

Storytelling for understanding: a case study of an English-language digital storytelling service-learning subject for refugee children in Hong Kong

Huiwen Shi and Lok Ming Eric Cheung

Division of Languages and Communication, College of Professional and Continuing Education, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Abstract

Purpose – While most language departments of the university offer service-learning (SL) subjects based on language teaching, such as “Teaching Chinese as a Second Language in Local Schools” and “Serving the Community through Teaching English,” this paper aims to argue that teaching students to teach language(s) is yet to be the best strategy to serve the service recipients.

Design/methodology/approach – SL is widely understood as an experiential learning pedagogy that integrates academic focus, reflection and community service and is shown to be impactful. In Hong Kong, the first university that has made SL a graduation requirement is the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (the University). Considering this, new SL courses have proliferated over the past decade. Adopting a narrative inquiry approach, this paper examines personal narratives from a new SL subject aiming to raise awareness of refugees in Hong Kong. The data includes students’ reflective journals, co-created personal narratives and podcasts and semi-structured interviews.

Findings – This paper finds that crafting and recording narratives of shared experiences deepens cultural understanding, cultivates empathy and facilitates language learning in a genuine setting.

Social implications – Ultimately, this paper advocates a well-designed SL that combines language, content and technology as a powerful, transformational experience for both college students and service recipients.

Originality/value – This paper focuses on a brand new SL course, “Storytelling for Understanding: Refugee Children in Hong Kong,” offered in Semester 1, 2022–2023. The subject was developed by the two authors from a language division affiliated to the University. The deliverables were podcast recordings, co-authored and co-edited by the students and the children.

Keywords EFL, Digital storytelling, Podcasting, Cultural understanding, Personal narrative, Service-learning, Refugees

Paper type Case study



Introduction

Language acquisition, especially English as a foreign language (EFL), persistently constitutes a crucial research area for educational studies. Traditional pedagogies, such as systematic studying of grammar (Abdu and Nagaratnam, 2011), task-based instruction using oral presentation and essay writing (Skehan, 2003; Robinson, 2011) and content-based instruction such as using fiction and film for critical thinking or cultural communication (Liaw, 2007; Tseng, 2010), while effective to a degree, often fall short in involving learners in a contextually and culturally relevant way. Contemporary pedagogical development endeavors to rectify this issue through the integration of experiential learning strategies (Heuser, 1999; Tilley-Lubbs *et al.*, 2005; Barreneche, 2011). Using a case study of a new service-learning (SL) subject titled “Storytelling for Understanding: Refugee Children in Hong Kong,” this paper introduces, testifies and advocates an innovative pedagogy that combines SL, personal narrative and podcasting to enhance English language and cultural understanding for tertiary students.

SL has a long history in the university curriculum in the USA, but it is relatively new in the context of higher education in Asia (Xing and Ma, 2010; Ma *et al.*, 2016). Perhaps the most accessible definition for SL practitioners is that it is a form of experiential education where students actively participate in comprehending, assimilating and using knowledge and skills from their field of study to meet community needs (Kaye, 2010). Ideally, SL enables active participation and deep reflection, hence deepening students’ understanding of the communities they live in (Jacoby, 1996). Over the past decade, the implementation of SL has witnessed significant growth in Hong Kong’s higher education sector. For instance, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (the University) is the first in Hong Kong to fully embrace SL as an “institutional strategy” (Ngai, 2024). By making SL a mandatory graduation requirement for undergraduates, the University’s SL subjects have grown from ten in the 2011–2012 academic year to currently providing 60 approved credit-bearing SL subjects, engaging over 4,000 students annually.

The SL subject discussed in this paper is offered by an academic division of languages and communication in a self-financed college affiliated to the University, and it addresses needs of an often-ignored community: refugees and asylum seekers. For a considerable period, Hong Kong has been providing temporary asylum to refugees without extending their legal citizenship. Most refugees in Hong Kong originate from South and Southeast Asia, while the remainder are from Africa, the Middle East and various other global regions (Refugee Ministry in Hong Kong, 2023). They face lengthy periods of waiting, which can extend to even decades, to obtain or appeal for non-refoulement claims, and the substantiation rate is only 1.2% (Hung, 2023). In December 2022, new rules were passed to allow authorities to expel people whose applications for refugee status were turned down while awaiting appeal court verdicts, making asylum seekers susceptible to immediate deportation. Surabhi Chopra, a law professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, said “the official narrative is very, very hostile to non-refoulement claimants” (AFP, 2023). Such “hostile” narratives against refugees are common in Hong Kong, and the SL subject in this case study aims to make a change to such narratives.

This article briefly delineates the SL subject’s first-time implementation (September–December 2022) in a culturally diverse context where students from the college and refugee children bonded using English as a lingua franca, and it studies SL’s influence on students’ English language competency, cultural awareness and the implications for merging SL and digital storytelling (DST) in EFL. We adopted a narrative inquiry approach and conducted content analysis on the narratives generated from the subject, including students’ individual reflections, co-created personal narratives between the students and the refugee children and

semi-structured interviews conducted with students in June 2023 [1]. We present the theoretical framework of the content analysis based on Kolb's learning style model (1984; 2015). Fundamentally, we wish to contribute to the continuing discourse on inventive pedagogies in EFL instruction (especially cultural learning) with a thorough description and discussion of this case study.

Review of literature

SL pedagogy in EFL has been explored extensively in scholarly discourse, which marks positive impact of SL for both language instruction and community engagement (Wurr, 2018). It is also proven that the inclusion of SL in EFL curricula can bolster cognitive understanding, intercultural consciousness and language proficiencies (Heuser, 1999; Nhat's, 2023). A case study surveyed 24 English teachers and 396 students in Vietnam to find that students engaged in community SL demonstrated higher English communication capabilities compared to their non-participating counterparts. The interview findings revealed that English teachers perceived SL activities as providing students with a chance to apply their English skills in real-life contexts. Nhat's study highlighted that SL cultivated students' interpersonal abilities and civic responsibility.

Regarding DST, literature over the past decade has proven it an effective tool to improve students' language and digital skills (Razmi *et al.*, 2014; Soler Pardo, 2014; Hava, 2021). Additionally, studies have found it essential for teaching cultural awareness. For instance, Ribeiro (2016) revealed that DST fostered a constructive debate among students on the topic of technology-enhanced learning and cultural differences, empowering them to create new personal and collective understandings. Belda-Medina (2021) found a significant difference regarding inclusiveness and diversity among EFL teacher candidates before and after the use of DST. These studies hold a similar view that in addition to language skills, DST facilitates effective culture learning, which Tomalin (2008) recognized as the fifth language skill.

Because podcast recordings were major deliverables of the SL subject and an important part of narrative data of this case study, it is necessary to review the use of podcast as a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) strategy. O'Brien and Hegelheimer (2007) delineated a systematic endeavor to incorporate CALL exercises on listening strategies for an academic English curriculum, specifically through the medium of podcasts, with initial feedback indicating positive reception from both the teacher and students. In a rigorous review of 20 journal articles, Hasan and Hoon (2013) proved podcasting to be an effective resource for English learners, enhancing skills such as listening, speaking, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Additionally, as an engaging tool for self-study, it also holds promise for boosting both linguistic proficiency and learner motivation (Indahsari, 2020). However, we have found that recent literature connecting podcasting, DST and CALL remains largely in the domains of listening and speaking, presentation and writing (Hasan and Hoon, 2013; Yang *et al.*, 2022; Tanrikulu, 2022), the more technical and skill-oriented aspects of language acquisition instead of the cultural learning aspects.

Reviewing the existing literature and observing the University's implementation of SL in language departments, we identify gaps that could be filled with our case study. First, scholarly work on SL pedagogy in EFL, given its complication during implementation, focuses primarily on teacher training programs, arguing for how pre-service English teachers benefit from SL subjects and programs. This phenomenon also partially explains why, when proposing and implementing SL subjects, most of the University's language departments come up with courses that teach service recipients language skills [2]. However, identifying teaching English as the academic focus and the service component can be

problematic when the SL is offered as a general undergraduate education program because students' English proficiency level might not be high enough to "teach" the target language and teaching requires specific skills, professional training and rich experience that is beyond the duration of a SL subject (1–2 semesters). Second, storytelling (personal narratives in particular) has long been recognized as a powerful instrument that expands EFL to the fifth language skill of culture and DST is rising as the state-of-the-art way of doing it. However, little research is done on digital personal narratives as the academic focus and the service component at once.

Theoretical framework and course design

The most influential model of experiential learning theory (ELT) remains David Kolb's (1984) ELT, a continuous cyclical process of *concrete experience* abilities (CE), *reflective observation* abilities (RO), *abstract conceptualization* abilities (AC) and *active experimentation* (AE) abilities (p. 30). Updating his theory, Kolb (2015) maintained that the experiential learning process is a "four-stage cycle" where "learning arises from the resolution of creative tension" among these four stages (p. 51). Recognizing the process as an idealized learning spiral, Kolb stressed the importance of the learner going through this "recursive process" that is "sensitive to the learning situation." Hence, experiential learners should ideally "touch all four bases" of experiencing (CE), reflecting (RO), thinking (AC) and acting (AE):

The SL subject investigated in this paper fulfils Kolb's cycle. Devised into four stages, the course embeds two iterations of crafting and recording of personal narratives:

Stage 1: Six weeks of interactive lectures where students are trained to write and record their own personal narratives in English. (ELT Cycle 1: CE 1, RO 1, AC 1, AE 1)

Stage 2: Six weeks of on-site service where students interact with refugee children, lead storytelling workshops and help refugee children draft and record their personal stories in English. (ELT Cycle 2: CE 2, RO 2, AC 2, AE 2)

Stage 3: A story exhibition in the last week of class, where students and refugee children share their podcasts with teachers, family members, NGO and community members.

Stage 4: Students write an extended reflection in English on their SL experience.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate how the two ELT cycles are completed in the course.

Thus, this case study essentially addresses the following **research question**:

How did undergraduate students in Hong Kong perceive their learning of language and culture in an English-language DST SL subject?

Methods

The present study adopted a qualitative research method with a narrative inquiry approach. It is because of the small student population ($n = 12$), in that quantitative research methods may over-generalize the case to arrive at meaningful insights to answer the research question. As the course used personal narratives as both an instrument for cultural understanding and the SL deliverables, narratives become natural, complex and rich data worth investigating (Bell, 2002). In addition, the use of reflective journals remains one of the best ways to facilitate meaningful descriptions of a learning experience and the most widely accepted ways to assess students' progress in an SL subject (Camus, *et al.*, 2021). Reflective journals submitted at the end of the SL, therefore, are included in our dataset as students' "learning history" (Barkhuizen *et al.*, 2014, p. 37). Overall, using narrative inquiry allows us to focus on personal perspectives and pay close attention to individual experiences (Clandinin, 2016), which are essential for in-depth analysis of

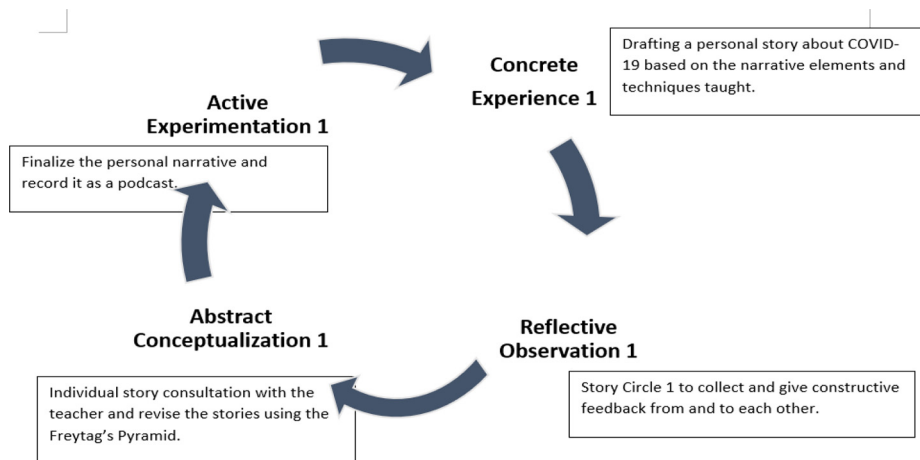


Figure 1.
ELT Cycle 1 in the case study

Source: Authors' own work

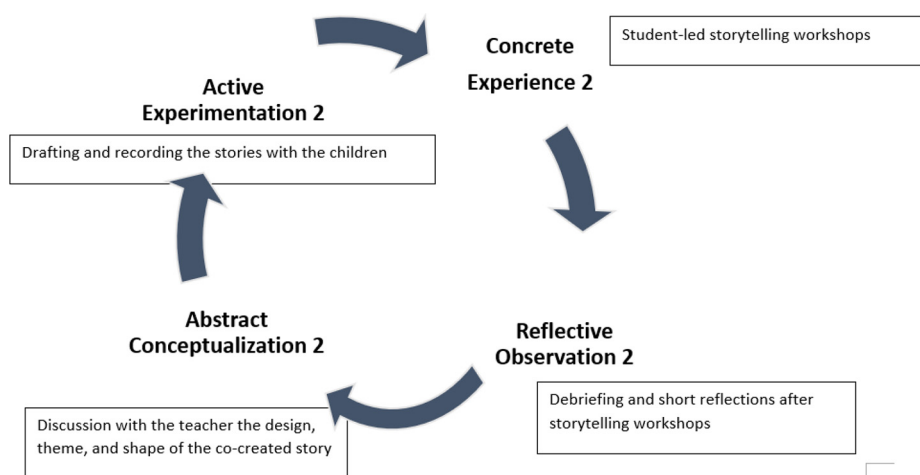


Figure 2.
ELT Cycle 2 in the case study

Source: Authors' own work

students' cultural learning. This approach helps understand how individuals navigate in complex cultural contexts.

Research participants

The research participants were undergraduate SL students in Semester 1 of the 2022–2023 academic year. The cohort was comprised of seven local Hong Kongers and five Mainland Chinese students, forming five groups that organized storytelling workshops at a refugee center for the children. Five students participated in the in-depth interviews voluntarily, while all 12 students' personal narratives/podcasts and reflections were analyzed. All

participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the case study, and ethical clearance was obtained following the college's required procedure. Our NGO partner was also made aware of the research, and subsequently sought approval from the parents of the children for the use of their stories. Only pseudonyms are used when presenting the data (see [Appendix 1](#) for the profile of the students and a summary of stories produced).

Data collection

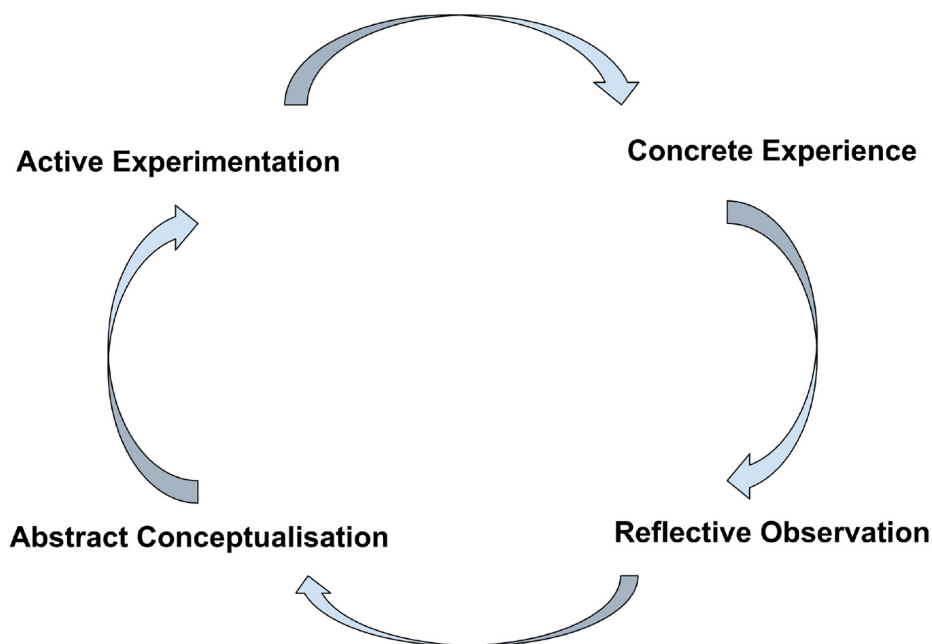
Narrative data were collected, including the students' personal narratives, reflective journals and interviews. Written drafts and final versions of students' personal stories, accompanied by audio podcasts, were collected to compare their performance of storytelling techniques and identifying common themes in the students' stories. In the assessed individual reflective journals (1,400–1,600 words), students recorded their personal experience and reflected critically on service impact and learning experience. The written data were organized and stored in a standardized, plain-text format to facilitate the subsequent analysis.

Six months after the course ended, five students (two male and three females) agreed to attend semi-structured interviews. These interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min each and were designed to gain insights into the students' perceptions of their improvements in language and communication skills, their use of digital tools when creating the podcasts and their understanding of the refugee community. The questions ranged from general ones such as defining "service-learning" to specific ones such as details of digital elements of the storytelling activities. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring emergent themes ([Barkhuizen et al., 2014](#)). Students were also able to express their views in a low-threat setting, knowing they would not be "graded" for what they said. As with the written data, the interviews were transcribed into the plain-text format.

Data analysis

The collected data were examined using a qualitative content analysis approach ([Selvi, 2019](#)). The aim of content analysis is to answer the research question with qualitative content, which is rich in in-depth sharing of participants in the study ([White and Marsh, 2006](#)). The content analysis was based on the four stages of the ELT cycle – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (see [Figure 3](#)). The ELT cycle reflects the stages of the subject, in which the students developed new understanding of language learning, storytelling and cultural and digital awareness based on their experiences of using English in the SL setting. Their written stories and reflections, as well as the interviews, described their perceptions and attitudes as the subject proceeded. To present the findings, we exemplified the data by quoting and paraphrasing the reflections and transcriptions.

Overall, the theoretically guided analysis relies less upon our subjective judgement of the data, as we did not aim to answer the research question by proving the effectiveness of the subject. That said, we acknowledge our biases and assumptions about the students and the subject, so we improved the trustworthiness of the analysis in two ways. First, member checking ([Candela, 2019](#)) was conducted with the student participants to clarify any misinterpretations and provide extra information to enrich the findings. Second, the students' strengths and weaknesses, alongside their positive and negative feelings were captured to maintain a balanced view towards the SL subject.



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 3.
Kolb's experiential
learning model (2015),
Stern and Powell's
(2020) graph
representation

Findings and discussion

Experiential learning theory cycle 1: students' personal story writing and podcast making (Weeks 1–6)

Concrete experience 1. The students all reported that they had never used English for creative purposes. M reflected that her English teachers usually trained students “for examinations... writing academic essays but not stories.” The SL subject therefore provided opportunities for them to create their own stories in English for the first time. Under the subject lecturer’s guidance with knowledge and principles about storytelling [3] and podcasting techniques [4], the students wrote and recorded their personal narratives to share with their classmates. Specifically, the personal narratives, titled “My Covid Story,” were based on memorable experiences students had during the pandemic. Before their services at the refugee center, they were given a profile of all clients (i.e. the refugee children) and required to pass an online learning module on cultural awareness designed by the University’s SL office to be eligible to serve the target community. These experiences enabled them to extend their English use beyond formal settings and provided them with an arena to share their lives with real-life audiences. These authentic experiences also paved the way for communicating with the service clients when delivering storytelling workshops at the center.

Reflective observation 1. With their personal narrative drafts, students engaged in “story circle” sessions in class. Although the primary purpose of the story circle was not peer assessment, anxieties facing the crowd and speaking English were reported. In her individual reflection essay, Student O confessed that she was slightly “resistant to the

atmosphere [of the story circle]" and "was a bit worried that [she] would be laughed at [. . .] as [she] was not very good at speaking English." Her worries were alleviated after the first story circle, especially when she had a consultation session with the subject lecturer, who reassured her English proficiency and praised specifically where her story was effectively written. Moreover, the story circle, along with the follow-up feedback from the subject lecturer, was also a source of affirmation. Student A considered her draft presented in the story circle "not really what [she] expected [. . .] not perfect but not bad either, after listening to others' stories." Student R recounted that his story received the most votes as the best story among his classmates. The story circle, therefore, increased the students' confidence in using English in a low-threat environment. Support from peers and teachers also helped reduce their anxieties about accuracy so that students could focus on meaning-making through storytelling.

Abstract conceptualization 1. Between the first and final story drafts, face-to-face individual consultations were initiated by the lecturer to revise students' stories. The primary concerns in these consultation sessions were not grammar, vocabulary or sentence structure, but the shape of the story (see Appendix II), the narrative skills (showing and telling) and characterization (dialogue and action) to ensure that the stories were well developed. Concepts such as "story shapes," "growth mindset" and "service-learning partnership" were reviewed and integrated into these consultations, so students' abstract conceptualization was achieved through interaction and discussion with the lecturer.

Active experimentation 1. The low-stakes experience of drafting, editing and telling stories in the SL subject helped the students form basic ideas about effective storytelling. They might not yet have formed solid theories about storytelling, because for the most part, the subject teacher provided them with storytelling concepts and techniques. However, they benefitted from the teacher's feedback and improved their drafts. For example, Student O found that her second draft had more details "showing" her quarantine hotel's environment. She also reflected that her work became "more moving" with such details. Student A, on the other hand, took time to polish her first draft such as proofreading and adding dialogues to the story so that the story "reads more smoothly [. . .]" and more vivid as "multiple perspectives were shown." Students R and H reflected on the importance of crafting the story arc so that the story could have a "climax." Overall, their revisions of the personal narratives enabled them to discover strategies for effective storytelling, which enabled them to transfer knowledge and skills when they crafted the stories with the children.

As for the podcasts, students reported multiple failures in achieving their desired results for a high-quality digital story at this stage. However, a majority of them felt their English speaking improved after numerous attempts to record their personal story in the podcast form.

Section discussion: fostering the acquisition of language for creative and communicative purposes. The preparatory work in the first six weeks of the SL subject equipped the students with DST, communicative and cultural sensitivity before their on-site service at the refugee center. Specifically, podcasting allows them to acquire "the 21st century literacies" (Robin, 2008), in that they became familiar with digital recording and editing technologies. The low-stakes storytelling exercise and story circles lowered the students' anxiety about using English in conversational and literacy settings, because the course primarily focused on fluency over accuracy (Skehan, 2009). In this subject, "accuracy" was downplayed, whereas "fluency" – the ability to communicate and narrate in an engaging manner – was emphasized. Such fluency enabled students to communicate effectively with the children during the service, as to be illustrated in the next ELT cycle.

Experiential learning theory cycle 2: creating stories and podcasts for refugee children
(Weeks 7–12)

Concrete experience 2. The first encounters with the children changed the students' evaluation of the children's English level. According to the interviews, before meeting with the children, they rated themselves no higher than the average score of 6 out of 10 points regarding their English skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). They either reflected on their fear when speaking in English (H, A), weakness in writing and reading (R) or a lack of confidence (M). By contrast, when asked to anticipate children's proficiency before their encounter, the students gave scores as high as 8 or 9. English proficiency, therefore, was a concern to the students, who had the impression that the service recipients would be better English users.

However, after meeting the children, such a concern became unnecessary for two reasons: the nature of storytelling and the children's low proficiency in writing. From the get-go, the subject did not aim at teaching students to teach English. Second, as the students co-created stories with the children, they found that the children's English writing skills were lacking. In the interviews, all students consistently lowered their ratings for the children's writing and reading skills to 5 or 6. Some participants also highlighted the difficulty in recording stories with the children. For example, Child J in M and S's group was six years old and was not literate enough to read the whole story. M and S had to ask J to read word for word after them, and edit the recording to make the story coherent. This recording experience, however, forced M and S to practice their English speaking in a clear and accurate manner, eventually benefiting them as EFL learners.

The concrete experience the SL students possessed in the SL course was highly context-specific, with a particular service target and environment. The encounter with this unique English-speaking community demystified their impression of not only the children's proficiency level, but also their cultural backgrounds. In addition, the experience in an authentic English-speaking environment and the growing knowledge about the target service community increased the students' confidence in using English to express themselves. As the fear about their English proficiency subsided week by week, students were able to focus on the children's need and optimizing storytelling workshops.

Abstract conceptualization 2. Before the finalization of the co-created stories, teacher intervention was invited by each group to revise and comment on the refugee children's stories. This time, significantly fewer inputs were given by the lecturer because students had very clear ideas about the type of stories they wanted to tell. It is observed that the co-created stories mostly took after three themes: family, school and dreams/ambition (see Appendix I). All stories except for one used Freytag's Pyramid to shape a story arc that emphasizes the climax and a resolution. In the interview, most participants mentioned that they were very conscious about the importance of a climax when creating stories with the children, in particular.

Reflective observation 2. Students were offered two ways of reflection: the weekly debriefing and the post-workshop written reflection. At the end of each workshop (Weeks 7–12), the students would have a debriefing session with the teachers. The session allowed the students to respond to feedback and reflect on the observations made during the workshop. On the other hand, the written reflection required students to recount their workshop and specific incidents happening during the workshop, evaluate their performance and provide insights into conducting storytelling workshops. From their reflections, the encounters with the children were largely positive. Aside from satisfaction with their arrangement (Student Group 1, as in [Appendix 1](#)), however, they also expressed frustrations (Student Group 2), and reflected on problems with budgeting for the activities (Student Group 5), issues about

incentives to motivate children's participation (Student Group 3) and children's understanding of instructions (Student Group 4). Other than these experiences, the students reported great engagement with the children, especially when they played language-related games and shared stories about food cultures with the children.

These critical reflections of the students on their performance and engagement with the children were deemed useful in the subsequent weeks of service. While concrete experiences allowed them to learn about the children, deliver workshops with them and practice their storytelling strategies, the reflections inform workshop strategies and storytelling techniques.

Active experimentation 2. Combining students' critical reflections on their storytelling workshops and concrete experiences at the refugee center, the students had a better understanding of the children to create personal stories for them. Their written reflections showed evidence of careful planning and strategizing storytelling with the children: students casually "interviewed" refugee children to obtain materials for the stories, played meaningful games to elicit views and opinions, etc. For example, Student A's initial observation of a child named Sylvester (pseudonym) was that he was "cool and not talkative." As her group created the story with him, they had to "keep asking questions to get details" for the story. This strategy corroborated their group reflection, in that they considered "patience" as one of the key factors to successfully engage their clients. Another example was M and S's group, who were working with two sisters. They observed that the children might not plan an intact story at all. The group, therefore, had to piece together details from the siblings and fabricate a dialogue between them that is based on real-life interactions.

As regards to co-creating podcasts with the children, students reported that they appreciated the innovative digital element in the course. Student A was highly positive about the procedure, while Student R preferred making videos, saying that could be more captivating. Students H and O reckoned it was convenient to produce podcast recordings with smartphones.

Section summary: enhancing digital competencies and intercultural dialogues. Unlike many other DST courses that incorporate visual elements (e.g. still images and videos), this course focused on creating "podcasts" so that the children's privacy can be protected. The use of audio recording also allowed the students to concentrate on the voices of the children: engaging in dialogues to draft and edit the stories with the children and guiding the children to record the finalized personal narratives. As they worked as a team in DST, both parties developed the necessary communication skills for consensus building, decision-making and ultimately developing cultural and technological competencies (Grant and Bolin, 2016).

Eventually in this course, crafting personal stories and making them into podcasts became valuable learning experiences for students as we find solid evidence of students' development in self-empowerment, cultural understanding and empathy. Several direct quotations are necessary in concluding this section.

Student J wrote in his reflection:

I joined this storytelling course because it sounded meaningful. My proudest achievements were completing the workshops, children's stories and being rewarded with my own story [. . .]. In this course, I experienced the beauty of others. That gave me a lot of encouragement. Every week was a little more positive feedback from teachers, classmates, and the refugee children. It helped me step out of depressing moments and gain a lot of confidence (minor grammatical mistakes corrected).

Students reported in the interviews:

M: “I overcame my fear of speaking English with foreigners.”

A: “I changed my perspective on people from the Middle East and Southeast Asia. I now even recommend their food culture to my friends. No more stereotyping.”

H: “I have learned about RESPECT. Capitalized. Respect the minorities– they deserve more in Hong Kong.”

Situated in a culturally diverse setting and given a genuine purpose of meaning-making through storytelling, students found the SL experience a transformative one. Language acquisition becomes a secondary and complementary “side effect.”

Conclusion

In this study, Kolb provides us with a framework with which we analyze the students’ learning experiences in two complete ELT cycles (crafting personal stories and producing podcasts for themselves and the refugee children). Although most of the research in CALL concentrates on the traditional quartet of language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing, our case study proves that DST, especially personal story crafting and podcast recording, can extend CALL to encompass the fifth critical language skill, which is cultural understanding.

Of course, we are also aware of the study’s limitations. First, this is a small-size SL subject, which enabled a deeper bonding between students and the service recipients. Hence, the results gathered might not be applicable to larger-scale SL of similar natures. Second, due to privacy issues, no refugee children were included in the study. Future research could collect narratives and interview data from the children to triangulate the study. Third, longitudinal studies might be necessary to further legitimize the results of this study. Last but not least, in the process of analyzing the data, we discovered that the subject focused primarily on storytelling techniques and cultural awareness yet neglected cultivating students’ abstract theorization on narratology and multiculturalism. Therefore, students’ abstract conceptualization (AC) was relatively weak in both ELT cycles.

In conclusion, in this study, we showcase a SL subject that innovatively intersects language learning, personal narrative and manageable technology as a cultural experience for tertiary students. Students showed better acceptance and understanding toward a marginalized yet culturally diverse community in Hong Kong, gained confidence in communicating in English in a genuine setting and produced meaningful digital stories that represent themselves and the children they served. Essentially, we wish to see more EFL educators adopt similar pedagogies that expand beyond pure language skills, transform students’ English learning experience and empower them to be impactful digital storytellers.

Notes

1. The semi-structured interviews were conducted six months after the SL subject was completed.
2. Examples of recent SL subjects offered by the University’s language departments/divisions include “Serving the Community through Teaching English” and “Teaching Primary School Students English as a Service-learning Experience,” focusing mainly on listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.
3. Examples of narrative skills and knowledge include different types of story arcs, “showing not telling,” characterization, metaphorical language and plotting.
4. Examples of podcasting skills include recording and editing with digital devices and software.

References

- Abdu, A.M. and Nagaratnam, R.P. (2011), "Difficulties in teaching and learning grammar in an EFL context", *International Journal of Instruction*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 69-92.
- AFP (2023), "Hong Kong asylum seekers face bureaucratic maze and deportation under tightened policy", Hong Kong Free Press. [online], available at: <https://hongkongfp.com/2023/03/26/hong-kong-asylum-seekers-face-bureaucratic-maze-and-deportation-under-tightened-policy/> (accessed 13 September 2023).
- Barkhuizen, G.P., Benson, P. and Chik, A. (2014), *Narrative Inquiry in Language Teaching and Learning Research*, Routledge.
- Barreneche, G.I. (2011), "Language learners as teachers: integrating service-learning and the advanced language course", *Hispania*, Vol. 94 No. 1, pp. 103-120.
- Belda-Medina, J. (2021), "Promoting inclusiveness, creativity and critical thinking through digital storytelling among EFL teacher candidates", *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 109-123.
- Bell, J.S. (2002), "Narrative inquiry: more than just telling stories", *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 36 No. 2, pp. 207-213.
- Camus, R.M., Ngai, G., Kwan, K.P., Yau, J.H.Y. and Chan, S. (2021), "Knowing where we stand: mapping teachers' conception of reflection in service-learning", *Innovative Higher Education*, Vol. 46 No. 3, pp. 285-302.
- Candela, A.G. (2019), "Exploring the function of member checking", *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 619-628.
- Clandinin, D.J. (2016), *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, Routledge.
- Glatch, S. (2021), "The 5 stages of Freytag's pyramid: Introduction to dramatic structure", [online], available at: <https://writers.com/freytags-pyramid> (accessed 18 September 2023).
- Grant, N.S. and Bolin, B.L. (2016), "Digital storytelling: a method for engaging students and increasing cultural competency", *Journal of Effective Teaching*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 44-61.
- Hasan, M.M. and Hoon, T.B. (2013), "Podcast applications in language learning: a review of recent studies", *English Language Teaching*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 128-135.
- Hava, K. (2021), "Exploring the role of digital storytelling in student motivation and satisfaction in EFL education", *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, Vol. 34 No. 7, pp. 958-978.
- Heuser, L. (1999), "Service-learning as a pedagogy to promote the content, cross-cultural, and language-learning of ESL students", *TESL Canada Journal*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 54-71.
- Hung, E. (2023), "Asylum seekers in Hong Kong wait up to 20 years for host countries to take them", South China Morning Post. [online], available at: www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3207802/long-wait-new-life-asylum-seekers-clear-hong-kong-checks-only-watch-years-go-host-countries-take?campaign=3207802&module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article (accessed 15 September 2023).
- Indahsari, D. (2020), "Using podcast for EFL students in language learning", *JEES (Journal of English Educators Society)*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 103-108.
- Jacoby, B. (1996), *Service-Learning in Higher Education: concepts and Practices*, 1st ed., Jossey-Bass.
- Kaye, C.B. (2010), *The Complete Guide to Service Learning: proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, and Social Action*, 2nd ed., Free Spirit Pub.
- Kolb, D.A. (2015), *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, 2nd ed., Pearson Education, Inc.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984), *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Prentice-Hall.
- Liaw, M.L. (2007), "Content-based reading and writing for critical thinking skills in an EFL context", *English Teaching and Learning*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 45-87.

- Ma, H.K., Chan, W.F. and Chan, C.M. (2016), "The long-term impact of service-learning on graduates' civic engagement and career exploration in Hong Kong", *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 37-56.
- Ngai, G. (2024), "Message from head", Service Learning and Leadership Office. [online], available at: www.polyu.edu.hk/sllo/about-sllo/message-from-head/ (accessed 20 August 2023).
- Nhat, T.T.M. (2023), "Applying community service learning to improve technical students' English communication skill: case study at industrial university of Ho chi minh city", *Vietnam. Eastern Journal of Languages, Linguistics and Literatures*, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 154-171.
- O'Brien, A. and Hegelheimer, V. (2007), "Integrating CALL into the classroom: the role of podcasting in an ESL listening strategies course", *ReCALL*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 162-180.
- Razmi, M., Pourali, S. and Nozad, S. (2014), "Digital storytelling in EFL classroom (oral presentation of the story): a pathway to improve oral production", *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 98, pp. 1541-1544.
- Refugee Ministry in Hong Kong (2023), "Refugee care handbook 2023: RMHK", [online], available at: www.rmghk.org/refugeecarehandbook2023 (accessed 2 September 2023).
- Ribeiro, S. (2016), "Developing intercultural awareness using digital storytelling", *Language and Intercultural Communication*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 69-82.
- Robin, B.R. (2008), "Digital storytelling: a powerful technology tool for the 21st century classroom", *Theory into Practice*, Vol. 47 No. 3, pp. 220-228.
- Robinson, P. (2011), "Task-based language learning: a review of issues", *Language Learning*, Vol. 61 No. s1, pp. 1-36.
- Selvi, A.F. (2019), "Qualitative content analysis", in McKinley, J. and Rose, H. (Eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, Routledge, pp. 440-452.
- Skehan, P. (2003), "Task-based instruction", *Language Teaching*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 1-14.
- Skehan, P. (2009), "Modelling second language performance: integrating complexity, accuracy, fluency, and lexis", *Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 30 No. 4, pp. 510-532.
- Soler Pardo, B. (2014), "Digital storytelling: a case study of the creation and narration of a story by EFL learners", *Digital Education Review*, Vol. 26, pp. 74-84.
- Stern, M.J. and Powell, R.B. (2020), "Field trips and the experiential learning cycle", *Journal of Interpretation Research*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 46-50.
- Tanrikulu, F. (2022), "Students' perceptions about the effects of collaborative digital storytelling on writing skills", *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, Vol. 35 Nos 5/6, pp. 1090-1105.
- Tilley-Lubbs, G.A., Raschio, R., Jorge, E. and López, S. (2005), "Service-learning: taking language learning into the real world", *Hispania*, Vol. 88 No. 1, pp. 160-167.
- Tomalin, B. (2008), "Culture - the fifth language skill", British Council. [online], available at: www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/inclusive-practices/articles/culture-fifth-language-skill (accessed 5 May 2023).
- Tseng, F.P. (2010), "Introducing literature to an EFL classroom: teacher's presentations and students' perceptions", *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 53-65.
- White, M.D. and Marsh, E.E. (2006), "Content analysis: a flexible methodology", *Library Trends*, Vol. 55 No. 1, pp. 22-45.
- Wurr, A. (2018), "Advances in service-learning research with English language learners", *Journal of Service-Learning in Higher Education*, Vol. 8, pp. 84-99.
- Xing, J. and Ma, H.K. (2010), *Service-Learning in Asia: curricular Models and Practices*, Hong Kong University Press.
- Yang, Y.T.C., Chen, Y.C. and Hung, H.T. (2022), "Digital storytelling as an interdisciplinary project to improve students' English speaking and creative thinking", *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, Vol. 35 No. 4, pp. 840-862.

Further reading

- Barkhuizen, G. (2011), "Narrative Knowledging in TESOL", *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 45 No. 3, pp. 391-414.
- Chiva-Bartoll, O., Ruiz-Montero, P.J., Olivencia, J.J.L. and Grönlund, H. (2021), "The effects of service-learning on physical education teacher education: a case study on the border between Africa and Europe", *European Physical Education Review*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 1014-1031.
- Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (2013), "The government of the Hong Kong special administrative region's response to the list of issues raised by the united nations committee on the rights of the child", [online], available at: www.cmab.gov.hk/doc/en/documents/policy_responsibilities/List_of_Issues_201309.pdf (accessed 23 September 2023).
- Morris, T.H. (2020), "Experiential learning—a systematic review and revision of Kolb's model", *Interactive Learning Environments*, Vol. 28 No. 8, pp. 1064-1077.
- Shi, H.W., Cheung, L.M., Lai, W.S. and Chiu, T. (2021), *Service-Learning Subject Proposal Form*, College of Professional and Continuing Education, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Appendix 1

Group	Pseudonym of student (code)	Program of Study	Place of Origin	Personal narrative about Covid-19 (Description and theme)	Co-created story with the refugee children (Subject and theme)
1	Mandy (M)	BA in language and professional communication	Hong Kong	An initiation story- learning to cook during the quarantine days Theme: "Taking care of oneself is hard, but achievable and rewarding"	The group wrote two stories for a pair of sisters from Uganda aged 8 and 9. The stories cleverly present a fight between the sisters from 2 different points of view
	Sandy (S)	BA in Chinese language and culture	Mainland China	A sketch – witnessing a dispute over the mask mandate on a bus in Hong Kong Theme: "People should learn to accommodate each other in times of crisis"	Theme: "Sibling rivals cannot be avoided. Yet, they can end in peace and love"
2	Henry (H)	BA in marketing management	Hong Kong	A role model story – being an apprentice to a responsible contractor Theme: "One should cherish every job opportunity and never compromise work ethics"	H wrote a story about a boy from Nepal. In the story the boy's dream to become a world-famous football star comes true Theme: "Chase your dream"
	Ted (T)	BA in marketing and digital strategy	Hong Kong	Man in hole story – Ted was stuck at home and getting addicted to Netflix and video games during online learning during Covid-19 Theme: "Face-to-face, real-life communication is precious"	T wrote a story for a 13-year-old Indian boy. The story is a sketch of the child's beloved school and friends Theme: "The school provides an amazing environment, and the child wants to become an entrepreneur in future"
3	James (J)	BA in business (finance)	Hong Kong	A character-driven story that presents a father as someone selfish and addicted to gambling Theme: "Parents may love their children in the wrong way, and children has the right to judge them"	The group wrote a story for a 13-year-old boy from Nigeria. His dream is to become a professional footballer. In the story, the child movingly tries to reconcile the parents' hope for a stable job and the young generation's ambition for something different and less common
	Eleanor (E)	BA in convention and event management	Mainland China	A story about getting infected by Covid-19 Theme: "COVID is not that scary if one faces it positively"	Theme: "Younger generations seek to balance dream and their parents' hope"

(continued)

Table A1.
Profile of the students, student groups and a summary of the personal stories/podcasts produced

Group	Pseudonym of student (code)	Program of Study	Place of Origin	Personal narrative about Covid-19 (Description and theme)	Co-created story with the refugee children (Subject and theme)
4	Ono (O)	BA in marketing management	Mainland China	21 quarantine days in a hotel Theme: "Freedom is valuable especially when you are deprived of it"	The group wrote a story for a 13-year-old Pakistani boy The story is about a child's dream of becoming a YouTuber despite the difficulties he encounters
	Ivan (I)	BA in marketing management	Mainland China	21 quarantine days in a hotel. Theme: "Learning to give each day a structure is the key to a fulfilling life"	Theme: "Parental support is essential in a child's growth and confidence building"
	Jeremy (Y)	BA in marketing management	Mainland China	A love story– how the protagonists lost each other due to distance during Covid-19 and how they regained their love eventually Theme: "True love conquers all."	
5	Alice (A)	BA in marketing and public relations	Hong Kong	A story about a Covid-19 scare Theme: "Life is full of accidents"	The group wrote two stories for two boys. One is 9 years old from Sri Lanka. The other is 10 years old from Nepal
	Cameron (C)	BA in business (operations and supply chain management)	Hong Kong	A story about a dangerous but well-paid job Theme: "Money is not worth your life"	One story is about getting stuck at home and fighting Covid-19 with family members
	Rick (R)	BA in marketing and digital strategy	Hong Kong	A role model story – how the student learned from a boss he initially disliked Theme: "Great leadership shapes people positively and help them grow"	Theme: "A loving family can conquer all" The other story is about becoming a football superstar Theme: "Don't stop dreaming"

Table A1. Source: Authors' own work

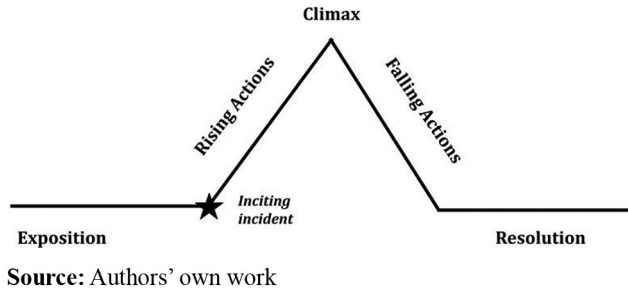


Figure A1.
Freytag's Pyramid
(Glatch, 2021)

About the authors

Huiwen Shi is a Bilingual Educator, Researcher and Writer. She completed her PhD in contemporary poetry of mourning in the School of English at the University of Hong Kong. Her research interests lie in contemporary poetics, service-learning, life writing, digital storytelling and English language teaching. She has published journal articles on English poetry and emergency online teaching. She is currently leading a new service-learning course called "Storytelling for Understanding: Refugee Children in Hong Kong," using personal narratives as an instrument to foster cross-cultural learning, language acquisition and civic awareness. Huiwen Shi is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: huiwen.shi@cpce-polyu.edu.hk

Lok Ming Eric Cheung is a Linguist and Language Educator. He earned a joint PhD in Linguistics and Education at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the University of Technology Sydney. His research interests lie in text linguistics, academic literacy, corpus-based language teaching and teaching professional development, and he has published in these areas. He is also the Associate Editor of *Linguistics and the Human Sciences*.

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com