

International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 22-35, March 2022
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.21.3.2>
Received Jan 4, 2022; Revised Feb 26, 2022; Accepted Feb 28, 2022

Speaking Skills Enhancement through Digital Storytelling among Primary School Students in Malaysia

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Abstract. Speaking skills can be considered a key measure of success in learning a language. Learning Tamil, as an elective language in Malaysian National Primary schools, is extremely difficult for beginners compared to students in National Type Tamil Primary Schools in Malaysia. The aim of the research is to apply digital storytelling as a pedagogical approach in speaking classes in national primary schools with a view to promote Tamil speaking abilities of children. A collaborative quasi-experimental action research design was adopted to measure the efficacy of digital storytelling in enhancing students' Tamil speaking skills. Action research was conducted with thirteen 2nd standard students aged between 7 and 8 years old, in a national primary school, in Pasir Gudang district, Johor, on a pilot project. The Tamil digital storytelling modules were developed in a mobile application with pre-and post-test survey tools and the respective class teachers were trained on the module to work with children in a regular classroom setting. The results showed that significant improvements were observed in students' comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency elements of the speaking skills after their participation in the digital storytelling sessions. As a result, the study suggests that digital storytelling may be an effective pedagogical approach to enhance students' speaking abilities in the classroom and beyond to improve the students' mother-tongue as second-language learning in schools.

Keywords: digital storytelling; education; speaking skills; pedagogy; Tamil language

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1. Introduction

Speaking is an important element of learning and communication. Speaking in a second or third language enables students' abilities to reflect, connect, and contextualize situations beyond their learning experiences. The initial method of student engagement is through oral communication. Students express their thoughts, ideas, and desires verbally (Sembiring & Ginting, 2019). This already known pattern of communication makes speaking skills vital in the early stage of learning, particularly in countries with a multi-racial and linguistic population like Malaysia (Xu et al., 2020). Malaysia is home to around two million Tamil people ethnically from Tamil Nadu, India, and Sri Lanka (Joshua Project, 2019). Although most children are from Tamil-speaking family traditions, when students learn Tamil as a second language as an elective subject, their Tamil speaking abilities are rather low. Consequently, these students struggle to speak in their mother tongue at school. Speaking in their mother-tongue enables kids to learn other languages easily; it builds children's self-esteem and their personal, cultural, and social identities; and it develops critical thinking and innovation (Awopetu, 2016). Students learning Tamil as an elective subject in Malaysian national primary schools (Malay medium schools) face more difficulty in speaking in Tamil in comparison to students in National Type Tamil Primary Schools (Tamil medium schools).

Rapid technological advancements and assistive technologies, however, are changing the learning patterns of students. There are more tech tools, products, and services available to improve the students' learning abilities. As a result, teachers are using more technology in the classroom to promote listening and speaking skills. Storytelling has proven to be an effective pedagogical approach to improve students' listening and speaking abilities in a classroom and family setting (Sharma, 2018). The growth of digital media has more creative content development opportunities for storytelling. Digital storytelling is a new form of storytelling that has emerged as a digital tool for education enhancement. Teachers can use digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool to work on various aspects of language in order to stimulate students' interest and attention (Badawi et al., 2022). This empirical paper raises a key critical question – does digital storytelling enhance the Tamil speaking skills of National Primary School children in Malaysia? – and seeks to address possible research and practice gaps to promote Tamil speaking skills of the students in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Storytelling

Storytelling retells a narrative that has been heard or read in the narrator's own words depending on their expertise (Ikramuddin, 2018). As per Kristiawan et al. (2022), storytelling resembles an activity in which the storyteller and the audience – the speaker and the listener – participate in some level of interaction. Nurzaman (2019) defines storytelling as a means for students to retell stories after the teacher lectures them in a new word construction. Safei (2020) defines it as one instructional approach that uses short stories called storytelling. According to Asniatih et al. (2020), storytelling as a learner-centered technique assists students in making sense of material and interacting with others. Thus, storytelling may be characterised as a teaching style wherein students are required to repeat the

substance of stories employing a variety of word constructions whilst interacting with the storyteller. One technique for telling stories are outlined as follows: (1) the teacher displays various stories on the whiteboard with colourful papers, (2) the teacher organizes students in small groups, (3) the teacher ask student representative from each group to take a paper from the whiteboard, (4) the teacher instructs students to create their own story in 15 minutes, and (5) the teacher instructs them to share their story (Khodabandeh, 2019). Fikriah (2016) offers another example: (1) Students are instructed to sit in groups, (2) they develop a tale using a series of photos and key sentences supplied by the teacher, and (3) the teacher invites each group to share their story in front of the class.

The physical storytelling strategies have been applied in various settings to measure the efficacy of the pedagogical approach. Recent studies in Indonesia used storytelling methods for teaching English: they observed that the storytelling approach has enhanced students' fluency, grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and content (Asniatih et al., 2020; Sembiring & Ginting, 2019). According to an Iranian teaching experiment, it was revealed that storytelling was helpful in teaching vocabulary (Wahyudi, 2020). Rosyidah and Putri (2019) implemented digital storytelling materials in the classroom. They have observed joyful learning, critical thinking, creativity, confidence, and interest to explore the world of technology. Rajendran and Yunus (2021) performed a systematic literature review based on the Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) usage for improving speaking skills among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, which showed that students' English-speaking skills were significantly improved in using digital storytelling. There are several research studies for storytelling and digital storytelling in the English language to improve the speaking skills of the students. However, no study was found in the Tamil language to improve speaking skills in Malaysia.

2.2. Storytelling and Speaking Skills

Storytelling is an oral activity that can comprise enhancement in telling a story through body movement as well as facial gestures, to capture the audience's attention by using multisensory stirring emotion of an event in a story. Storytelling is also a teaching strategy that helps students to concentrate on story aspects as part of class speaking activities (Yunita, 2019). Moreover, storytelling is a technique that allows children to take an active role in the retelling of a story. It places a strong emphasis on both academic and social development. When telling and developing a story, they employ language for a lengthy amount of time. This activity therefore helps them to develop their language skills (Masuram & Sripada, 2020).

Students in preschool or in the early stage of primary school instinctively love stories. They are introduced to the wonders of the world and stimulated to imagine many unknown possibilities (Febyanti et al., 2022). Telling stories resembles an active process encouraging students to reconstruct the text, and at the same time, allowing teacher and student interaction (Valsesia et al., 2017). Storytelling boosts students' confidence, improves their language skills, promotes speaking and listening fluency, and increases motivation and interaction (Ahmadi & Zenouzagh, 2017; Ikramuddin, 2018). The storytelling method makes the

learning process more enjoyable for the student. In addition, the storytelling process develops language skills with history, science, and other subjects as well. In primary education, four basic language skills are taught: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Leong & Zainol Abidin, 2018). In Malaysia, storytelling has long been used as a teaching method or technique to pique interest following a lesson. Teachers use storytelling to teach language skills, inculcate moral values in students, and develop students' soft skills such as communication and social skills.

One of the key skills in language is speaking. Speaking skills are viewed as an important indicator of a student's progress in learning a foreign or second language. Speaking is an essential skill for students to develop and not just to meet curriculum objectives, but also to advance to the next level of their formal education. Numerous specialized programmes are referred to as intensive speaking programmes of foreign languages, particularly, English for adults and students. However, the majority of Tamil students in National Primary Schools learn a relatively minimal level of Tamil in a short period of time in these schools. The majority of them are still beginners in their efforts to learn Tamil as a second language. Most often, these students have difficulties in speaking Tamil as it's a second language for them. Rudrapathy (2021) argued that it is difficult for a beginner to pronounce Tamil letters.

Every child hears his/her mother tongue as a first language, which also serves to develop thoughts and emotions. Learning in one's mother tongue is also important for improving other skills such as critical thinking, the ability to learn languages, and literacy. A child's mother tongue promotes the child's personal, social, and cultural identity (Cvikić & Dobravac, 2017). The choice of words and expressions have different meanings across cultures, and where asking direct questions is considered as quite intrusive in one language, but it may be inquisitive in another. This means that the language used when speaking is deliberated upon before it is spoken. According to (Nishanthi, 2020), ability and concepts learnt in the learner's native language do not need to be taught again when they are transferred to a second language. In a school with a strong mother tongue programme, it is critical that younger children receive support in their mother-tongue. When a child is confident in his/her mother tongue, he or she will typically perform well when learning a second or third language. Children who receive education in their mother-tongue improve their performance in their second language as well (Maniam et al., 2020). Early learning to read in one's mother language also lowers dropout rates and it makes schooling more engaging, relevant, and fun for youngsters.

2.3. Child Development and Speaking Skills

Primary school students start to compare and contrast, organize, analyze, and come up with increasingly complex solutions to problems, which helps in the development of their mathematical and scientific reasoning abilities (Ramasamy et al., 2018). This study also focuses on the cognitive-developmental level for children in the preschool age group. There are two types of early childhood learning models: teacher-centered learning models and child-centered learning models. Pavlov, Skinner, and other behaviorists pioneered a teacher-centered

learning model. Child-centered learning was pioneered by Piaget, Erikson, and Isaacs (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Children have the ability to communicate their ideas orally in narrative and innovative ways. Their imaginations increasingly become the primary mode of play and learning for them. Cognitive development is a unique process for each child's development. According to (Dewi et al., 2018) children's brains grow alongside their bodies during the preschool years. Between the age of 3 and 5, a child's thinking skills will undergo significant development. Children continue to grow and acquire new abilities in kindergarten and preschool (aged 2.5 to 6 years old). Playing is beneficial in many aspects of development, which includes, emotional, social, communicative, physical, cognitive, and linguistic (Kucirkova, 2019). Language and communication skills are essential for a child's development. They are more able to socialise and learn from formal classroom instruction including the pleasant atmosphere around them, owing to clear oral communication that can help them enhance their speaking abilities. Language and speech are important in children's communication and development (Rao, 2019).

It is evident that storytelling has a significant impact on early childhood development and during the education process. However, the majority of educational experiments and research focus on the English language and there is not much literature on Indian regional languages like Tamil. This significant research gap drives the authors to explore the Tamil language-specific digital storytelling as an alternative pedagogical approach to improve Tamil speaking skills of the National Primary School students in Malaysia.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Problem

Malaysia's Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Curriculum Development Agency, has created updated curriculums for every subject taught from preschool to tertiary level. In primary school, a curriculum has been established for each of the core subjects and electives, including the Spanish, English, and Tamil language programmes offered at the National School of Tamil. Under the Tamil language programme, Tamil language lessons, which were previously exclusively available to Tamil students and are now available to all students regardless of race or religion, encourage children from other races to learn Tamil as an additional language, which fosters increased harmony in Malaysia's multi-racial culture. As a result of this education strategy, an additional 70 National Schools pioneered the introduction of Tamil subjects in 2007 (PIPP 2006-2010).

Based on the primary observations during the pilot test by the researcher, Tamil students at National Primary Schools in Pasir Gudang district still have a relatively poor level of Tamil speaking skills. According to Rudrapathy (2021), the following factors contribute to students' low speaking skills in Tamil: (1) insufficient time in the classroom to practice speaking in Tamil, (2) a lack of vocabulary, (3) less interest in communicating in Tamil because of unattractive teaching methods, and (4) a lack of ability to relate the content of speech to their daily lives. Furthermore, providing speaking methods that enable language learners to communicate in the target language is vital (Shin & Yunus, 2021). In

addition, speaking is one of the major challenges for beginners and often causes them dissatisfaction (Nijat et al., 2019). In order to address these pertinent issues, research and practice gap in the Malaysian education system, a comprehensive action research on Tamil digital storytelling for primary school students was initiated. As part of the larger Ph.D. research work, this article has been prepared based on the initial pilot study conducted among 2nd standard Tamil students in a National Primary School as an intensive Tamil digital storytelling programme. The primary aim of this research is therefore to examine the impact of digital storytelling to enhance the speaking skills among 2nd standard Tamil students at a National Primary School with an intense Tamil digital storytelling programme in the academic year 2021.

3.2. Research Design

This research adopts collaborative action research as a quasi-experimental research study (Sembiring & Ginting, 2019; Sharma, 2018; Zuhriyah, 2017). This research process consists of the following four steps 1) plan, 2) implement, 3) observe, and 4) reflect. These four steps were adopted based on the model developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (James et al., 2019). The purpose of this study is to incorporate digital storytelling as pedagogy into speaking classes to encourage students from National Primary Schools to speak Tamil during Tamil language classes and to measure their progress with a pre-and post-test survey.

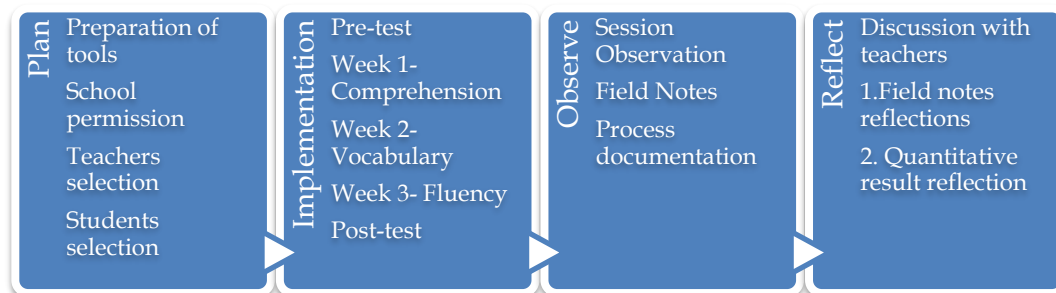


Figure 1: Implementation process of digital storytelling in the classroom

3.2.1. Plan

The first author prepared the lesson plans of teaching speaking skills by using digital storytelling during the month of May 2021. In addition, the researcher also prepared 13 tablets with a mobile application named 'KaniMani' for digital storytelling. This mobile application contains 6 family-oriented stories which emphasize moral value in the family. The researcher also prepared pre-and post-test questions based on the students' comprehension (understand instruction), vocabulary (nouns, verbs), and fluency (number of sentences, speech rate, fillers) in speaking skills. Qualified Tamil Teachers with a minimum of five years of experience were identified and inducted on the mobile application, research objectives, process, and tools for effective implementation of the programme. As part of the plan, the researcher received written consent from the school administration and individual parents/ legal guardians to engage children in the classroom research activities. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia to carry out this research project in schools.

3.2.2. *Implement*

The researcher ensured that the invitation letter and the informed consent forms are received from the parents/legal guardians. Additionally, the researcher provided a brief explanation of the research objective and process to ensure that the participants understood and gained a general understanding of both the research objectives, methods, process, and time requirements to complete the study to all the student participants and teachers involved in the process. Meanwhile, the teachers received a set of lesson plans to use in the classroom with a mobile application. The teacher was also provided with observation sheets to record the teacher's instructions, students' activities, and responses of the students. The researcher ensured a complete child-friendly and participative pedagogical approach for the digital storytelling sessions. The digital storytelling sessions were implemented for over a period of 4 weeks between May to July 2021. Each session lasted for a period of 60 minutes. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, all the sessions were organized through Google Meet. In the end, post-assessments were conducted to measure progress in speaking skills. The speaking rubric produced by Rukmini and Saputri (2017) was adapted to develop the grading criteria for oral communication abilities used in this study.

3.2.3. *Observe*

The researcher was present during the implementation of digital storytelling in the virtual classroom as a participant-observer and took field notes from the teaching and learning process. The students' and teachers' perspectives were observed and described in the field notes.

3.2.4. *Reflect*

After observation, the researcher gathered all required information and pre- and post-survey data and discussed and reflected on the results with the Tamil teachers. The researcher conducted two cycles of reflections with teachers: one based on the field observation and the other on the quantitative results of speaking skills among the students. These observations and reflections were recorded and described in the field notes.

3.3. **Research Area and Participants**

The survey was conducted at the National Primary School in Pasir Gudang district, Johor, Malaysia. The study indicated that the participants are predominantly identified as Indian students who were 8 years old at the time of the study. There were 15 students in this Tamil class, but only 13 of them were regular attendees without missing any class. The participants have been selected using the purposive sampling method (Har, 2019) based on the low achievement track record in the previous academic year in the Tamil subject, particularly in speaking skills. These 13 Indian students studying Tamil as an elective subject in the school, were included. All the participants were from similar socio-economic backgrounds.

3.4. **Data Collection and Analysis**

Qualitative and quantitative data was collected from the students through the online classroom experiment. The quantitative data was collected from the students' pre-and post-tests. All the collected data was updated on Microsoft

Excel, cross-verified for missing values, coded based on the categories of the speaking skills, and analyzed to generate bar diagrams to assess the speaking skills of the students who participated in the study and disseminate as the result. The field notes from observations and reflections were described in Microsoft Word, and thematic analysis were performed to validate the qualitative results.

3.5. Limitations

As a pilot study from the Ph.D. programme, the experiment was conducted in one school with a limited number of research participants. The results may not be generalizable at this point. However, this pilot study will pave the way for larger studies in regional languages. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic safety restrictions, all the sessions were conducted virtually and consequently, it was difficult to observe students' learning process, body language, and other expressions. The parents' guidance and engagements were required to be with their children to ensure effective implementation. Due to multi-stakeholders' engagement, it was difficult to find a mutually available time for everyone in the research process. The fluctuations and other disturbances in internet connectivity made the process more difficult in understanding students' speaking abilities. Mobile Application-based digital storytelling, in any regional language, will be well suited for a home-based learning perspective with parents than virtual classrooms.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Results

The results of the present study were based on the pre- and post-speaking tests. There are three components measured in the Tamil speaking test with primary school students. The (1) comprehension, (2) vocabulary, and (3) fluency of students were observed and measured to understand the impact of digital storytelling on improving students' speaking abilities.

Table 1: Pre and post-test scores of digital storytelling

No	Student	Pre-Test Marks			Post-Test Marks		
		Comprehension	Vocabulary	Fluency	Comprehension	Vocabulary	Fluency
		10 marks	10 marks	10 marks	10 marks	10 marks	10 marks
1	Student 1	3	3	1	5	5	6
2	Student 2	2	2	2	5	4	5
3	Student 3	3	3	1	6	6	6
4	Student 4	2	2	2	4	4	5
5	Student 5	3	3	1	5	5	5
6	Student 6	2	3	2	5	5	6
7	Student 7	3	3	1	6	5	6
8	Student 8	2	2	2	5	4	7
9	Student 9	1	2	1	5	5	5
10	Student 10	4	4	3	6	6	5
11	Student 11	3	3	3	5	6	6
12	Student 12	3	3	1	5	5	7
13	Student 13	2	2	2	5	5	6
Total scores		33	35	22	67	65	75
Total Percentage		25%	27%	17%	52%	50%	58%

The above table 1 shows that the summary of the pre and post-test scores of the students. Each category of speaking skills was scored out of 10 marks. Significant improvements were recorded in the pre and post-test in all aspects of the speaking skills. Fluency had an highest level of improvement in students speaking skills.

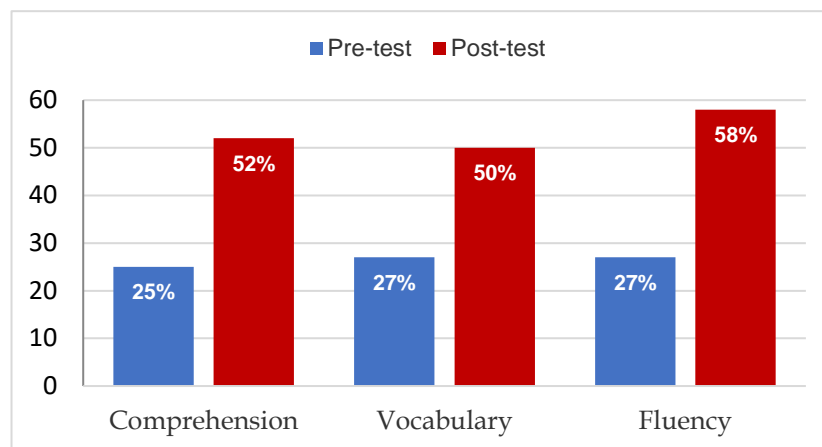


Figure 2: Result of speaking skills before and after digital storytelling

Figure 1 shows that students' speaking skills considerably improved in all three aspects after the implementation of digital storytelling sessions. The students' oral comprehension skill has increased to 52% compared to a pre-test score of 25%. The results show that students' vocabulary has improved from 27% to 50%, and the fluency of Tamil speaking skills have also improved with a difference of 31% after they were exposed to digital storytelling. Overall, the students' capacity to communicate vocally improves as a result of the implementation of the digital storytelling technique in the virtual classroom environment

4.2. Observations and Reflections

The researcher's observations and teachers' post-experiment reflections reveal that teachers strongly believe that digital storytelling was a good pedagogical approach to improve students' speaking skills. The teachers acknowledged that the Mobile Application-based storytelling allows students to repeat the stories more times which allows them to learn vocabulary and get familiar with new words in Tamil. The mobile application-based digital storytelling and gamified evaluations with rewards motivated students to joyfully participate and learn independently at home. The parents are highly satisfied with children's creative expressions after the digital storytelling sessions. Students expressed that Mobile Application-based learning for Tamil is new to all of them. It was also observed that the students were more interested in participating in an online storytelling competition at the state level. Students imitated stories and actions which enable them to speak in Tamil for more than a minute. Students feel more secure, able to recognize their own potential through video, and more comfortable sharing their stories and tales. It was also observed that students were more excited and had fun with Mobile Application technology and considerably improved their Tamil speaking skills.

5. Discussion

5.1. Digital Storytelling and Speaking Skills

It is evident that the digital storytelling approach contributes to the Tamil speaking abilities of primary school students in Malaysia. The storytelling proved to be an effective approach in improving English speaking skills. The present pilot study results show that Tamil speaking skills also improve through digital storytelling. It may be possible to expand digital storytelling as a pedagogical approach for other regional language improvement and promote mother-tongue speaking abilities in National Schools. Yunita (2019) emphasized that students require better speaking skills in all aspects of life in this era of globalization. The Mobile Application-based digital storytelling could be an option to improve the speaking skills of the students in primary schools. The students' excitement towards modern technology, visual representation, and active virtual participation makes digital storytelling an interesting tool to explore in the classrooms. There are several researchers who have argued on the importance of speaking skills for students' communication, creativity, career development, identity development, learning languages, and social engagement (Choi et al., 2019; Kucirkova, 2019). Schools in the twenty-first century adopt various emerging technologies and assistive technologies into the classrooms to support students' learning abilities. Mobile application-based learning is not a new approach in the education space, however, language inclusion in technology can make it more accessible for diverse ethnic groups across the world. Digital storytelling in a mobile application version will support students beyond the classroom and geographical boundaries to improve their speaking skills and other additional social benefits.

5.2. Language Inclusion and Digital Storytelling

Most digital products in the education space are in English. There are roughly 6500 to 7000 languages and major dialects spoken in the world (UNESCO, 2020). 74 million people speak Tamil as their native language (Goreau-Ponceaud, 2019), and almost ten million people speak Tamil as a second language in more than six countries including Malaysia. Digital learning tools need to be in the native language to share indigenous stories and tales to students to build their socio-cultural identity and creative exploration of the world, and enhance their clarity and confidence to communicate with each other. Learning in one's mother tongue is also important for developing other critical thinking skills, more additional language learning, and literacy abilities (Nishanthi, 2020). People convey and communicate ideas to others verbally by speaking (Pandian et al., 2020). People's thought process and feelings are shaped by their mother tongue. It is vital for a child's growth to learn to speak in his/her mother tongue. Fluency in the children's mother tongue has a number of advantages for the child (Uzeyir Sugumlu, 2022). This digital storytelling experiment in the Tamil language will pave the path for language inclusion in the digital learning environment and promote more mother tongue speaking abilities through digital storytelling approaches.

6. Conclusion

Digital storytelling is one of the emerging approaches in the education space to improve students' skills and capacities to be better learners. The pilot study results suggest that digital storytelling can be an effective methodology to improve students' speaking skills particularly to improve their language fluency. In addition, for linguistic minorities learning their mother tongue as a second language in school, digital storytelling may be an effective way to enhance these students' speaking skills at home and school via the Mobile Application. The effective implementation of digital storytelling in the National Primary school of Malaysia could improve the Tamil speaking abilities of students of Indian origin in the intensive Tamil programme. The study results show that primary school students enhance their speaking skills at an early stage of their education. Therefore, more child-friendly speaking-based mobile applications should be enhanced for primary school students in Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil languages for National and National Type schools based on the Malaysian syllabus. In addition, there is a need for a teaching module based on digital storytelling which can provide systematic guidance to tell a story and enhance speaking skills among primary school students. There is scope for future research in the areas of digital storytelling and creative skills and leadership. The future of digital storytelling may adopt Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Extended Reality (XR) to the classrooms to expand the regional language learning and speaking opportunities for students. It is vital to adopt additional innovative pedagogies and digital tools to optimize the level of mother tongue and second language speaking skills among students for their well-being and for a brighter future. Language inclusion in digital tools will expand learning opportunities for every child, everywhere.

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