A Literature Review on Culture-Based Digital Storytelling to Enhance EFL Students' English Writing Skills

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Abstract

This study explores the potential of culture-based digital storytelling as a pedagogical approach to enhancing English writing skills among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) by integrating multimodal learning features with culturally familiar narratives. Adopting a literature review methodology, the study synthesizes findings from 27 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2024 that examine EFL writing challenges, instructional strategies, digital storytelling practices, and the incorporation of cultural materials in language learning. The synthesis reveals that EFL learners frequently encounter difficulties in idea generation, textual coherence, and linguistic accuracy, challenges that are often exacerbated by cognitive overload and affective barriers. The reviewed studies indicate that digital storytelling supports writing development by providing multimodal scaffolding through the integration of visual, auditory, and textual modes, which enhances learners' comprehension, engagement, and narrative organization. In addition, the use of culturally familiar narratives, particularly local folklore, facilitates conceptual understanding, reduces cognitive demands, and fosters emotional connection with writing tasks. The findings suggest that culture-based digital storytelling constitutes a mutually reinforcing instructional model in which multimodal support and cultural relevance jointly address both cognitive and affective dimensions of writing. This integrated approach enables learners to construct and express ideas more meaningfully in written form. The study concludes that culture-based digital storytelling offers a pedagogically sound framework for strengthening EFL learners' narrative writing competence and emphasizes the need for further empirical research to investigate its classroom implementation and effectiveness across diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: *Culture-based Digital Storytelling, Cultural Familiarity in Language Learning, EFL Writing Development, Multimodal Writing Instruction, Narrative Writing Skills*

INTRODUCTION

English writing skills are increasingly essential in today's globalised and academic environment, especially for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Writing is one of the most demanding skills because it requires students to manage linguistic accuracy, conceptual organisation, rhetorical structure, and cultural relevance simultaneously. Hyland (2004) explains that writing is a complex cognitive activity, integrating rhetorical elements, linguistic control, and communicative intent. Brown (2009) emphasizes that writing is a recurrent activity that necessitates planning and revision. Additionally, Harmer (2009) emphasizes that psychological impediments, such as a fear of error, impede students' inclination to engage in writing tasks. Collectively, these factors impede the student's ability to produce coherent, compelling written compositions.

Especially, recent research underscores the importance of instructional approaches that provide structured guidance and meaningful interaction for learners who face

literacy-related difficulties. Wijayatiningsih et al. (2022) found that scaffolding within blended learning environments enables EFL learners to develop writing competence more confidently by offering targeted support that aligns with their learning needs. Complementing this, Robin (2008) highlights the multimodal advantages of digital storytelling, which helps learners visualize narrative flow, activate ideas, and enhance conceptual understanding during the writing process.

Although digital storytelling has been widely studied, existing research has not fully explored how it can be integrated with culturally resonant materials to address writing difficulties. This perspective emphasizes the importance of comprehensible and meaningful input; however, digital storytelling research often overlooks the role of cultural familiarity in lowering affective barriers. Nunan (2015) emphasizes that learners develop writing skills more effectively when instructional tasks are meaningfully connected to their background knowledge; however, many existing studies have not sufficiently incorporated local narratives that learners already understand. From a sociocultural perspective, Kramsch (1993) argues that language and culture are inseparable, as meaning is constructed through shared cultural symbols, values, and social practices. Similarly, Byram (1997) highlights the central role of cultural knowledge in shaping learners' communicative competence and engagement in language learning. Despite these theoretical foundations, research on digital storytelling has largely focused on technological affordances and multimodal design, often overlooking how cultural familiarity and identity mediate learning processes. Consequently, the integration of culture-based narratives with digital multimodal tools remains underexplored. This gap is particularly evident in EFL writing research, where few studies have examined how culturally familiar stories, such as; Indonesian folklore *Timun Mas* that can be incorporated into digital storytelling as a pedagogical model to support writing development. Therefore, further investigation is needed to understand how cultural familiarity interacts with digital storytelling to reduce cognitive and affective barriers and enhance EFL learners' writing skills.

This gap is significant because cultural familiarity can reduce cognitive load, enhance engagement, and help students organize narratives more intuitively. The novelty of this study lies in integrating digital storytelling with local cultural narratives, specifically *Timun Mas*, to create a pedagogical model that supports both the cognitive and affective dimensions of writing. This integrative perspective has not been sufficiently examined in prior research, making it a meaningful contribution to the field.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a **thematic literature review** with systematic search and selection procedures to examine prior research on EFL writing challenges, instructional strategies, digital storytelling, and culture-based media. This type of review is appropriate for synthesizing conceptual and empirical trends across diverse study designs while allowing for in-depth thematic interpretation rather than statistical A

thematic literature review enables researchers to identify recurring patterns, dominant instructional approaches, and theoretical gaps within a field, particularly when the research focus spans pedagogical, technological, and cultural dimensions. By systematically analyzing 27 peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2024, this review provides a structured overview of existing knowledge and highlights underexplored intersections that specifically the integration of culture-based narratives with digital storytelling in EFL writing instruction. Unlike a meta-analysis or strictly systematic review, this approach allows for flexibility in synthesizing qualitative and mixed-methods research, making it suitable for educational contexts where methodological diversity is common. Therefore, the thematic literature review design is well suited to addressing the conceptual scope and exploratory aims of the present study Synder, 2019; Kraus et al., 2022). The goal of this method is to synthesize theoretical and empirical insights to build a coherent understanding of how culture-based digital storytelling, particularly the *Timun Mas* narrative, may improve EFL learners' writing skills.

The data sources for this review were Google Scholar, SINTA, ERIC, and DOAJ. Several keyword combinations were used during the search process, including "writing skills, EFL writing, digital storytelling, culture-based learning, folklore, and *Timun Mas*." These keywords were selected to capture studies focusing on writing pedagogy, multimodal learning, and cultural integration in English instruction.

The inclusion criteria were as follows; (1) peer-reviewed journal articles; (2) publications from 2010 to 2024; (3) relevance to writing instruction, digital storytelling, or cultural pedagogy; (4) availability of full-text; and (5) articles written in English or Indonesian. Studies were excluded if they were duplicates, non-academic sources, shallow conference abstracts, or unrelated to the central focus of this study. Through this process, an initial pool of 142 articles was identified, of which 53 articles met the preliminary relevance criteria. Following a full-text screening, 27 articles were retained for the final thematic analysis. The flowchart can be seen in Figure 1.
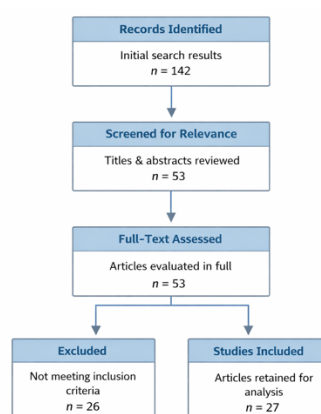

*Figure 1. **Selection Process***

Data collection and analysis were conducted using a thematic approach. Each article was reviewed to extract significant arguments, pedagogical insights, and conceptual

contributions. Through coding and categorization, four dominant themes emerged consistently across the literature: (1) writing challenges in EFL learning, (2) instructional strategies for developing writing skills, (3) digital storytelling practices as multimodal pedagogy, and (4) culture-based media, particularly local folklore such as *Timun Mas*. These themes form the conceptual framework for interpreting the role of culture-based digital storytelling in supporting English writing development.

In addition, the thematic analysis allowed the researchers to trace how these four themes intersect and support one another within the broader context of writing development. By comparing theoretical perspectives and empirical findings across the selected studies, it became clear that writing difficulties are often intertwined with limited exposure to narrative structures and insufficient support during the writing process. Instructional strategies such as scaffolding and modelling were frequently shown to mitigate these issues, especially when combined with technology-enhanced learning tools (Klimova, 2020; Sundari & Febriyanti, 2023; Wijayatiningsih et al., 2022). Digital storytelling, in particular, repeatedly emerged as an effective pedagogical intervention because it integrates visual, auditory, and textual elements, thereby providing multimodal support that strengthens learners' comprehension of narrative flow.

Furthermore, the incorporation of culture-based materials, especially familiar folklore such as *Timun Mas* was identified as a key factor that enhances learners' ability to generate ideas and organize narrative structures more intuitively. Learners benefit from drawing on pre-existing cultural knowledge that acts as a conceptual scaffold, enabling them to focus more on linguistic expression rather than struggling to conceptualize story content. When synthesized, the literature indicates that the intersection of digital storytelling and cultural familiarity provides a dual scaffolding effect: multimodal support aids structural understanding, while cultural narratives reduce cognitive load and increase engagement.

Overall, the thematic analysis not only categorized recurring patterns but also clarified conceptual relationships across studies, enabling a deeper understanding of how culture-based digital storytelling can serve as a comprehensive pedagogical model. This integrated perspective establishes a strong foundation for examining its potential application in diverse EFL writing contexts and highlights the need for further empirical validation in classroom implementations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the reviewed literature generated four central themes relevant to the aim of this study: (1) persistent writing challenges in EFL contexts, (2) instructional strategies that support writing development, (3) digital storytelling as a multimodal pedagogical approach, and (4) culture-based media, with particular attention to the *Timun Mas* folklore. These themes collectively address the research question of how cultural familiarity and digital storytelling enhance EFL students' writing competence.

The first theme highlights recurring difficulties in idea generation, narrative organization, coherence, and linguistic accuracy. These issues appeared consistently across the studies reviewed and were identified through thematic coding of repeated patterns in the literature. The findings indicate that writing problems are not merely linguistic but also cognitive and affective. Learners often struggle to access prior knowledge, maintain narrative flow, and sustain clarity of expression in a foreign language. The second theme concerns pedagogical strategies that have demonstrated consistent effectiveness in improving writing performance. Scaffolding, modelling, process-based instruction, and collaborative learning repeatedly emerged across the studies synthesized. This theme was derived through cross-comparison of empirical evidence, emphasizing guided support in narrative construction. Digital storytelling (DST) emerged as a prominent instructional framework for supporting narrative writing. Across the reviewed studies, DST was shown to facilitate comprehension and generation of narrative structure through its integration of visual, auditory, and textual elements. The theme was identified through thematic synthesis of research examining the implementation of DST in EFL contexts.

Next DST supports learner cognition by distributing semantic load across multiple modes, a process consistent with multimedia learning theory (Mayer & Moreno, 2007). Empirical evidence demonstrates that DST promotes narrative sequencing, enhances engagement, and reduces writing anxiety. Previous research shows that digital storytelling improves EFL students' writing by enhancing idea organization, narrative coherence, and engagement. It also highlights that language learning is shaped by cultural experiences and cultural knowledge. However, most digital storytelling studies focus on technology rather than cultural familiarity. As a result, there is a clear research gap in exploring how culturally familiar stories, such as local folklore, can be integrated into digital storytelling to support EFL writing development (Nunan, 2015). These findings refine existing understandings of DST by positioning it as a form of structural scaffolding rather than solely a motivational tool. The final theme underscores the contribution of culture-based media, with particular emphasis on the *Timun Mas* folklore. Studies incorporating cultural narratives into writing tasks reported significant improvements in idea generation, narrative detail, and writing confidence. This theme was developed through the synthesis of literature on culturally embedded literacy practices.

Furthermore, cultural familiarity serves as a conceptual scaffold, reducing cognitive load and facilitating narrative construction. Learners draw on pre-existing schemas, character roles, plot progression, and moral structure to provide a foundation for expressing ideas in English. This aligns with sociocultural perspectives on meaning-making that view learning as socially mediated (Vygotsky, 1978), while also resonating with psycholinguistic views that highlight the role of comprehensible input in language development (Krashen, 1985). (Krashen, 1985) and UNESCO's (2018) framework on culturally responsive pedagogy. Local empirical findings corroborate this view:

(Chatterjee et al., 2019)noted that culturally grounded writing tasks improved narrative coherence, while (Kormos & Suzuki, 2024) found that cultural familiarity combined with digital media generated richer narrative elaboration. Collectively, the four themes indicate that cultural familiarity and digital storytelling operate in a mutually reinforcing relationship. Writing challenges, particularly those related to idea generation and narrative organization, can be mitigated through instructional scaffolding. However, the combination of digital multimodal support and culturally familiar content produces more robust effects.

However, digital storytelling offers structural scaffolding by enabling learners to visualize narrative sequences, while culture-based media provide conceptual scaffolding by grounding narrative construction in familiar schemas. The integration of these components leads to a pedagogical model conceptualized in this study as culture-based digital storytelling. This integrated model contributes to ongoing theoretical discourse by extending multimodal learning theory and refining culturally responsive literacy frameworks to incorporate the cognitive advantages of narrative familiarity.

Moreover, these strategies facilitate the internalization of narrative schema and promote metacognitive awareness. Scaffolding offers stepwise assistance, modelling provides explicit exemplars of narrative structure, and process-based instruction encourages cyclical drafting and revision. Collaborative environments, in turn, promote negotiation of meaning and exposure to varied linguistic input. These findings align with sociocultural and constructivist learning frameworks and are supported by who argue for structured guidance in developing writing proficiency (Kulanovic et al., 2025).

In addition, these observations correspond to established theoretical perspectives in L2 writing, which conceptualize writing as a recursive, cognitively demanding process requiring sustained planning and revision (Hyland, 2016; Harmer, 2004; Brown, 2007). Evidence from Indonesian studies further reinforces this view. Wijayatiningsih et al. (2021) reported that hesitation during the drafting stage is primarily associated with limited narrative familiarity and low confidence, underscoring the role of content familiarity in reducing cognitive load. These findings affirm the need for writing instruction that provides conceptual and structural support, enabling learners to overcome cognitive barriers.

The integrated findings across the reviewed literature further emphasize that writing development in EFL contexts is not an isolated linguistic skill but a multidimensional process shaped by cognitive, cultural, emotional, and technological factors. The synthesis indicates that writing challenges cannot be attributed solely to learners' linguistic limitations; instead, they emerge from the interaction between insufficient content knowledge, unfamiliar narrative structures, lack of confidence, and insufficient instructional support. The incorporation of digital storytelling and culture-based media

appears to directly address these intertwined barriers by providing learners with both structural and conceptual scaffolding.

A striking theme that emerged from the literature is the role of *schema activation* in facilitating narrative writing. Many EFL learners enter the writing classroom with limited exposure to narrative conventions in English. While they may have a strong narrative background in their first language, the transfer of narrative structure across languages is not always automatic. Culture-based media, such as the *Timun Mas* folklore, assist learners in bridging this gap by activating familiar schemas that help them conceptualize narrative sequences more effectively. This is supported by Krashen (1985) view that meaningful input is essential for lowering the affective filter, as familiar cultural narratives reduce anxiety and promote risk-taking in writing. When learners recognize characters, plotlines, and moral lessons from their cultural experiences, they can devote more cognitive effort to linguistic expression rather than conceptualizing unfamiliar content.

The analysis also reveals that digital storytelling amplifies the cognitive benefits of familiar narratives by transforming them into multimodal representations. This is consistent with (Mayer & Moreno, 2007) multimedia learning principles, which argue that information presented in dual channels (visual and auditory) reduces cognitive load and enhances comprehension. When learners engage with digital stories that visually represent scenes, characters, or events from familiar folklore, their mental processing is significantly eased. They can visualise the story as it unfolds, which assists in planning paragraphs, organising events chronologically, and establishing coherence. As several studies reported, this multimodal input encourages learners to internalise narrative organisation more deeply than through text-only instruction.

Moreover, findings across different cultural contexts demonstrate that digital storytelling is particularly effective when learners are asked to reconstruct, retell, or expand stories they have previously encountered in oral or written form. This approach encourages them to engage in *narrative transformation*, where they reinterpret or translate cultural narratives into English. Such transformation stimulates critical thinking, creativity, and language manipulation, which are fundamental to developing advanced writing skills. Chatterjee et al. (2019), for instance, observed that students working with familiar cultural materials displayed greater narrative coherence and more vivid descriptive details, which they attributed to the learners' strong conceptual understanding of the story. This aligns with (Kormos & Suzuki, 2024) findings that cultural familiarity enhances narrative elaboration, leading to richer and more expressive writing.

Another important result emerging from the literature concerns *learner motivation*. Many researchers noted that students' motivation to write improves significantly when the writing task connects with their cultural identity. Culture-based storytelling validates learners' backgrounds and allows them to see their heritage as valuable

academic material. This validation fosters a sense of ownership over the writing task, making the learning process more meaningful. When cultural narratives are combined with digital tools, students often report heightened engagement, enjoyment, and curiosity. The novelty of digital storytelling technologies, such as animation software, voice recording, and image editing that attracts learners who may otherwise be reluctant to write. This motivational boost has been shown to improve both writing fluency and willingness to revise drafts.

The reviewed literature also highlights the importance of *process-based writing instruction*, particularly when paired with digital storytelling. Writing is widely recognised as a recursive process that involves planning, drafting, revising, and editing Hyland (2004) Harmer (2009) Digital storytelling fits naturally into this framework because story creation typically requires multiple stages: selecting images, scripting narration, sequencing events, and revising multimedia components. When learners engage in these recursive digital storytelling tasks, they simultaneously practice the stages of process writing. Several studies found that students who produced digital stories exhibited greater awareness of narrative structure and demonstrated improved ability to revise their written work. This suggests that the digital storytelling process reinforces metacognitive skills essential for effective writing.

In addition, collaborative dimensions of digital storytelling emerged as a key benefit. Many digital storytelling tasks require learners to work in pairs or groups, where they negotiate meaning, exchange vocabulary, and discuss story progression. These collaborative interactions provide learners with opportunities to receive feedback from peers, which is an essential component of sociocultural learning theory. Richards and Renandya (Alzhrani, 2022) emphasize that peer interaction and guided support are crucial in helping learners internalize writing skills. When storytelling activities incorporate collaborative learning, students benefit from shared knowledge construction, enhanced motivation, and exposure to diverse linguistic input. Group-based digital storytelling also encourages learners to use English for authentic communication, thereby providing a meaningful context for language production.

The reviewed literature additionally points to improvements in *linguistic accuracy* and *lexical variety* when students engage with multimodal cultural narratives. This improvement may stem from the fact that visual aids in digital stories provide concrete representations of settings, characters, and events, which facilitates vocabulary retrieval and syntactic structuring. Learners often generate more descriptive vocabulary when they can visually interpret the story. For example, vivid images of the giant, the forest, or magical objects in Timun Mas prompt learners to use adjectives, adverbs, and narrative verbs that enrich their writing. Some studies found that digital storytelling led to increased use of temporal connectors and cohesive devices, further strengthening narrative coherence.

Beyond linguistic outcomes, the findings also highlight the role of digital storytelling in reducing writing anxiety. Many EFL learners view writing as a high-stakes, error-prone activity. However, digital storytelling reframes writing as a creative, playful process that emphasizes meaning-making rather than grammatical perfection. The presence of images and audio elements shifts students' attention away from language accuracy toward overall communication. This shift reduces anxiety and can lead to improvements in writing fluency. Several researchers reported that students who previously struggled with writing were more willing to write when engaged in digital storytelling tasks.

Another important dimension emerging from the literature is the cultural relevance of digital content. Although digital storytelling is widely implemented in classrooms internationally, the cultural resonance of the narrative greatly influences its effectiveness. Studies that used foreign or unfamiliar stories reported mixed outcomes, suggesting that cultural distance can hinder comprehension and reduce engagement. In contrast, studies using local folklore observed more consistent improvements in writing performance. This reinforces the idea that cultural familiarity enhances cognitive accessibility, enabling learners to focus more on linguistic expression. Using *Timun Mas* as the cultural anchor aligns with UNESCO's (2018) recommendation to integrate culturally responsive pedagogy into all learning domains, including language education.

It is also worth noting that integrating digital storytelling with folklore supports identity formation among young learners. When students see their cultural heritage represented in digital formats, they experience a sense of pride and continuity. This identity affirmation strengthens their connection to the learning material and may motivate them to express themselves more confidently. Additionally, the use of folklore in digital storytelling provides opportunities for intergenerational knowledge transfer, as students may consult parents or elders to verify cultural elements, reinforcing cultural literacy alongside linguistic development.

The synthesis of the reviewed studies further suggests that teachers play a pivotal role in facilitating the integration of digital storytelling and culture-based media. Effective implementation requires teachers to provide clear instructions, scaffold digital skills, and guide students in aligning multimodal elements with narrative goals. Research indicates that when teachers adopt a facilitative role by providing modelling, exemplars, and feedback, so the students are more likely to produce coherent and creatively engaging stories. However, several studies also highlight the need for teacher training in digital literacy to ensure successful implementation. The lack of teacher preparedness in some contexts was identified as a barrier that may limit the pedagogical effectiveness of digital storytelling.

In terms of pedagogical implications, the literature strongly supports the integration of digital storytelling into writing curricula, particularly in contexts where learners face

challenges with narrative organization, idea generation, and motivation. Culture-based digital storytelling has the potential to transform writing instruction from a teacher-centered, text-heavy approach to a learner-centered, multimodal, culturally relevant practice(Arroba & Acosta, 2021; Choo et al., 2020; Cuesta et al., 2021; Sembiring & Simanjuntak, 2023). It aligns with constructivist principles by encouraging students to construct meaning through interaction with multimedia tools and cultural resources. Additionally, it offers a flexible platform that can be adapted for various proficiency levels, genres, and learning environments.

Finally, the literature underscores the need for further empirical studies to explore the long-term impact of culture-based digital storytelling on writing proficiency. While current evidence highlights substantial benefits, most studies focus on short-term interventions. Future research could examine how sustained integration of digital storytelling influences writing development over an academic year, how different age groups respond, and how digital storytelling can be adapted for expository or argumentative writing.

CONCLUSION

Integrating digital storytelling with culturally familiar narratives offers a practical and effective way to support EFL students' writing development. The analysis confirms that students struggle mainly with generating ideas, organising narratives, and maintaining linguistic accuracy. These challenges can be reduced when instruction provides both structural support and meaningful content.

In fact, digital storytelling contributes by presenting narrative sequences in a multimodal format that helps learners plan and construct their texts more clearly. Meanwhile, cultural stories such as *Timun Mas* supply familiar plot structures that make idea generation easier and reduce cognitive load. When combined, these two elements create a learning environment that is both supportive and engaging.

The study's central implication is straightforward: EFL writing instruction becomes more effective when technology is paired with culturally relevant materials. Teachers can use digital storytelling not only as a creative tool but also as a scaffold to help students visualize narrative flow. Cultural narratives can be selected to provide accessible content that students already understand.

Finally, in practical terms, this approach can improve narrative coherence, boost motivation, and reduce writing anxiety. Future research should examine how this combination works in classroom implementation, how students respond to it, and how it can be adapted for other genres or proficiency levels.

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