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Enhancing English communication skills and self-efficacy: A blended learning approach with digital storytelling in primary education

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the impact of a blended learning approach incorporating digital storytelling on the English communication skills and self-efficacy of 80 sixth-grade students in China. Using a mixed-methods approach, two sixth-grade classes at Tongren Second Primary School were selected, with one class taught using the blended learning with digital storytelling method and the other receiving traditional instruction. Pre-tests and post-tests were administered to assess students' English communication skills and self-efficacy, with quantitative data analyzed using statistical methods and qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews. Results showed that the experimental group demonstrated significantly higher self-efficacy (mean score of 122.83) and communication skills (mean score of 23.83) compared to the control group (mean scores of 89.65 and 17.43, respectively). The qualitative analysis revealed increased motivation, perceived improvement in communication skills, and enhanced self-efficacy among students. This study concludes that the blended learning approach with digital storytelling effectively enhances the English communication skills and self-efficacy of Chinese primary school students, offering a promising educational tool for modern teaching settings. The findings suggest practical implications for educators to integrate digital storytelling into the curriculum to create an engaging learning experience and boost students' confidence and motivation.

Keywords: Blended learning, Digital storytelling, English communication skills, Primary education, Self-efficacy.

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1. Introduction

The integration of information technology into education has revolutionized teaching and learning, particularly in higher education since the early 2000s. In China, the English curriculum reform seeks to leverage information technology to enhance

teaching effectiveness [1], yet traditional methods have often prioritized rote learning and exam preparation over communicative skills [2]. Digital storytelling has emerged as a promising tool in language education, combining narratives with multimedia to engage students and improve language proficiency [3]. In the globalized era, English communication skills are essential for students' future success [4]. Primary education plays a crucial role in laying the foundation for these skills [5]. However, traditional teaching methods often fail to engage young learners effectively. Even though blended learning and digital storytelling are seen as potentially valuable tools for developing English communication skills and self-efficacy in primary schools, there is still a need for a more thorough understanding of how to implement them effectively and whether they consistently lead to meaningful and lasting improvements in various learning environments. The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of a blended learning approach, which included digital storytelling, on the English communication skills (speaking, listening, and writing) and self-confidence of 80 students in the sixth grade in China.

1.1. Research Questions

1. Do the students who learned with the blended learning approach, incorporating digital storytelling, have significantly better English communication skills and self-efficacy than those learning with the traditional method?
2. What are the opinions of the experimental group students regarding the blended learning approach with digital storytelling that they experienced?

The independent variable of this study is the teaching method, which includes blended learning with storytelling and traditional methods, and the dependent variables are communication skills and self-efficacy of English language learners.

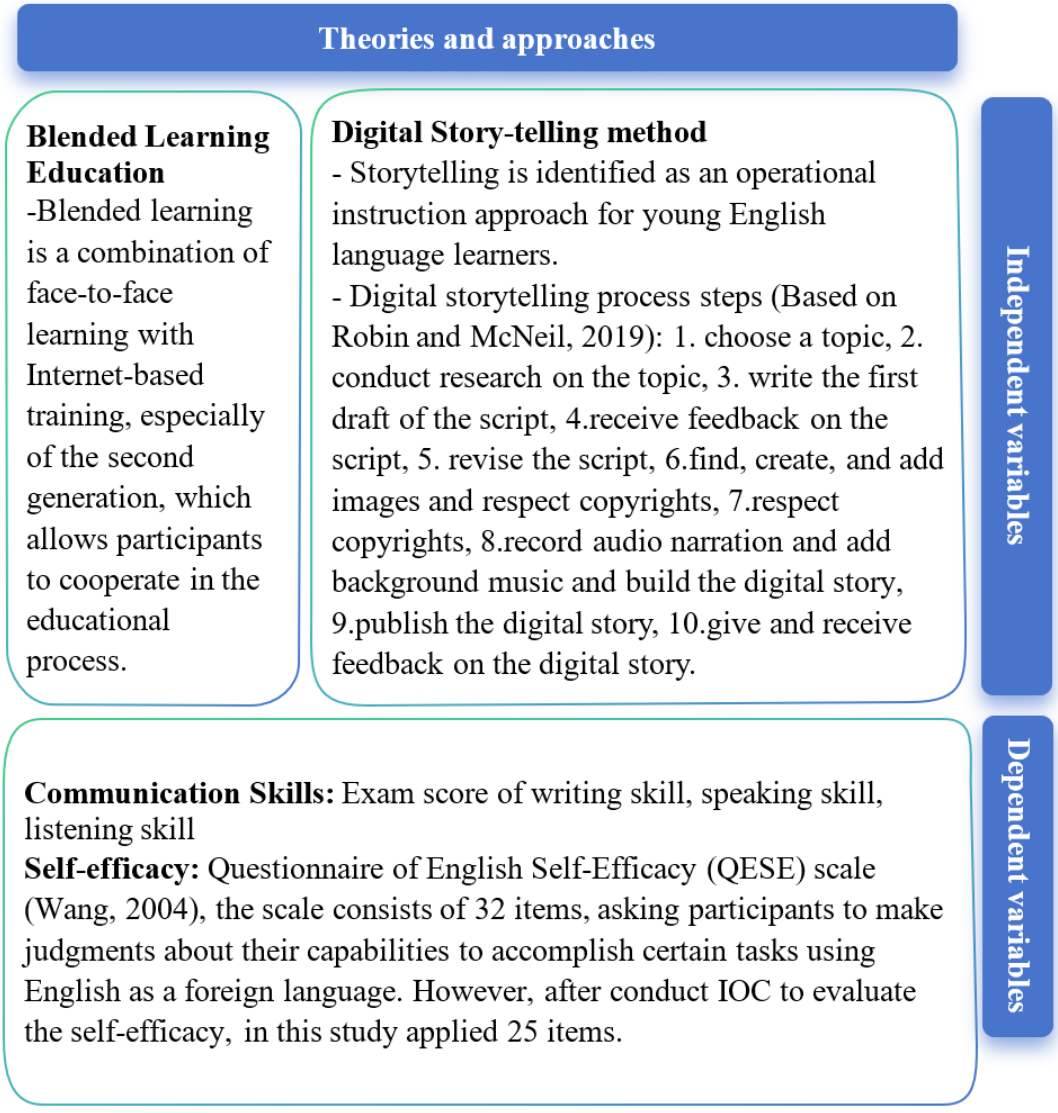

Figure 1.
Conceptual framework.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Blended Learning Technology

Blended learning merges face-to-face instruction with online training, typically involving 30-79% online time [6]. It combines traditional and digital methods to enhance flexibility and efficiency, addressing modern time constraints Bonk and

Graham [7]. Graham et al. [8] identified three key reasons for using blended learning: improving pedagogy, increasing flexibility, and enhancing cost-effectiveness. It was further categorized into activity-, course-, program-, and institution-level blending. Blended learning originated in the education sector, emphasizing the combination of technology and face-to-face interaction to improve knowledge retention [9]. In academia, it has been used to enhance teaching and learning through flexible delivery and integration of online tools [10]. Effective blended learning should consider learner needs, preferences, and available support.

Effective blended language learning requires complementarity, sound materials, and comprehensive support (technical, affective, and academic). Teachers must select interactive materials and vary technology use to meet student needs. The teacher's role includes guiding progress, providing feedback, and creating blended learning activities.

2.2. Digital Story-Telling

Digital storytelling has emerged as a powerful tool in language education, offering an engaging and interactive way for learners to develop their language skills. By combining traditional storytelling with digital media, digital storytelling allows students to create and share their narratives using multimedia elements such as text, images, audio, and video.

Digital storytelling positively impacts language education by engaging low-level students through multimodal communication. It enhances motivation, writing skills, and cognitive development while integrating socio-cultural identities [11]. Educators can use it to promote autonomous learning and transcend traditional classroom boundaries. However, research on digital storytelling in foreign language education is limited Anderson et al. [12]. Tsou et al. [13] developed a multimedia storytelling environment for EFL students, showing significant improvements in language proficiency but not in story comprehension. Somdee and Suppasetseree [14] demonstrated its effectiveness in enhancing speaking skills and integrating cultural identities. Liu et al. [15] found that digital storytelling improved academic achievement, critical thinking, and motivation. It highlights its positive impact on reading, self-confidence, and motivation. Hwang et al. [16] showed that web-based digital storytelling significantly enhanced speaking skills compared to traditional methods. Overall, digital storytelling offers a multifaceted approach to language learning, combining multimodal expression with interactive technology to support diverse learning outcomes.

2.3. Learner's Communication Skills

Communication skills encompass speaking, writing, and listening abilities and are vital for English learners [17]. However, developing oral communication skills in classrooms is challenging due to teacher strategies, curriculum limitations, and student confidence issues [18]. Effective communication requires practice beyond linguistic knowledge [19]. Studies show that virtual classes and online tools can improve communication skills by providing interactive and less intimidating environments compared to traditional settings. For example, podcast creation and asynchronous discussions have been effective in boosting students' speaking abilities and confidence [20].

2.4. Language Self-efficacy

It is influenced by past experiences, observations of others, verbal persuasion, and emotional states. Self-efficacy is context-specific but can generalize to similar situations, impacting online learning success [21]. Furthermore, in the context of language learning, EFL learners' motivation, anxiety, and self-efficacy could be positively influenced by using computers and mobile devices [22]. Given the unique demands of language learning, targeted assessments and interventions are needed to enhance self-efficacy.

3. Design of Blended Learning with Digital Story-Telling Method

The components of the blended learning technology with the digital storytelling method were developed from both components of the blended learning theory and the digital storytelling model, based on several sources [8]. The steps of the digital story creation consisted of ten steps designed in this study. The blended learning with the digital storytelling method is shown in Figure 2.

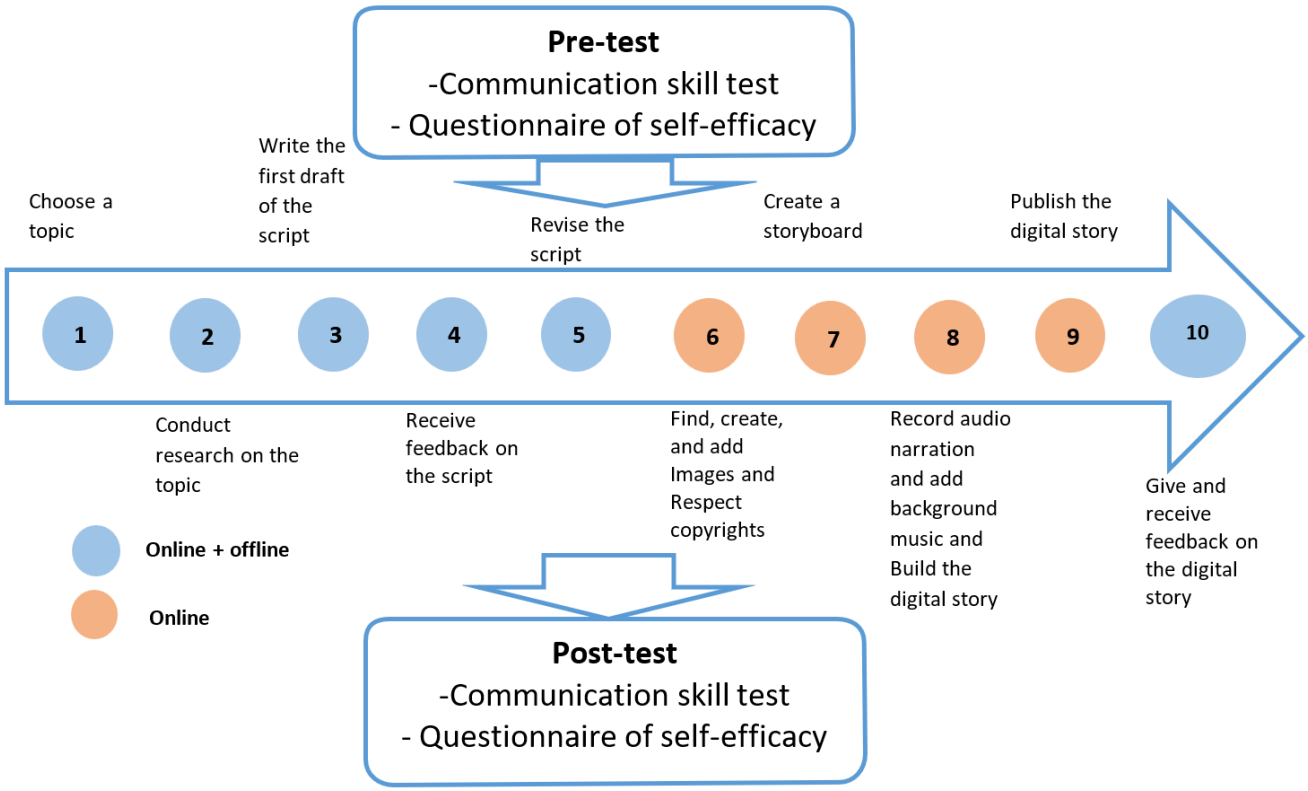

Figure 2.
The blended learning with the digital storytelling method.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design and Participants

The research approach of the study is a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative and quantitative research. This study selected two classes with similar English levels at Tongren Second Primary School in China, one as the experimental class and the other as the control class. It involved 80 sixth-grade students divided into two classes: Class A (experimental group) and Class B (control group), each with 40 students. The experimental class applied a blended learning approach with digital storytelling using the AI.English100.com intelligent learning application and Canva software for creating digital stories among students, while the control class followed traditional teaching methods. The study aimed to compare the English communication abilities and self-efficacy of students in both classes through exam tests, analyzing whether the blended learning approach improved students' listening and speaking skills.

Table 1.
Demographic information of the participants in quantitative research.

Control group			**Experimental group**	
Gender	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Boy	17	42.5	19	47.5
Girl	23	57.5	21	52.5

The qualitative research method was used in the form of in-depth interviews for primary information. The in-depth interview, therefore, helped the researcher to understand how the informants derive meaning from their surroundings to respond to the questions. The interviewees in this study would include forty primary school students who have participated in the digital storytelling blended learning program, who can provide direct feedback on how the learning method has affected their English communication skills and self-efficacy. Semi-structured interviews would be conducted. This format allows for a systematic and comprehensive exploration of the research questions while also providing flexibility to delve deeper into the interviewees' responses as needed. For students, the interview questions would focus on their perceptions of improvements in English communication skills and changes in self-confidence during digital storytelling activities.

Combining in-depth interviews and questionnaires can compensate for the shortcomings of a single method. The interviews provide depth, while questionnaires offer breadth, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the research issue.

4.2. Research Instruments

The quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire with closed questions to survey the personal data of students, and the questionnaire of the English Self-Efficacy (QESE) scale developed by Wang [23]. Exam scores for writing skills, speaking skills, and listening skills, which are multiple-choice tests, are used to assess students' English communication skills.

For the qualitative method, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews in a relaxed atmosphere and used a loose structure for the interviews, which was flexible to change direction and add necessary points. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, with recordings of the conversations to put the participants in a comfortable situation. The interview questions (Appendix) for this study were guided by the interview protocol. The interviews started with an oral introduction about this study and its purpose as an icebreaker to set rapport with the informants in the Chinese language. The researcher orally asked if they gave permission for the interview to be recorded on a digital voice recorder.

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected through pre-tests and post-tests. The pre-test and post-test provide an understanding of the overall level of students' English communication and self-efficacy, which guides the researcher in planning lessons and setting weekly lesson content and planning time. The data from the questionnaire were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Pre-test and post-test scores were compared using mean values to identify significant differences. An independent t-test was employed to assess the significance of differences between pre-test and post-test scores. Additionally, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the means of two groups, specifically analyzing students' communication skills and self-efficacy. To test for differences in self-efficacy and communication skills from pretest to posttest, paired-samples t-tests were performed, one for each outcome. The p-value for statistical significance was adjusted, resulting in a critical p-value of .005. Hence, tests with p

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research approach employed to examine qualitative data. This method can be applied to gather data from various sources such as texts and interview transcripts. Thematic analysis serves as an effective tool for researchers aiming to uncover participants' opinions, ideas, experiences, thoughts, and knowledge. Following the interviews, the process of identifying themes involves several steps: coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and ultimately presenting the outcomes of the interviews.

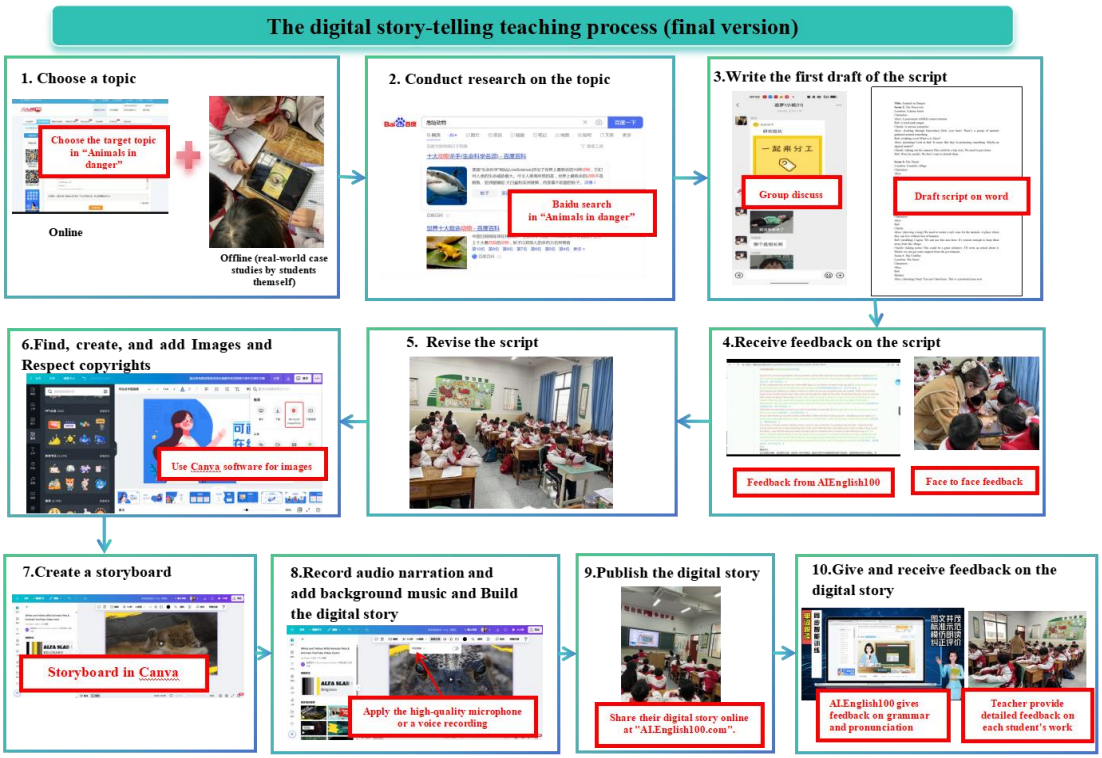

Figure 3.
The digital story-telling teaching process.

Table 2.
Data collection and analysis.

Research Question	Data Sources	Research Instruments and Data Collection	Data Analysis
- RQ1: Do the students who learned with the blended learning approach, incorporating digital storytelling, have significantly better English communication skills and self-efficacy than those learning with the traditional method?	- 80 sixth-grade students in the groups of "blended learning with digital storytelling" method, and traditional learning (40 students each)	1. The questionnaire of the English Self-Efficacy (QESE) scale 2. Exam score of writing skill, speaking skill, listening skill (English communication skills)	- The interdependent t-test, MANOVA and the paired-samples t-tests were used to compare differences of pre- and post-test in mean scores of students' communication skills, and self-efficacy between two groups (experimental group and control group)
- RQ2: What are the opinions of the experimental group students about the blended learning with digital storytelling approach that they experienced?	- 40 sixth-grade students in the groups of "blended learning with digital storytelling"	- An in-depth interview was conducted after the experiment; it was a face-to-face interview with 40 sixth-graders from the experimental group. All interviews were conducted in Chinese.	- The thematic analysis was used for data analysis and interpretation in line with the main concepts and theories.

5. Quantitative Research Result

5.1. Pre-test of Self-Efficacy and Communication Skills

Before the beginning of the experiment, the self-efficacy levels and communication skills of both groups were confirmed to be normally distributed. An independent samples t-test was conducted on the pre-test scores. The means for self-efficacy were 98.85 (SD=12.903) for the experimental group and 70.65 (SD=14.976) for the control group, while the means for communication skills were 16.1375 (SD=3.01914) for the experimental group and 15.625 (SD=2.70505) for the control group. These values indicated that the initial means were closely aligned. Levene's test (Sig.>0.05) confirmed the homogeneity of variance. The t-test results (Sig.>0.05) further indicated no significant differences in pre-test of self-efficacy and communication skills between the experimental and control groups.

Table 3.
Interdependent t-test of pre-test for self-efficacy and communication skills.

DV	IV	$\bar{X}$±SD	Levene's Test		t	Sig.
			F	Sig.		
Self-efficacy	C	70.65±14.98	0.001	0.974	0.576	0.566
	E	68.85±12.90				
Communication skills	C	16.138±3.02	0.999	0.321	0.800	0.426
	E	15.625±2.71				

Note: C = Control group, E= Experimental group

5.2. Post-Test of Self-Efficacy and Communication Skills

After eight weeks of teaching activities, students in both the experimental and control groups completed the reading ability post-test and the attitude test. The normality of the post-test scores for self-efficacy and communication skills was assessed for both groups and confirmed to be normally distributed. Subsequently, MANOVA was employed to examine whether there were significant differences between the experimental and control groups in terms of self-efficacy and communication skills.

Table 4 presents the results of Levene's test, which indicated homogeneity of variance for both self-efficacy (Sig. = 0.651) and communication skills (Sig. = 0.091), as both values exceeded the 0.05 threshold. The ANOVA results revealed a significant difference in self-efficacy post-test scores (Sig. = 0.041 <0.05), with the experimental group achieving a mean score of 122.83 compared to 89.65 for the control group. This suggests that despite similar initial self-efficacy levels, the experimental group demonstrated significantly higher self-efficacy after the intervention. Similarly, a significant difference was observed in communication skills (Sig.<0.001), with the experimental group achieving a mean score of 23.83, compared to 17.43 for the control group, indicating a substantial improvement.

Table 4.
MANOVA analysis of post-test for self-efficacy and communication skills.

DV	IV	$\bar{X}$±SD	Levene's test		ANOVA		Compare results
			W	Sig.	F	Sig.	
Self-efficacy	C	89.65±13.37	0.207	0.651	0.207	0.041	C<E
	E	122.83±42.10					
Communication skills	C	17.43±3.45	101.02	0.091	101.02	<0.001	C<E
	E	23.83±2.086					

Note: C = Control group, E= Experimental group.

5.3. Paired-Sample T-Tests Among Two Groups

Mean of self-efficacy before the teaching class ($\bar{X}$±SD=69.75±13.92) and after the class ($\bar{X}$±SD=121.24±31.08) at .001 level of significance (*t*=-13.51, p<.001). On average score of self-efficacy after class was 51.49 higher after class. Mean of communication skills before the teaching class ($\bar{X}$±SD=15.88±2.86) and after the class ($\bar{X}$±SD=20.63±4.29) at .001 level of significance (*t*=-13.51, p<.001). On average score of communication skills after class was 4.75 higher after class.

Table 5.
Paired-sample t-test results among two groups.

Variable	Test	$\bar{X}$±SD	*t*	df	Sig.
Self-efficacy	Pre-test	69.75±13.92	-13.51	79	<0.001
	Post-test	121.24±31.08			
Communication skills	Pre-test	15.88±2.86	-7.69	79	<0.001
	Post-test	20.63±4.29			

6. Quantitative Research Result

Results from the qualitative analysis of student responses from both pathways are presented in three main themes: (1) increased motivation and enjoyment, (2) perceived improvement in communication skills, and (3) enhanced self-efficacy and confidence (Table 5). From the students' perspectives, the blended learning approach with digital storytelling had a profound and multifaceted impact on their English communication skills and self-efficacy. The increased motivation and enjoyment, perceived improvement in communication skills, and enhanced self-efficacy highlight the effectiveness of this innovative teaching method. These findings suggest that digital storytelling can create a more engaging and supportive learning environment for primary school students, fostering their confidence and competence in English language learning. By providing students with a creative and interactive platform to express themselves, digital storytelling not only enhances their language skills but also builds their self-esteem and motivation to continue learning.

Table 6.
Qualitative results of the student experience with the proposed model.

Theme	Findings	Data sources	*n* (*n* coded responses =40)
Increased Motivation and Enjoyment	- Students described feeling more motivated to participate in digital storytelling activities because they could create and share their own stories. - This increased motivation translated into a higher willingness to practice speaking and listening in English. Students reported feeling more excited about English lessons and looking forward to the storytelling sessions.	"I like making stories with pictures and sounds. It makes English fun and I want to do more."*(S11)* "I enjoy using the computer to make my stories. It feels like playing a game, but I'm learning too."*(S04)* "I used to hate English class, but now it's my favorite because I get to tell my own stories." *(S25)* "I feel like I'm really good at something when I finish my story. It makes me want to do more."*(S16)*	21
Perceived Improvement in Communication Skills	- Students reported noticeable improvements in their English communication skills. Many mentioned feeling more comfortable speaking English in front of their peers and teachers. - Students also noted improvements in their listening comprehension. They described how they had to understand and respond to stories created by their classmates, which helped them become better listeners.	"When I tell my story, I have to use English, and I get better at it every time." *(S02)* "I used to mix up words, but now I can say what I want without getting stuck."*(S38)* "I have to listen carefully to understand the other stories, and that helps me understand English better." *(S22)* "I can understand more words now when my friends tell their stories."*(S06)*	16
Enhanced Self-Efficacy and Confidence	- Students expressed increased confidence in their English abilities. Many felt more capable of handling English-related tasks and were less anxious about making mistakes. - This boost in self-efficacy led to a more positive attitude towards learning English. Students felt more willing to take risks and try new things in English.	"I used to be scared to speak English, but now I know I can do it. I feel proud of my stories."*(S34)* "I feel more confident because I can see my progress. I can tell better stories now."*(S30)* "I'm not afraid to make mistakes anymore. If I make a mistake, I just try again." *(S29)* "I feel like I can do anything in English now because I've done so much with my stories."*(S09)*	29

7. Discussion

7.1. Discussion on the Blended Learning with Digital Story-Telling Method Effects on Communication Skills and Self-Efficacy

The analysis results after 8 weeks of teaching activities show that blended learning with digital storytelling enhances self-efficacy and communication skills in Chinese primary students. The experimental group showed significant improvements in both areas compared to the control group, supporting the hypothesis that this method improves English language learning outcomes. Cheung [24] showed that blended learning environments enhance student engagement and outcomes by combining traditional instruction with digital resources. In addition, Larsari et al. [25] demonstrated that digital storytelling boosts student motivation and creativity, improving language skills and confidence. Therefore, effective blended learning designs, such as flipped classrooms and digital learning, can significantly enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. Lim et al. [26] explored the relationships among English language proficiency, self-efficacy, and motivation, emphasizing the importance of self-efficacy in academic success. These findings underscore the necessity of constructing positive and stimulating teacher-student communication, as well as enhancing students' perceived self-efficacy.

7.2. Discussion on Interview of Students' Perspective on Blended Learning With Digital Story-Telling Method

The qualitative analysis of student perspectives reveals that the blended learning approach with digital storytelling significantly enhances their English communication skills and self-efficacy. The findings show that students find digital storytelling highly engaging and enjoyable, transforming English learning into a fun and interactive experience. This increased motivation leads to greater participation and enthusiasm for English lessons. Students report noticeable improvements in their English speaking and listening skills. They feel more comfortable and confident in expressing themselves in English, both individually and in front of their peers. This result is congruent with Balaman's [27] research

findings that digital storytelling boosts students' self-efficacy, making them more confident in their English abilities [27]. Additionally, students are less anxious about making mistakes and more willing to take risks in their learning, leading to a more positive attitude towards English.

8. Conclusion

The results of the post-test and statistical analysis clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of the blended learning with digital storytelling method in enhancing self-efficacy and communication skills among Chinese primary students. Both the experimental and control groups started with the same level of self-efficacy, but the experimental group showed a significant improvement after the intervention. Similarly, the experimental group also showed a significant improvement in communication skills compared to the control group. The results of this study underscore the potential of blended learning with digital storytelling as a powerful educational tool for enhancing self-efficacy and communication skills among primary school students. This method not only engages students but also significantly boosts their confidence and language abilities, making it a valuable approach for modern educational settings.

8.1. Implication

For educators, these results imply that incorporating digital storytelling into the curriculum can create a more engaging learning experience while also boosting students' confidence and motivation. Teachers should receive comprehensive training and ongoing professional development to effectively utilize these tools. Policymakers may consider allocating resources to support the implementation of blended learning strategies and ensuring alignment with educational standards. For researchers, the study highlights the need for further longitudinal and comparative analyses, as well as exploration of ethical considerations and broader applications of digital storytelling across different subjects. Overall, these implications point toward a promising approach for optimizing learning outcomes and creating a more dynamic educational environment.

8.2. Recommendation and Limitations

Future research could explore the long-term effects of blended learning with digital storytelling on students' language development and academic performance. Studies involving larger and more diverse student populations could provide further insights into the generalizability of these findings. The study was conducted in a single school with a limited sample size, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other educational settings or broader student populations.

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