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Improving Thai EFL secondary school students' English literacy and thinking skills through CEFR-based digital storytelling

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Abstract: CEFR-Based Digital Storytelling plays a crucial role in promoting EFL students' literacy and thinking skills. This study aimed to investigate the effects of CEFR-Based Digital Storytelling on students' English literacy and thinking skills. The participants included 48 secondary school students studying at a public university demonstration school in northern Thailand during the second semester of the 2024 academic year. The participants were randomly divided into experimental and control groups, with 24 students in each group. The instruments used included pre- and post-tests utilizing Bloom's revised taxonomy to assess the students' English literacy and thinking skills. The statistical analysis was conducted using the Mann-Whitney U test. The results indicated that the post-test reading skills scores of the experimental group were significantly higher than those of the control group. Regarding thinking skills, the post-test scores for basic order thinking skills of the experimental group were not significantly higher than those of the control group. However, the post-test scores for higher-order thinking skills of the experimental group were higher than those of the control group. The findings of this study suggest that CEFR-Based Digital Storytelling is valuable and applicable for enhancing EFL students' English literacy and thinking skills.

Keywords: *CEFR-based, Digital storytelling, English literacy, Thinking skills.*

1. Introduction

The development of English literacy skills during secondary education serves as a vital foundation for academic achievement and lifelong educational growth according to the [1]. Students need to develop their English abilities to understand complex ideas and express them through writing and speaking as they move from basic literacy skills learned in primary school to more advanced competencies. Students who master reading and writing and verbal communication skills achieve better academic results in all subjects while gaining essential qualifications for university studies and professional work [2, 3]. Students who demonstrate strong English literacy skills develop their ability to think critically and solve problems while learning to interact with multiple viewpoints in today's interconnected world [4, 5]. The rising need for digital and information literacy in modern society makes it essential to develop English proficiency during secondary education because students need these skills to succeed in our interconnected knowledge-based world [6, 7].

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has become widely accepted throughout the world as a standardized system for language education and assessment [8]. The Council of Europe created the CEFR which provides a systematic method to assess language abilities through six progressive levels from A1 beginner to C2 mastery [9]. The framework's widespread adoption results from its ability to fit various educational settings which helps learners and teachers and institutions create specific learning targets and track student development [9]. The CEFR enables international student and worker mobility because it provides a standardized language proficiency standard that universities and employers worldwide accept for admission and certification

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purposes [8]. The CEFR maintains its expanding influence on language education because globalization requires more multilingual competence from students which drives its adoption in curriculum development and teaching methods and assessment systems across the world [9-12].

Language learning requires thinking abilities because they help students process and analyze and apply linguistic information effectively [13, 14]. The development of critical thinking and problem-solving and metacognitive abilities leads to better comprehension and language retention and enables students to use language effectively in various situations [15, 16]. Students who develop higher order thinking abilities such as reasoning and synthesis and evaluation skills can understand texts better and create meaningful messages while adapting their language usage to various social environments [17, 18]. The development of thinking skills development enables students to become independent learners because they can evaluate their learning methods and apply this self-assessment to enhance their language abilities. The integration of thinking skills into language learning becomes vital for achieving lasting linguistic competence and effective communication because language acquisition now requires meaningful interaction and contextual understanding [19].

Digital storytelling functions as an educational method which unites multimedia content including text and images and audio and video to generate interactive and captivating stories [20]. The combination of technology with storytelling methods in this approach helps students develop their language abilities and digital competencies and creative skills while improving their authentic language usage [5]. Digital storytelling according to Mesa [21] enables students to build essential language abilities through reading and writing and listening and speaking by helping them create purposeful stories and present their thoughts in organized ways. The method enables students to develop cultural understanding and critical thinking abilities through collaborative learning while they create personalized digital stories that showcase their individual experiences [22]. The educational landscape of the future will benefit from digital storytelling because this method delivers an interactive student-focused learning system which enhances both learning depth and effectiveness [23-25].

1.1. Research Objectives

1. To investigate the impact of CEFR-based digital storytelling on students' English literacy development.
2. To analyze the enhancements of thinking skills through CEFR-based digital storytelling.

1.2. Research Questions

1. What is the impact of CEFR-based digital storytelling on students' English literacy development?
2. How does CEFR-based digital storytelling enhance students' thinking skills?

2. Literature Review

2.1. English Literacy in Secondary Education

Academic achievement and lifelong learning depend on the development of English literacy skills. Students who master reading and writing and communication skills achieve better academic results in all subjects and gain readiness for university studies and professional careers [2, 3]. The Thai educational system faces difficulties in literacy development because numerous students face problems with understanding and remembering new words [17]. The development of secondary school literacy needs modern educational methods which create interactive multimodal learning experiences that follow the CEFR framework.

2.2. CEFR as a Framework for Language Learning

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) offers a complete system to describe and evaluate language abilities. The six levels of CEFR from A1 to C2 serve as a universal framework which works for different educational settings [9]. The CEFR framework has shaped Asian language education through Thailand by establishing performance standards for teaching and

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evaluation [8, 10]. Research shows that the CEFR has seen increased adoption yet its ability to develop critical thinking and advanced reading abilities needs further investigation [12]. The combination of CEFR-based teaching methods with modern educational approaches will optimize its effectiveness.

2.3. Thinking Skills in Language Education

Language learning depends on thinking skills which help students understand and use information effectively. The development of basic skills like remembering and understanding forms the base while higher order skills including analysis and evaluation and creativity enable learners to become autonomous and proficient communicators [13]. Research shows that students who develop higher order thinking abilities achieve better understanding and master flexible language skills [16, 18]. The Thai educational system shows students excel in basic tasks but struggle with more complex assignments which requires teaching methods that actively develop their advanced cognitive abilities [26].

2.4. Digital Storytelling in EFL Classrooms

Digital storytelling has become an effective teaching method which combines text with audio and video and images to develop interactive stories. The method helps students develop their reading and writing abilities and listening and speaking competencies while promoting creative thinking and analytical reasoning [5, 20]. A1-level students developed better literacy skills through digital storytelling according to Mesa [21] while Al-Shaye [14] demonstrated how this method enhances students' critical reading abilities and self-directed learning. Digital storytelling in Thai EFL classrooms and other EFL settings enables students to work together while developing their ability to create and exchange meaningful stories which promotes intercultural understanding [22, 27].

2.5. CEFR-Based Digital Storytelling

Recent studies suggest that combining CEFR standards with digital storytelling can enhance both language proficiency and cognitive skills. Kaowiwattanakul [28] reported that a CEFR-based approach using literature improved students' reading and critical thinking skills. Similarly, Jayanti and Sudimantara [25] demonstrated that CEFR-based digital storytelling resources supported middle schoolers' critical listening development. Rosi, et al. [29] discovered that CEFR-based comics helped high school students learn literacy skills. The research by Eissa [30] and Leong, et al. [31] demonstrates digital storytelling enhances vocabulary skills and reading comprehension and speaking abilities but there is limited evidence about its effects on higher order thinking abilities. The current research gap requires additional studies to determine how CEFR-based digital storytelling methods can develop both EFL learners' literacy skills and their cognitive abilities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Population

The research included Grade 7 students who attended the demonstration school of a public university located in northern Thailand. The research included all students who started their studies during the first semester of the 2024 academic year. The study population consisted of three classrooms with 24 students in classroom 1 and 23 students in classroom 2 and 24 students in classroom 3. The total number of students in the population reached 71.

3.2. Sample

The sample of this study included Grade 7 students at the demonstration school of the public university in the north of Thailand. The students enrolled in the first semester of the 2024 academic year. The sample consists of 48 students from two classrooms, selected using simple random sampling, with classrooms as the sampling units. The sample was divided into two groups as follows.

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Experimental group: 24 students who leant through English digital stories based on the CEFR framework to develop English reading and writing skills, as well as thinking skills.

Control group, 24 students who learnt through traditional English storybooks based on the CEFR framework to develop English reading and writing skills, as well as thinking skills.

3.3. Instruments

The research instruments used in this study included the following:

3.4. English Digital Stories Based on the CEFR Framework

The digital stories were designed to develop English reading and writing skills, as well as the thinking skills of the secondary school students who participated in the study. The stories originated from the British Council website through the Learn English Kids section where students can find content in the Listen and Watch category. The short stories in this category included images and audio and subtitles which combined to create a multimodal learning experience that improved student engagement and understanding.

3.5. Traditional Storybooks Based on the CEFR Framework

The contents of the storybooks were adapted from the British Council website under the Learn English Kids section, specifically in the Listen and Watch category. Unlike digital stories, the traditional storybook presents the texts along with only one accompanying illustration.

3.6. Pre-test and Post-test

The *pre-test* and *post-test* adopted multiple-choice questions using the same story contents to examine the students' reading comprehension and order of thinking skills. Each item has four choices with one correct answer and three distractors. The story contents were adapted from The Aesop for children, produced by Library of Congress [32]. Bloom's revised version of learning taxonomy was adapted to construct the questions used to examine the students' reading comprehension and thinking skills. Each test has two stories, and each story has six questions using Bloom's revised taxonomy action verbs to construct questions investigating the students' comprehension and order thinking skills. The action verbs include remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating.

4. Development of Research Instruments

4.1. Development of English Digital Stories and Conventional English Stories

The researchers adapted English stories from British Council website under the "Learn English Kids" section, specifically the "Listen and Watch" skill category, which provides short stories, featuring images, audio, and subtitles. Permission was obtained from the British Council to use these materials for this study. The researcher supplemented the selected stories with exercises and activities for both the experimental and control groups.

4.2. Development of the pre-test and post-test

The development of the *pre-test* and *post-test* followed these steps:

1. Reviewing relevant approaches, theories, and previous studies on the construction of *pre-test* and *post-test.*

2. Analyzing the contents of the Aesop fables adapted from the Aesop for Children website produced by Library of Congress [32].

3. Constructing two reading comprehension tests consisting of 12 multiple-choice questions. The *pre-test* contents were similar to the *post-test* contents. Both tests were designed to align with the contents of the stories and learning objectives.

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4. Submitting the test items to three content experts for validation and revising the test contents based on the experts' feedback.

5. Piloting the test with 23 Grade 7 students from the demonstration school of the public university in the north of Thailand. The students were not part of the study sample.

6. Analyzing individual test items to determine their difficulty index and discrimination index using the 27% technique. The test items with difficulty indices ranging from 0.20 to 0.80 and discrimination indices of 0.20 or higher were selected to ensure standardization and alignment with the content and learning objectives.

7. Calculating the reliability of the finalized test items using Kuder Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20).

8. Implementing the validated tests as the *pre-test* and *post-test* for the present study.

4.3. Data Collection

The researcher carried out data collection following these steps:

1. The researchers and the teacher-researchers informed both experiment and control groups about the objectives of the study and the benefits of their participation. The consent forms were given to the students in both groups to gain permission to collect.

2. Both experiment and control groups completed the *pre-test* consisting of reading comprehension and thinking skills, with an allotted time of 30 minutes.

3. The teacher-researchers conducted the intervention using four English digital stories based on CEFR framework to develop students' English reading literacy skills and their thinking skills over a period of four weeks, with each week consisting of 50 minutes of instruction. The experimental group engaged in literacy skill development through digital stories, while the control group followed the same literacy skill development process using conventional printed stories.

4. Upon completion of the learning sessions, both groups took the *post-test*. The test lasted 30 minutes. The *post-test* was identical to that of the *pre-test*.

5. The collected data were analyzed to compare the *pre-test* and *post-test* scores in literacy skills and thinking skills.

4.4. Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis was conducted using statistical software, and data analysis was performed using the following statistical methods.

1. Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics included percentage, arithmetic mean, and standard deviation.

2. Statistics for instrument validation

1. Item difficulty index (p) and item discrimination index of the *pre-test* and *post-test* were analyzed using the 27% technique by Chung Teh Fan.

2. Test reliability was determined using the Kuder Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20)

3. The quality of the instructional materials was assessed based on expert evaluations, with the arithmetic mean used for analysis.

4. Descriptive statistics, including percentage, arithmetic mean, and standard deviation, were used to evaluate expert opinions.

3. Inferential statistics for variable comparison

To compare differences between variables, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to analyzed pre-test and posttest scores in English literacy and thinking skills.

5. Results

The results of the present study are divided into three sections. Section 1 presents a comparison of reading literacy scores. Section 2 involves a comparison of basic order thinking skill scores, and section 3 illustrates a comparison of higher order thinking skills scores.

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5.1. Comparison of the Reading Literacy Score

This section presents a comparison of the reading literacy scores between the control and experimental groups. The Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to compare posttest reading skills scores between the experimental and control groups. The details are shown in Table 1 and 2.

Table 1.
Ranks of Post-Test Reading Skills Scores

Test	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Control Group (Post-Test)	22	18.27	402.00
Experimental Group (Post-Test)	21	25.90	544.00
Total	43		

Table 1 presented the ranks of *post-test* reading skills scores for both groups. The experimental group (Mean Rank = 25.90) obtained higher mean ranks than the control group (Mean Rank = 18.27), which indicated that the experimental group performed better in reading literacy. These results provided the basis for further analysis using the Mann–Whitney U test, the results of which were shown in Table 2.

Table 2.
Mann-Whitney U Test Results.

Test Statistic	Score
Mann-Whitney U	149.000
Wilcoxon W	402.000
Z-Score	-2.018
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.044

The results from Table 1 and Table 2 show a statistically significant difference between the two groups (U = 149.000, Z = -2.018, p = .044). The *post-test* reading skills scores of the experimental group exceeded those of the control group at a statistically significant level because the *p*-value fell below 0.05. The intervention showed evidence of effectiveness in enhancing reading abilities of students according to the results.

5.2. Comparison of Basic Order Thinking Skill Scores

This section showed a comparison of basic order thinking skills scores. The Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to compare posttest reading skills scores between the experimental and control groups. The details were shown in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3.
Ranks of Post-test Basic Thinking Skills Scores

Test	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Control Group (Post-Test)	22	20.20	444.50
Experimental Group (Post-Test)	21	23.88	501.50
Total	43		

The post-test basic thinking skills scores from Table 3 revealed the ranking positions for both experimental and control groups. The experimental group achieved better basic thinking skills performance than the control group because their mean rank score reached 23.88 compared to the control group's 20.20. The obtained results from Table 4 served as the foundation for conducting the Mann–Whitney U test.

Table 4.
Mann-Whitney U Test Results.

Test Statistic	Score

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Mann-Whitney U	191.500
Wilcoxon W	444.500
Z-Score	-0.998
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.318

The results in Tables 3 and 4 demonstrated no statistically important differences between the two groups (U = 191.500, Z = -0.998, p = .318). The post-test basic order thinking skills scores of the experimental group showed no significant difference compared to the control group because the p-value exceeded 0.05. Therefore, the intervention might not have resulted in a significant improvement in students' basic order thinking skills.

5.3. Comparison of Higher Order Thinking Skills Scores

This section illustrated a comparison of higher order thinking skills scores. The Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to compare posttest reading skills scores between the experimental and control groups. The details were shown in Table 5 and Table 6.

Table 5.
Ranks of Post-Test Higher Order Thinking Skills Scores.

Test	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Control Group (Post-Test)	22	18.91	416.00
Experimental Group (Post-Test)	21	25.24	530.00
Total	43		

Table 5 presented the ranks of *post-test* higher order thinking skills scores for both groups. The experimental group achieved higher mean ranks (25.24) than the control group (Mean Rank = 18.91) which demonstrated that experimental participants outperformed controls in higher order thinking skills. The subsequent Mann–Whitney U test analysis used the data from Table 6 to determine the results.

Table 6.
Mann-Whitney U Test Results.

Test Statistic	Score
Mann-Whitney U	163.000
Wilcoxon W	416.000
Z-Score	-1.691
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.046

The results from Tables 5 and 6 showed that the two groups demonstrated a statistically significant difference (U = 163.000, Z = -1.691, p = .046). The *p*-value below 0.05 indicated that experimental group students achieved better *post-test* higher order thinking skills than control group students. The intervention seemed to create a positive effect on students' higher order thinking abilities.

6. Discussion of Findings

The research indicates that teaching digital storytelling through CEFR standards leads to better reading literacy and higher-order thinking abilities in students. The research results confirm earlier studies which demonstrate that interactive storytelling methods improve language learning and reading comprehension abilities. The experimental group achieved better reading results because digital storytelling delivered contextualized and fully immersive learning experiences.

The intervention failed to produce any substantial changes in students' basic order thinking abilities. The results show digital storytelling effectively develops advanced analytical and evaluative abilities yet it does not appear to boost students' fundamental cognitive skills for remembering

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information and basic understanding. Researchers should investigate ways to enhance the intervention by adding direct training about basic cognitive processes to improve its effectiveness.

The research results support modern educational principles which demonstrate how digital storytelling helps students develop critical thinking abilities and solve problems and create original content. Through digital storytelling students learn to handle complex stories while developing critical thinking abilities and making educated inferences which represent key elements of advanced cognitive functions.

7. Implications

The research results provide essential knowledge to teachers who want to use digital storytelling in their classrooms for improving reading abilities and mental development. Future studies need to investigate how CEFR-based digital storytelling affects students in the long run while determining which teaching methods within digital storytelling produce the best learning results for different cognitive abilities. A bigger participant group and extended research period would generate more detailed information about this teaching method's effectiveness.

The research shows that CEFR-based digital storytelling functions as an effective educational method which improves reading abilities and develops advanced thinking abilities thus making it an innovative teaching approach.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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