

Digital Storytelling and Critical Listening in EYL: Exploring the Impact of Let's Read on Learners' Engagement and Comprehension

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of interactive digital storytelling on young learners' engagement, critical listening, and listening comprehension in a community-based learning environment. Grounded in the framework of digital transformation in English language learning, the study integrates an interactive read-aloud approach using the *Let's Read* platform. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed involving 15 learners aged 9–12 from a community reading center (*Taman Bacaan Masyarakat*). Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-listening tests, while qualitative data were obtained from engagement checklists, field notes, and interviews. The findings revealed a significant improvement in listening comprehension, supported by a high normalized gain and statistically significant pre- and post-test differences. Learners also demonstrated high levels of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement throughout the storytelling sessions. Furthermore, interactive teacher-guided questioning promoted emerging critical listening skills, including prediction, inference, evaluation, and personal reflection. The study demonstrates that combining digital storytelling with interactive read-aloud provides an effective and inclusive approach to enhancing English language learning, particularly in community-based and low-resource contexts, while contributing to community literacy development and innovative digital pedagogy.

Keywords: *Community Reading Center, Critical Listening, Digital Storytelling, Engagement, EYL.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital transformation has significantly reshaped educational practices across the world, particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT). According to Bond et al. (2024), emerging digital technologies have transformed conventional teacher-centered instruction into more interactive, learner-centered, and multimodal learning environments that promote meaningful communication and active

participation. This transformation aligns with the growing demand for twenty-first-century competencies, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and digital literacy, which have become essential learning outcomes in contemporary education (OECD, 2023). Consequently, educators are increasingly encouraged to integrate innovative digital pedagogies that not only improve language proficiency but also foster learners' higher-order thinking skills and active engagement throughout the learning process (Redecker, 2022).

English for Young Learners (EYL) has become one of the educational areas most influenced by digital transformation. As Ozfidan (2019) explains, young learners acquire language differently from adolescents and adults because they learn more effectively through meaningful interaction, visual support, stories, play, and authentic experiences. Therefore, instructional approaches that integrate multimodal learning experiences are considered particularly appropriate for children. Likewise, Lim, Zakaria, and Aryadoust (2022) reported that technology-enhanced learning environments increase learners' motivation, participation, and language achievement by presenting information through multiple sensory channels that support children's cognitive development.

Among various digital pedagogical innovations, digital storytelling has emerged as one of the most promising approaches for English language instruction. Wang et al. (2026) defines digital storytelling as the integration of traditional storytelling with digital illustrations, narration, audio, and interactive multimedia elements that enable learners to experience language through visual and auditory modalities simultaneously. Similarly, Lim et al. (2022) argued that multimodal storytelling facilitates deeper comprehension, increases learners' motivation, and creates meaningful learning opportunities that extend beyond vocabulary acquisition toward critical thinking and language production. Furthermore, the systematic review conducted by Rustam and Guo (2025) concluded that digital storytelling consistently enhances learner engagement, language achievement, communication skills, and learner autonomy across diverse educational settings.

Listening is widely acknowledged as the foundation of language acquisition because it enables learners to receive, process, and construct meaning before developing productive language skills. According to Vandergrift and Cross (2021), listening is an active cognitive process involving linguistic decoding, inferencing, interpretation, and meaning construction rather than merely hearing spoken language. Nevertheless, listening instruction in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

classrooms remains dominated by teacher explanations, scripted recordings, and factual comprehension questions that primarily assess learners' ability to recall explicit information. Akdamar and Sütçü (2021) argued that such instructional practices provide limited opportunities for learners to analyze spoken information, infer implied meanings, evaluate characters' decisions, or formulate evidence-based opinions. Consequently, listening is frequently treated as a passive receptive skill instead of an active process requiring reasoning and critical interpretation.

To address these limitations, increasing scholarly attention has been directed toward critical listening, which extends beyond literal comprehension by requiring learners to interpret, infer, predict, evaluate, and reflect upon spoken texts. According to Palanisamy and Rajasekaran (2025), critical listening is closely associated with higher-order thinking skills and has become an essential component of twenty-first-century language education. Likewise, Tabieh et al. (2021) found that story-based digital learning environments naturally encourage learners to explain characters' motivations, predict future events, evaluate actions, and connect stories with their own experiences. Therefore, digital storytelling accompanied by teacher-guided questioning may serve as an effective pedagogical strategy for integrating listening comprehension with critical thinking development.

One digital platform with considerable educational potential is Let's Read, an open-access multilingual digital library developed by The Asia Foundation (2024) to improve children's literacy through culturally relevant digital storybooks. Unlike commercial applications, Let's Read offers freely accessible illustrated stories that are developmentally appropriate for young learners and can be effectively implemented through interactive digital read-aloud. In the present study, the story *Grandpa's Animals* was selected because its narrative structure encourages learners to make predictions, identify problems, infer characters' intentions, evaluate decisions, and discuss moral values. As Febrianti (2024) suggested, teacher-mediated interactive storytelling transforms digital storybooks from simple technological resources into powerful pedagogical tools that facilitate dialogic interaction and collaborative meaning-making among young learners.

Another important construct in digital language learning is learner engagement, which encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive participation during learning activities. According to Fredricks et al. (2023), engaged learners demonstrate greater

attention, curiosity, persistence, and cognitive investment while interacting with instructional materials. Similarly, Chi, Nor Shaid, and Sulaiman (2025) reported that digital storytelling enhances behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement because multimodal narratives stimulate emotional involvement, teacher questioning promotes cognitive processing, and collaborative activities encourage active participation. High learner engagement is therefore expected to facilitate improvements in listening comprehension as well as higher-order listening abilities.

Despite the increasing number of studies investigating digital storytelling in English language education, several important research gaps remain. First, most previous studies have primarily examined the effects of digital storytelling on vocabulary learning, reading comprehension, speaking performance, or general listening comprehension (Lim et al., 2022; Rustam & Guo, 2025), while relatively few have focused specifically on the development of critical listening as a higher-order cognitive skill. Second, existing studies generally employ digital storytelling as a technological medium without emphasizing teacher-mediated interactive read-aloud, despite its theoretical importance for scaffolding children's reasoning and language development (Tabieh et al., 2021; Febrianti, 2024). Third, previous research has been conducted predominantly in formal educational institutions, whereas empirical evidence from community-based learning environments, such as community reading center, remains scarce. Finally, only a limited number of studies have simultaneously examined the relationships among interactive digital storytelling, learner engagement, critical listening, and listening comprehension within a single conceptual framework.

To address these gaps, the present study proposes a novel pedagogical framework that integrates interactive digital storytelling through Let's Read, teacher-mediated interactive read-aloud, multidimensional learner engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive), and critical listening within a community-based English learning context. Unlike previous studies that mainly evaluated learning outcomes in formal classrooms, this study investigates how digital storytelling implemented at a community reading center supports children's higher-order listening development through guided interaction and dialogic questioning. Furthermore, by positioning learner engagement as an integral mechanism underlying the development of critical listening and listening comprehension, this study offers a more comprehensive explanation of how digital storytelling contributes to English language learning in the era of digital transformation. The findings are expected to enrich the literature on

English for Young Learners (EYL) while providing practical implications for teachers, literacy practitioners, and community learning organizations seeking innovative approaches to language education.

METHOD

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data to explain and enrich the quantitative findings. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), this design enables researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of both the effectiveness of an intervention and the processes underlying the observed outcomes. The mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate because this study aimed not only to measure improvements in listening comprehension but also to explore learners' engagement and critical listening development during interactive digital storytelling.

The research was conducted at Rumah Baca KiMiChiGO, a community reading center in Serang, Banten, Indonesia. Community-based learning environments provide authentic contexts for meaningful language learning through voluntary participation and social interaction, making them particularly suitable for English for Young Learners (EYL) (Pinter, 2023). The participants were 15 elementary school students in Grades 4–6 (aged 9–12 years), selected through purposive sampling because they regularly attended literacy activities, possessed basic English proficiency, and had parental consent to participate.

The instructional intervention utilized the digital story *Grandpa's Animals* from the *Let's Read* digital library. The story was delivered through interactive digital read-aloud, where the researcher projected the story onto a large screen while reading it expressively and facilitating prediction, inferential, evaluative, and reflective discussions. As Tabieh et al. (2021) emphasized, teacher-guided questioning during digital storytelling promotes active listening, higher-order thinking, and meaningful classroom interaction.

Data were collected using four instruments: (1) a listening comprehension pre-test and post-test, (2) a learners' engagement checklist assessing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, (3) classroom observations and field notes, and (4) interview. The engagement checklist was adapted from the multidimensional learner

engagement framework proposed by Fredricks et al. (2023). Before implementation, all instruments were validated by experts in English language education, educational assessment, and educational technology, and their reliability was confirmed through a pilot study using Cronbach's alpha coefficients above the acceptable threshold (Hair et al., 2022).

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics, the Shapiro–Wilk test for normality, a paired-samples *t*-test, Cohen's *d*, and normalized gain (N-gain) were employed to examine the effectiveness of the intervention (Field, 2024). Qualitative data from observations, field notes, and interview transcripts were analyzed using the thematic analysis procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022), including familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and interpretation. Finally, both datasets were integrated during the interpretation stage to provide a comprehensive explanation of how interactive digital storytelling through *Let's Read* enhanced listening comprehension, critical listening, and learner engagement in a community-based English learning environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pre-Test and Post-Test

This study aimed to explore the effect of interactive digital storytelling through the Let's Read platform on critical listening, learner engagement, and listening comprehension among English for Young Learners (EYL) in a Community Reading Center. A total of 15 participants aged 9–12 years took part in interactive read-aloud sessions conducted over several learning meetings. The effectiveness of the intervention was analyzed using pre-test scores, post-test scores, and Normalized Gain (N-Gain). The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Comparison of Mean Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Variable	Value
Number of Participant	15
Mean Pre-test Score	50.40
Mean Post-test Score	85.20
Mean Improvement	34.80
Mean N-Gain	0.70

Category	High
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The results presented in Table 1 indicate a substantial improvement in participants' listening ability after participating in learning activities using the Let's Read platform. The mean pre-test score increased from 50.40 to 85.20 in the post-test, representing an average improvement of 34.80 points. The calculated Normalized Gain (N-Gain) was 0.70, indicating a high level of learning improvement (or the upper boundary of the medium category according to Hake's classification). These findings suggest that integrating digital storytelling with the interactive read-aloud strategy effectively enhances learners' ability to comprehend spoken information.

This improvement can be explained by the characteristics of the Let's Read platform, which provides illustrated stories featuring engaging visuals, contextual narratives, and language appropriate for children's developmental levels. During interactive read-aloud sessions, learners were not merely passive listeners; they were encouraged to predict story events, answer comprehension questions, relate the story to their personal experiences, and express opinions about the characters and events. These activities promoted active meaning construction, enabling learners not only to hear the stories but also to engage in critical thinking about the information they received.

Furthermore, the statistical analysis revealed a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Paired Sample t-test Results between Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Variable	Mean Difference	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-Test-Post-Test	-34.80	4.46	1.15	-30.22	14	< 0.001*

Note:

- df = degrees of freedom ($n - 1 = 15 - 1 = 14$).
- Significant at $\alpha = 0.05$.

The Paired Sample t-test yielded $t(14) = -30.22$ with Sig. (2-tailed) < 0.001 . Since the significance value was lower than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) was accepted. Therefore, a statistically significant difference existed between the participants' pre-test and post-test scores after receiving instruction through interactive digital storytelling using the Let's Read platform.

The participants' mean score increased from 50.40 on the pre-test to 85.20 on the post-test, with an average gain of 34.80 points. These findings demonstrate that interactive digital storytelling had a significant positive effect on learners' listening comprehension. This conclusion is further supported by the N-Gain value of 0.70, which indicates a high level of instructional effectiveness. Consequently, the combined evidence from the N-Gain analysis and the Paired Sample t-test confirms that the interactive read-aloud approach implemented through the Let's Read platform is effective in improving young learners' listening skills.

Learners' Engagement

There are the learners' engagement indicators and summary:

Table 3
Behavioral Engagement Indicators

Indicator	Mean	SD
Paying attention to the story	3.87	0.35
Responding to teacher's questions	3.73	0.46
Participating in discussion	3.67	0.49
Following instructions	3.93	0.26
Volunteering to answer	3.60	0.51

Table 4
Emotional Engagement Indicators

Indicator	Mean	SD
Showing enthusiasm	3.87	0.35
Enjoying digital illustrations	3.93	0.26

Expressing curiosity	3.80	0.41
Smiling or laughing	3.87	0.35
Showing confidence	3.60	0.51

Table 5
Cognitive Engagement Indicators

Indicator	Mean	SD
Predicting story events	3.67	0.49
Making inferences	3.53	0.52
Explaining reasons	3.47	0.52
Connecting with personal experience	3.60	0.51
Evaluating characters' decisions	3.40	0.51

Table 6
Statistical Summary of Learners' Engagement

Engagement Dimension	Mean	SD	Category
Behavioral Engagement	3.76	0.41	High
Emotional Engagement	3.81	0.38	Very High
Cognitive Engagement	3.53	0.51	High
Overall Engagement	3.70	0.43	High

The descriptive statistics revealed that emotional engagement obtained the highest mean score ($M = 3.81$), followed by behavioral engagement ($M = 3.76$) and cognitive engagement ($M = 3.53$). These findings indicate that interactive digital storytelling implemented through the *Let's Read* platform successfully fostered a very high level of emotional engagement while simultaneously maintaining high levels of behavioral participation and cognitive engagement among the learners.

The high levels of emotional and behavioral engagement observed in this study are consistent with the findings of Chi et al. (2025), who reported that digital storytelling enhances learners' emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and active classroom participation through multimodal support and interactive learning experiences.

Similarly, the high level of behavioral engagement supports the findings of Tabieh et al. (2021), who demonstrated that interactive digital storytelling significantly improves elementary school students' active listening skills and classroom participation during learning activities.

Furthermore, the high cognitive engagement scores reinforce the findings of Rustam and Guo (2025), who argued that digital storytelling promotes higher-order thinking processes, including inference, prediction, evaluation, and reflection, all of which are fundamental components of critical listening development.

Observation data collected throughout the learning process also revealed improvements in behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. In terms of behavioral engagement, most participants paid close attention to the stories, voluntarily raised their hands to answer questions, and consistently followed the teacher's instructions until the end of each session. Regarding emotional engagement, learners demonstrated enthusiasm, enjoyed the digital illustrations, laughed at humorous parts of the stories, and expressed curiosity about how the stories would end. From a cognitive perspective, participants gradually became capable of predicting story developments, describing simple conclusions, identifying key information, and providing reasons to support their responses. These observations indicate that digital media combined with interactive storytelling creates a more meaningful learning experience than conventional listening instruction.

The findings are consistent with those reported by Akdamar and Sütçü (2021), who found that digital storytelling significantly improved EFL learners' listening skills while fostering positive attitudes toward technology-enhanced learning. Through digitally presented stories enriched with visual and audio elements, in this study using read aloud approach, learners received multimodal support that facilitates deeper comprehension of story content.

The results also support the study conducted by Tabieh et al. (2021), which concluded that digital storytelling contributes to the development of active listening and creative thinking among elementary school students. Throughout the learning activities in the present study, participants demonstrated the ability to make predictions, draw inferences, and respond critically to story content. These skills

represent essential components of critical listening, encompassing the ability to understand, evaluate, and interpret spoken information reflectively.

From an English for Young Learners (EYL) perspective, the use of the Let's Read platform provides learners with authentic exposure to English in an enjoyable learning environment. The digital stories, accompanied by engaging illustrations, help reduce cognitive load when learners encounter unfamiliar vocabulary, while post-reading discussions encourage higher-order thinking. Consequently, learning extends beyond improving test performance to fostering essential 21st-century skills, including communication, critical thinking, and digital literacy.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that interactive digital storytelling using the Let's Read platform is an effective instructional strategy for enhancing listening comprehension, learner engagement, and critical listening among young learners in Community Reading Center. The mean N-Gain score of 0.70 indicates that this instructional approach produces a substantial positive learning impact. Therefore, integrating digital platforms with interactive read-aloud strategies can serve as an innovative alternative for educators and literacy community organizers seeking to create more inclusive, engaging, and meaningful English language learning experiences in the digital era.

Field Notes

Classroom Situation

The learning session was conducted in the reading area of Rumah Baca KiMiChiGO using a television with large screen. All fifteen participants attended the session and appeared enthusiastic before the storytelling activity began. The classroom environment was conducive, with students seated in a semicircle to ensure clear visibility of the projected digital story. The teacher briefly introduced key vocabulary and encouraged students to observe the cover illustration before reading the story.

Behavioral Engagement

Throughout the storytelling session, students remained attentive and consistently focused on the projected illustrations. Most participants voluntarily raised their hands when the teacher posed prediction and comprehension questions. Students actively followed instructions.

Emotional Engagement

Students demonstrated strong emotional involvement during the storytelling activity. They frequently smiled and laughed when humorous scenes appeared and expressed curiosity about what would happen next in the story. Several students showed excitement by spontaneously commenting on the animals and asking additional questions related to the story. The colorful illustrations appeared to sustain learners' interest throughout the session.

Cognitive Engagement

The teacher paused several times to encourage prediction and inference. Most students were able to predict subsequent events based on the illustrations and previous story episodes. During the discussion, several learners justified their opinions by referring to specific events in the story and connected the moral lesson with their own daily experiences. Although a few participants initially provided literal responses, teacher scaffolding helped them elaborate their reasoning and evaluate the characters' decisions.

Critical Listening

The majority of learners successfully identified the main idea and important details of the story. Several students explained why the grandfather acted in certain ways and inferred the characters' feelings based on contextual clues. During the reflective discussion, many participants recognized the moral value of caring for animals and respecting others, demonstrating emerging critical listening skills.

Representative Student Responses

S03: *"I think the gift is food."*

S08: *"Maybe it's toys."*

S11: *"If I were Grandpa, I would take care of all the animals too."*

Researcher's Reflection

The interactive digital read-aloud approach successfully maintained students' attention and encouraged active participation throughout the session. Teacher-guided questioning played a significant role in promoting prediction, inference, and evaluation rather than simple recall. The digital illustrations supported comprehension by helping learners interpret unfamiliar vocabulary through contextual visual cues. Overall, the session demonstrated that interactive digital storytelling fostered meaningful engagement and created opportunities for

developing higher-order listening skills in a community-based English learning environment.

INTERVIEW

These are some responses of the learners after having this activity:

"I feel happy." (S03)

"It's useful for me." (S07)

"I got some new vocabularies." (S11)

"I want to hear more stories because learning English is fun like this." (S06)

"Before the teacher told us the next page, I tried to guess what he would do." (S04)

"I like the pictures because they help me understand the story even when I don't know all the English words." (S10)

The learners showed their engagement not only emotional but also behavioral and cognitive. It means that this is impactful and effective for them.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Those are some conclusion and suggestions from this study.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that interactive digital storytelling through the *Let's Read* platform is an effective instructional approach for enhancing listening comprehension, critical listening, and learner engagement among English for Young Learners (EYL) in a community-based learning environment. By integrating digital storybooks with teacher-mediated interactive read-aloud, learners were encouraged to participate actively, think critically, and construct meaning through prediction, inference, evaluation, and reflection. The multimodal features of digital storytelling also created an engaging learning environment that supported learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement throughout the learning process.

Beyond improving language learning outcomes, this study contributes to the growing discourse on digital transformation in English language education by demonstrating that community reading centers can serve as effective settings for implementing innovative digital pedagogies. The integration of *Let's Read*, interactive read-aloud, and critical listening activities provides a practical and

accessible instructional model that supports meaningful English learning while fostering higher-order thinking skills and twenty-first-century competencies among young learners.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings of this study, four recommendations are proposed. First, English teachers are encouraged to integrate interactive digital storytelling and teacher mediated read aloud into listening instruction to foster learner engagement, critical listening, and listening comprehension through meaningful classroom interaction.

Second, community reading center is encouraged to incorporate digital storytelling into their regular literacy programs to provide engaging and technology-supported English learning opportunities in non-formal educational settings.

Third, curriculum developers and educational policymakers should consider integrating digital storytelling and critical listening activities into English language curricula to support the development of twenty-first-century competencies, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and digital literacy.

Finally, future studies are recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples, longer intervention periods, and different educational contexts. Further research may also examine additional variables, such as speaking proficiency, vocabulary acquisition, learner motivation, digital literacy, or self-regulated learning, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of interactive digital storytelling in English language education.

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