachers can return. The story is therefore not only a final product; it becomes evidence of how the narrator has selected, framed, and revised experience.

A third result concerns identity negotiation. Vinogradova's (2011) dissertation demonstrated that digital storytelling can support ESL learners in negotiating multilayered identities through multimodal representation. This finding is relevant to EFL higher education because students often experience English simultaneously as an academic language, a global medium, and a symbolic resource for projecting alternative selves. Digital stories allow learners to combine English with photographs, local cultural references, accent, music, and visual symbolism. The meaning of the narrative emerges from the relation among modes rather than from verbal language alone.

A fourth theme is critical perspective-taking. Intercultural competence requires learners to interpret difference without reducing cultures to fixed national stereotypes. Digital storytelling can support this goal when assignments require comparison, contextualization, and self-questioning. Do et al. (2026) found evidence of critical reflection and social critique in students' stories, while Wang (2026) emphasizes the value of structured activities that support intercultural communicative competence during story creation. The central pedagogical issue is therefore not whether students make videos, but whether the design of the task prompts them to examine whose perspective is represented, whose voice is missing, and how cultural practices are evaluated.

A fifth result is the importance of multimodal composition. Robin (2008) notes that digital storytelling brings together content, pedagogy, and technology. In intercultural tasks, image selection, pacing, voice-over,

captions, music, and transitions shape the viewer's interpretation. A photograph can authenticate a personal memory, but it can also simplify a community into a visual stereotype. Music may create emotional resonance, but it can also exoticize the culture being represented. Consequently, multimodal literacy must be treated as a critical competence: students need to explain why a specific mode was selected and how it changes the meaning of the verbal narrative.

The literature also identifies limitations. Technology access, unequal digital skills, time demands, and copyright awareness may influence project quality. More importantly, intercultural objectives can be lost when teachers evaluate only language accuracy or technical polish. Deardorff's (2006) multidimensional model suggests that assessment should include attitudes, interpretation, reflection, and interactional awareness. Digital storytelling tasks can therefore be evaluated through portfolios, reflective commentaries, peer response, and self-assessment in addition to conventional language criteria.

IV. Discussion

The reviewed literature supports an understanding of digital storytelling as a humanities practice rather than merely an educational technology. Its central object is narrated human experience. Students work with memory, cultural signs, place, voice, point of view, temporal organization, and audience. These are also categories familiar to literary and cultural studies. When transferred to EFL education, they create a productive bridge between language practice and interpretive inquiry.

The strongest pedagogical model appears to be a staged process. First, students explore a cultural question through reading, discussion,

interviews, or observation. Second, they draft a narrative that contains a clear perspective rather than a catalogue of facts. Third, they design the multimodal layer and justify the relation between verbal and visual choices. Fourth, peers respond not only to grammar but to representation, evidence, and cultural assumptions. Finally, students produce a short reflective commentary explaining how their understanding changed. This sequence corresponds with findings that digital storytelling is most meaningful when production is accompanied by reflection and dialogue (Dell-Jones, 2018; Do et al., 2026).

The synthesis also suggests a distinction between cultural display and intercultural learning. A digital story may display food, clothing, festivals, or monuments without developing intercultural competence. Intercultural learning begins when learners interpret why a practice matters, compare perspectives, recognize internal diversity, and reconsider their own position. Teachers should therefore formulate prompts around tensions and questions: how a custom is understood by different generations, how migration changes identity, how a local narrative appears to an outsider, or how media representations shape perceptions of a community.

For universities in multilingual contexts, digital storytelling has an additional advantage: it legitimizes local knowledge while using English as a medium of wider communication. Students can translate culturally specific concepts, retain key words from their first language, and explain why direct equivalence may be impossible. Such work turns translation into cultural interpretation. It also challenges the assumption that successful EFL production must erase local linguistic and cultural resources.

V. Conclusion

Digital storytelling can contribute meaningfully to intercultural learning in EFL higher education when it is designed as a reflective, interpretive, and multimodal practice. Across the reviewed research, its major affordances include cultural reflexivity, perspective-taking, identity exploration, audience awareness, and the integration of local experience with English-language communication. The evidence also shows that these outcomes are not automatic consequences of technology. They depend on carefully framed tasks, guided reflection, ethical attention to representation, and assessment criteria that value intercultural reasoning as well as linguistic performance. Future research should compare different narrative genres, examine long-term development of intercultural competence, and investigate how multilingual resources can be incorporated into digital stories without reducing English-language learning goals.

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Reviewer:

Dr. Matthew Sanders

Professor

Kettering University, USA