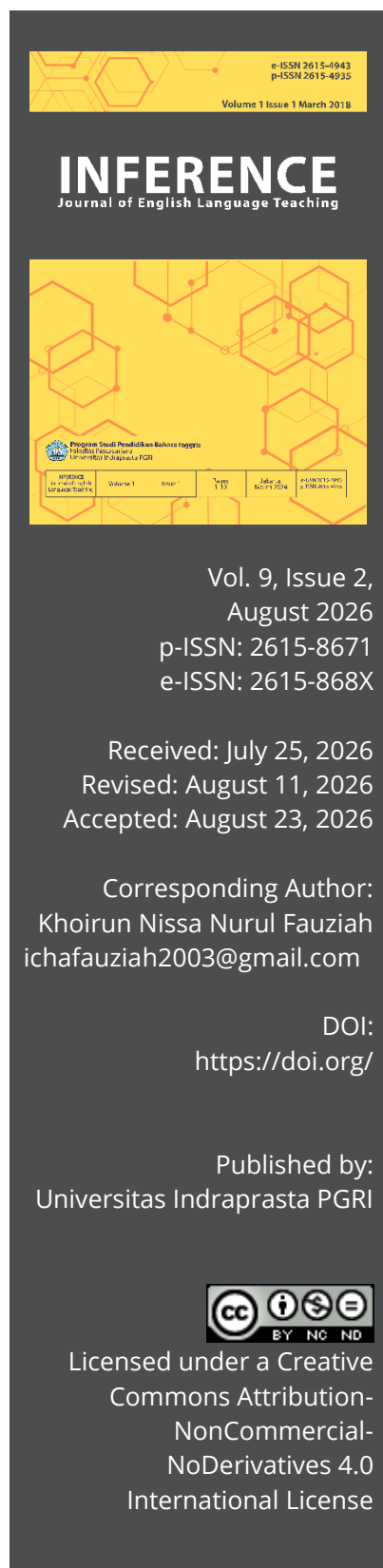




RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN SPEAKING DIFFICULTIES AND PERCEIVED PROGRESS IN DIGITAL STORYTELLING

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Abstract: This study aims to explore how students describe the relationship between speaking difficulties and perceived progress during a Digital Storytelling project in an EFL classroom. While previous research discusses the challenges and benefits of Digital Storytelling as two separate findings, little research has examined how they interrelate in students' learning experiences. This qualitative case study involved six eleventh-grade students from a high school in Garut Regency, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed three interrelated patterns: technical and contextual challenges influenced students' motivation and confidence, repeated practice supported by digital tools contributed to speaking improvement, and confidence developed differently among students. These findings suggest that speaking difficulties and perceived progress are interrelated aspects of students' learning experiences during Digital Storytelling. This study contributes to an understanding of students' speaking experiences and provides insights for teachers in supporting speaking instruction through Digital Storytelling.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling; Speaking Difficulties; Perceived Progress; Speaking Skills; EFL Students.

INTERAKSI ANTARA KESULITAN BERBICARA DAN KEMAJUAN YANG DIRASAKAN DALAM CERITA DIGITAL

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana siswa menggambarkan hubungan antara kesulitan berbicara dan persepsi kemajuan selama proyek Digital Storytelling di kelas EFL. Penelitian sebelumnya cenderung membahas tantangan dan manfaat Digital Storytelling sebagai dua temuan terpisah, sementara masih sedikit penelitian yang mengkaji keterkaitan keduanya dalam pengalaman belajar siswa. Studi kasus kualitatif ini melibatkan enam siswa kelas XI dari sebuah SMA di Kabupaten Garut, Indonesia. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Temuan penelitian mengungkap tiga pola yang saling berkaitan: hambatan teknis dan kontekstual memengaruhi motivasi dan kepercayaan diri siswa, praktik berulang yang

didukung oleh teknologi digital berkontribusi pada peningkatan kemampuan berbicara, serta kepercayaan diri berkembang secara berbeda pada tiap siswa. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan berbicara dan persepsi kemajuan merupakan aspek yang saling terkait dalam pengalaman belajar siswa. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman pengalaman berbicara siswa serta memberikan wawasan bagi guru dalam mendukung pembelajaran berbicara melalui penceritaan digital.

Kata kunci: Penceritaan Digital; Kesulitan Berbicara; Kemajuan yang Dirasakan; Keterampilan Berbicara; Siswa EFL.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking ability is one of the most important components of foreign language communication because through this skill, learners can apply their linguistic knowledge and strategies in meaningful interactions. However, speaking is also considered one of the most demanding skills to master, as it requires learners to process language in real time, manage cognitive load related to grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation simultaneously, and often cope with feelings of anxiety or low confidence. Chou (2024) emphasizes that speaking in a foreign language involves various interrelated linguistic components that collectively contribute to effective communication, intercultural communication, and learners' self-confidence.

Although speaking proficiency is one of the primary goals in English language learning, many EFL students still face various challenges in developing it. Musabal and AbdAlgame (2023) found that limited opportunities to practice speaking, low self-confidence, and a lack of support in the learning process are some of the factors that hinder students' participation in speaking activities. A comparable picture emerges in Indonesian EFL settings, where Digital Storytelling has been shown to support speaking development even among students whose motivation levels differ considerably (Sulistianingsih et al., 2025). These conditions highlight the need for a learning approach that provides students with more opportunities to practice speaking in a supportive and meaningful environment.

One approach that is increasingly being used is Digital Storytelling. According to Yu and Wang (2025), Digital Storytelling is a storytelling practice that integrates digital technology with various elements such as text, images, audio, and video to produce multimodal stories. Furthermore, a bibliometric review conducted by Mazlan et al. (2025) showed that research on Digital Storytelling in language education continues to increase, indicating growing attention to its potential in supporting speaking development. In secondary education, Imama and Pusparini (2025) reported that implementing a Digital Storytelling project in an EFL speaking classroom encouraged students to engage more actively in constructing and delivering their own narratives, further supporting its relevance as a pedagogical approach for developing speaking skills.

Nevertheless, most previous studies have still addressed speaking challenges and the benefits of Digital Storytelling as two separate findings. Phan et al. (2024) reported that Digital Storytelling helps reduce speaking anxiety and encourages students to be more confident in expressing themselves. Meanwhile, Usmani et al. (2025) found improvements in students' fluency, accuracy, and self-confidence. These results provide insight into the benefits of DST but do not yet fully explain how the speaking difficulties students experience relate to the progress they experience during the project.

Some recent studies are beginning to offer a different perspective. Bai and Xian (2024) found that repeated practice during the Digital Storytelling process not only helps students build self-confidence but also reduces anxiety when speaking. These findings suggest that the challenges and progress students experience likely do not occur in isolation but rather influence one another throughout the learning process.

Nevertheless, the relationship between speaking difficulties and the progress students perceive during the Digital Storytelling project has not yet been extensively studied. Theoretically, this relationship can be explained through the concept of self-efficacy (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020), defined as an individual's belief in their own capability to successfully perform a given task. In the context of speaking, this belief is often referred to as speaking self-efficacy, which reflects learners' confidence in their capability to perform speaking tasks successfully (Wang & Sun, 2024). The difficulties students encounter may influence their self-efficacy beliefs, while the experience of overcoming these difficulties for instance, through repeated practice may in turn shape their sense of progress, regardless of the actual improvement that occurs. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring how these two aspects are interrelated across students' learning experiences. From a theoretical perspective, this study is expected to enrich the literature on Digital Storytelling by viewing students' challenges and progress as interconnected experiences. From a practical perspective, the results of this study are expected to help teachers understand how the difficulties students experience can be part of the process of developing their speaking skills, so that teachers can provide more appropriate support during the implementation of the Digital Storytelling project.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design. This design was chosen because it is appropriate for addressing the research questions, which focus on how the relationship between speaking difficulties and perceptions of progress manifests in students' experiences while participating in the Digital Storytelling project. Case studies allow researchers to gain a deeper understanding of phenomena in real-life contexts without aiming to produce statistical generalizations (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The study participants consisted of six 11th-grade students, all female, from a high school in Garut Regency, Indonesia. Participants were recommended by the English subject teacher considering differences in their speaking proficiency levels. Although this Digital Storytelling project was participants' first experience with the approach in English language learning, all participants had previously created digital storytelling products in other subjects. Based on the interview results, participants generally used English actively only when completing school assignments, including this Digital Storytelling project. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the criteria of having completed a Digital Storytelling project as part of their English-speaking skills instruction and being willing to participate in interviews. The project involved scriptwriting, creating digital stories in video format, and presenting the results in class. To maintain participant anonymity, the name of the school was not mentioned in this article, and all participants were assigned codes P1–P6.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to explore speaking difficulties, perceived progress, and the students' experiences during the Digital Storytelling project. The interview guidelines were developed based on the research focus. Interviews were conducted individually in Indonesian after the entire project series was completed so that participants could reflect on their experiences more thoroughly. Each interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes, was recorded with the participants' consent, and was then transcribed verbatim before analysis. To ensure data credibility, each transcript was cross-checked against the interview recording to verify the accuracy of the transcription before thematic analysis was conducted.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2021), which included the processes of data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and theme definition and naming. After the themes were identified, each transcript was reviewed again to see whether themes related to speaking difficulties and perceived progress emerged in the same participant's narrative. This step was taken to identify the relationship between these two themes as the primary focus of the study. Participation in this study was voluntary, and all participants provided consent before the interviews were conducted. Their identities were also anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on a thematic analysis of interviews with six students, this study identified three main themes that explain the relationship between speaking difficulties and perceived progress during the Digital Storytelling project. These three themes include (1) the relationship between technical and contextual barriers and motivation and self-confidence, (2) repeated practice and the use of digital technology to support the development of speaking skills, and (3) self-confidence as an outcome that developed differently for each student. These three themes indicate that the difficulties students experienced and the progress they felt did not emerge as two separate experiences but were interrelated throughout the learning process.

The Relationship Between Technical and Contextual Barriers and Motivation and Self-Confidence

The first theme shows that the barriers students faced during the Digital Storytelling project were not only related to the use of technology but also affected their motivation to learn and their self-confidence in speaking English. However, the impact of these barriers was not experienced in the same way by every student.

P6 described an unstable internet connection as one of the main barriers during the project. According to her, the frequent delays when loading pages caused her to lose motivation to continue the task, as she stated, *"Itu bikin mood tidak bagus, jadi malas mengerjakan."* This experience was also reflected in her low self-confidence in speaking English. Regarding her confidence in speaking English after completing the project, P6 stated, *"Tidak, karena benar-benar tidak suka ngomong bahasa Inggris, suka belibet dan dalam penulisan juga suka salah."* Meanwhile, P2 shared a different experience. Although she faced difficulties while working on the project at home due to a lack of teacher guidance, as she put it, *"Apalagi kalau dikerjakan di rumah tidak ada guru yang membimbing, jadi agak bingung meskipun ada internet,"* she still reported an increase in self-confidence after the project was completed.

A comparison of P2's and P6's experiences shows that the obstacles encountered during the project do not always have the same impact. Although both faced obstacles during the process, their responses differed. For P6, technical obstacles led to a decline in motivation and low self-confidence. In contrast, P2 was still able to complete the project and reported an increase in self-confidence despite receiving limited guidance. This pattern suggests that the relationship between the obstacles students encountered and the development of their speaking skills is not uniform but is influenced by each individual's learning experience. P5 also experienced a barrier of a different nature, related to the process of designing the story itself. As she explained, *"Prosesnya sedikit sulit karena saya tipe orang yang tidak bisa membuat cerita,"* which affected her engagement from the early stages of the project.

These findings suggest that both technical and contextual obstacles not only affect project completion but also influence how students perceive their own English-speaking ability. In other words, difficulties arising during the project are not always limited to technical aspects but can evolve into experiences that affect students' motivation and self-confidence throughout the learning process. These findings support the view of Huang and Liu (2025), who explain that limited access to technology in digital-based learning can increase the psychological pressure experienced by language learners. Mekheimer (2025) also found that limited access to reliable technology can reduce learners' confidence in using digital tools for language learning, while also affecting their motivation. Similarly, Eddraoui et al. (2025) reported that unstable internet access can significantly affect students' motivation and engagement in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The results of this study are also consistent with Musabal and AbdAlgane (2023), who emphasize the importance of a supportive learning environment in encouraging students' oral participation.

However, unlike previous studies that treated technical barriers and affective factors as separate findings, this study demonstrates that both can occur simultaneously within the same student's experience. These findings offer a deeper understanding of how the challenges faced during the Digital Storytelling project do not always have the same impact on every student but are influenced by how they respond to the learning experience.

Findings on this theme indicate that technical and contextual barriers during the Digital Storytelling project are not only related to the use of technology but also to students' motivation and self-confidence. These relationships vary from one individual to another, resulting in each student's learning experience unfolding in distinct ways.

Repetitive Practice and the Use of Digital Technology in Supporting the Development of Speaking Skills

The second theme indicates that repetitive practice during the Digital Storytelling process, supported by the use of digital technology, contributed to the improvement in speaking skills reported by the majority of students. Unlike the previous theme, which focused more on obstacles, this theme illustrates how students utilized various strategies during the project to develop their speaking skills.

P3 explained that speaking practice was not only carried out through independent repetition but was also aided by digital technology. She stated that "*Proses latihan dibantu Google Translate untuk mendengarkan audio dan dibantu AI,*" allowing her to compare her pronunciation with a model considered correct. According to her, this process helped her become more accustomed to using English because "*Semakin sering dilatih, semakin sering membuat video, semakin sering berlatih speaking.*" P4 also shared a similar experience. Before making the final recording, she first compared her pronunciation with the audio generated by Google Translate. She explained, "*Biasanya coba mengucapkan dulu, direkam, lalu disamakan dengan suara Google.*" For P4, this process didn't bring immediate changes, but it gradually helped improve her speaking skills until she felt that "*Awalnya tidak bisa, bisa, terus terbiasa.*"

P1 also felt that repeated practice provided significant benefits. This participant considered the video-making process to be the most helpful aspect in developing her speaking skills because it provided an opportunity to continuously practice using English. She stated, "*Bikin video cerita pakai bahasa Inggris itu yang paling membantu,*" and attributed that experience to improvements in vocabulary, speaking fluency, and pronunciation. According to her, "*Dari kosa kata juga kelancaran bicara. Dari segi pengucapan juga ada, karena sering dengar pengucapannya jadi tahu.*"

An interesting finding also emerged regarding P6. In the previous theme, this participant reported that internet connection issues reduced her motivation while working on the project. However, at the same time, she still felt that her speaking ability had improved after going through the process of repeated practice. P6 stated that "*Membantu dari bicara bahasa Inggrisnya lumayan tidak berbelit lagi karena dilatih, ada kemajuan. Dari kosa kata juga lumayan ada peningkatan.*" This experience shows that the obstacles students encountered do not always hinder all aspects of their development. Although her motivation and self-confidence remained low, P6 still experienced improvements in speaking fluency and vocabulary mastery.

These four experiences reveal a relatively consistent pattern. All students who reported progress in their speaking skills attributed this development to the opportunity for repeated practice during the project development process. The forms of practice they engaged in varied, ranging from re-recording their voices, comparing their pronunciation with Google Translate, using AI as a practice companion, to practicing through the video-making process. Nevertheless, all these forms of practice share a common characteristic: they provide students with the opportunity to evaluate and gradually refine their speaking skills before producing the final product.

These findings indicate that the improvement in speaking skills reported by students does not stem solely from the Digital Storytelling products they created, but rather from the process they underwent while completing the project. The opportunity to repeat practice, listen to recordings, and receive feedback through digital technology appears to provide students with the space to reflect on

and enhance their speaking skills. Thus, repeated practice becomes a crucial component in fostering a sense of progress among the majority of participants.

These findings align with the research by Ngo et al. (2024), who, through a meta-analysis, found that the use of Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR)-based technology and other digital technologies can help improve the pronunciation accuracy of second-language learners through repeated self-directed practice. Similarly, Gutiérrez-Colón and Alameh (2024) found that implementing digital storytelling strategies supported undergraduate EFL learners in improving specific aspects of their oral production through repeated, technology-assisted practice, and Fathi et al. (2024) reported that AI-mediated speaking interactions helped learners build willingness to communicate through sustained practice. These findings are also supported by Tecedor (2024), who found that digital narratives can bring about positive changes in learners' beliefs about self-efficacy and their attitudes toward language learning. This is also consistent with Zhang (2024), who found that self-regulation strategies involving repeated and reflective practice contribute to the development of learners' self-efficacy. The results of this study also support the findings of Usmani et al. (2025), who reported that Digital Storytelling contributes to improvements in students' speaking fluency, pronunciation, and self-confidence.

Nevertheless, this study provides a more detailed picture of how this development occurred in the students' experiences. Rather than simply reporting that Digital Storytelling improves speaking skills, the results of this study show that students attributed this development to the repeated practice they engaged in during the project process, including through the use of Google Translate, artificial intelligence (AI), and voice re-recording. Furthermore, P6's experience demonstrates that improvements in speaking skills can still be observed even when students face challenges related to motivation and self-confidence. These findings suggest that progress in one aspect of speaking skills is not always accompanied by progress in other aspects.

Findings on this theme indicate that repeated practice and the use of digital technology provide students with opportunities to continuously develop their speaking skills throughout the Digital Storytelling project. Although the strategies used by each student varied, they all identified the practice process as a crucial component in the development of their speaking skills. These findings also suggest that the progress they experienced emerged through a gradual learning process, rather than solely from the final outcome of the completed project.

Self-Confidence as an Outcome That Develops Differently for Each Student

The third theme indicates that the development of self-confidence following participation in the Digital Storytelling project was not experienced uniformly by all students. Although most participants reported an increase in their self-confidence when speaking English, some students felt they had not yet experienced a significant change. These findings suggest that the progress perceived in the affective domain develops differently for each individual.

Four participants (P1, P2, P3, and P4) stated that the Digital Storytelling project helped them become more confident when using English. P1, for example, said that the activity made her "*sedikit*" more confident in speaking. Although the perceived improvement was not very significant, she still felt a change compared to before participating in the project.

A more noticeable improvement was reported by P2. She explained that the experience of completing the project made her bolder when speaking, both while recording videos and when speaking in front of others: "*Iya, membuat saya lebih berani dan percaya diri berbicara, baik di depan banyak orang maupun saat merekam.*" A similar experience was also shared by P4. According to her, her confidence grew gradually as the tasks continued to require her to use English: "*Percaya diri, karena kalau ada tugas ya mau tidak mau harus dikerjakan. Semakin banyak tugas yang di kerjakan, jadi semakin percaya diri.*"

Conversely, not all students experienced the same changes. P5 consistently stated that the Digital Storytelling project did not boost her confidence. Previously, she had mentioned that the process of designing a story was the most difficult part because she felt unable to develop story ideas.

That difficulty still seemed to influence her perception of her speaking ability. Therefore, when asked about changes in her self-confidence, she replied that she had not yet felt any improvement. P6 exhibited a slightly different pattern. In the previous theme, this participant acknowledged an improvement in speaking fluency and vocabulary mastery after undergoing repeated practice. However, this progress was not accompanied by an increase in self-confidence. She also stated that she still did not feel comfortable speaking in English because she often struggled to express herself verbally.

A comparison of the experiences of these six students shows that the development of self-confidence does not always align with the development of speaking skills they perceive. Some students reported improvements in both aspects, while others experienced progress in speaking skills without a corresponding change in self-confidence. Thus, the progress experienced does not follow the same pattern for every individual. This pattern of interrelation between difficulties and progress was most evident in P6's experience, while other participants showed more varied and less directly connected patterns across the two aspects.

These findings suggest that self-confidence is a more complex aspect than linguistic development in speaking ability. Although repeated practice during the project helped students improve their pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary, changes in self-confidence also appear to be influenced by personal experiences, perceptions of one's own abilities, and the level of comfort when using English. Therefore, the development of speaking skills is not always accompanied by an increase in students' self-confidence in speaking.

These findings are also consistent with those of Leeming et al. (2024), who showed that affective aspects such as self-confidence in speaking and the willingness to communicate can develop differently among students. This pattern is also reflected in Phipps (2023), who found that speaking self-efficacy among EFL learners grew at different rates across individuals over the course of a single semester, rather than developing uniformly. This view is also supported by the case study by Asnaini et al. (2025), which shows that self-confidence in speaking English as a foreign language (EFL) is influenced by various psychological factors and individual experiences that differ from student to student. Thus, the development of self-confidence during the Digital Storytelling project does not always follow the same pattern for every student. The results of this study also support the findings of Bai and Xian (2024), who found that the iterative process in Digital Storytelling can help build students' self-confidence. However, the results of this study indicate that this effect is not always experienced by all students. Therefore, the development of self-confidence remains dependent on each individual's learning experience.

Unlike previous studies, which generally report increased self-confidence as one of the main benefits of Digital Storytelling, this study shows that such development does not always occur alongside improvements in speaking skills. P6's experience illustrates that a student can experience improvements in fluency and vocabulary yet still lack confidence when using English. This pattern reflects what Wang and Sun (2024) describe as speaking self-efficacy learners' belief in their own capability to perform speaking tasks successfully which does not necessarily develop at the same pace as their actual linguistic competence. Although P6's fluency and vocabulary objectively improved through repeated practice, her speaking self-efficacy remained low, suggesting that self-efficacy beliefs are shaped not only by actual skill development but also by students' subjective interpretation of their own progress (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020) account of social cognitive theory, which explains that self-efficacy is shaped not only by actual performance outcomes but also by learners' perceived progress toward their goals meaning that a student's belief in her own capability depends on how she interprets her own development, not solely on the objective gains she has made. This finding suggests that the development of each aspect of speaking ability needs to be understood more specifically, as changes in one aspect do not always lead to changes in others. This also suggests that students' sense of progress may extend beyond linguistic gains alone. Across participants, the process of repeated practice also reflected a degree of learner autonomy, as students independently used tools

such as Google Translate and AI to check their pronunciation, generate ideas, and self-correct without direct teacher supervision indicating that progress can also be represented through students' growing independence in managing their own learning process.

Findings on this theme indicate that the development of self-confidence during the Digital Storytelling project varied among students. Although most participants reported an increase in self-confidence, the experiences of P5 and P6 show that improvements in speaking skills are not always accompanied by changes in the affective domain. These results confirm that the development of self-confidence is influenced by learning experiences as well as each student's individual characteristics, thus it does not develop uniformly throughout the Digital Storytelling project.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that students' experiences during the Digital Storytelling project cannot be understood by separating speaking difficulties and perceptions of progress into two distinct aspects. These three themes indicate that the development of speaking skills occurs through interconnected learning experiences, although the patterns of these relationships differ among students. Technical and contextual barriers can affect motivation and self-confidence, while repeated practice supported by the use of digital technology contributes to the development of fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary. At the same time, improvements in speaking skills are not always accompanied by an increase in self-confidence. These findings suggest that the relationship between speaking difficulties and perceived progress is dynamic and influenced by each student's learning experience. Thus, this study provides a deeper understanding of students' experiences during the Digital Storytelling project while expanding upon previous research that tended to report the challenges and benefits of Digital Storytelling as separate findings without examining the relationship between them.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study must be interpreted with several limitations in mind. This study involved only six students from a single private high school in Garut Regency. Therefore, the findings represent experiences within that specific context and are not intended to be generalized to other contexts. Furthermore, this study used interview data as its primary source, and thus the findings are based on the participants' self-reported experiences. Consequently, future research could involve participants from various schools, utilize more diverse data sources such as classroom observations or learning artifacts, and explore the relationship between speaking difficulties and perceived progress in the application of Digital Storytelling across different English language learning environments.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aims to explore how students describe the relationship between speaking difficulties and the progress they perceive while participating in a Digital Storytelling project. The results show that these two aspects do not emerge as separate experiences but are interrelated within students' learning experiences. This relationship is reflected in three main patterns: technical and contextual barriers that affect motivation and self-confidence; repeated practice supported by the use of digital technology that contributes to the development of speaking skills; and the development of self-confidence, which unfolds differently for each student. These findings suggest that the development of speaking skills during the Digital Storytelling project is a dynamic process influenced by each student's learning experience. Thus, this study expands our understanding of the implementation of Digital Storytelling by demonstrating that speaking difficulties and perceived progress should be understood as interrelated experiences rather than as two separate categories, as commonly reported in previous research.

Theoretically, this study contributes to enriching the literature on Digital Storytelling in speaking instruction through its emphasis on the relationship between speaking difficulties and perceived progress in students' experiences. Practically, the study's findings can serve as a foundation for teachers to provide learning support that is more responsive to the needs and learning experiences of each student during the implementation of the Digital Storytelling project. Although this study was

limited to six students from a single high school in Garut Regency and relied primarily on interview data, the findings provide an in-depth understanding of students' experiences in that context. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve participants from various schools and to strengthen data triangulation by incorporating classroom observations, speaking performance assessments, and analysis of learning artifacts such as students' scripts, video recordings, and drafts produced during the Digital Storytelling project, and to explore the relationship between speaking difficulties and perceived progress in the implementation of Digital Storytelling across different English language learning environments.

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