

# Digital storytelling with Acehese cultural values: A pathway to developing English writing competence

Sarair, Ika Kana Trisnawati\*, Yuniarti, Taufik

Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, Banda Aceh, Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

Proficiency in English academic writing is a critical competency for university students; however, pedagogical approaches often lack cultural relevance, which can impede engagement and skill development. This study investigated the efficacy of Digital Storytelling (DST) grounded in Acehese local wisdom as a means to enhance students' writing skills and reinforce their cultural identity. The pedagogical intervention explicitly encouraged students to integrate traditional Acehese cultural elements, such as *Meugang* and *Peusijek*, into their English compositions, thereby forging a meaningful connection between language acquisition and cultural heritage. Employing a quasi-experimental design, the research involved a purposive sample of 20 English major students from universities across Aceh. Writing proficiency was measured via pre-test and post-test assessments, while a supplementary questionnaire captured students' perceptions of the DST methodology. Data were analyzed using SPSS software, applying both descriptive and inferential statistics. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated a statistically significant improvement in overall writing performance, confirming the intervention's effectiveness. Findings demonstrate that students successfully incorporated Acehese cultural narratives into their writing and reported heightened motivation, engagement, and enjoyment throughout the process. Specific gains were noted in vocabulary expansion, narrative idea generation, and confidence in English self-expression. However,

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\* Corresponding author:

Ika Kana Trisnawati  
Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, Banda Aceh, Jl. Muhammadiyah No.91, Batoh, Kec. Lueng Bata, Kota Banda Aceh,  
Aceh 23123, Indonesia  
Email: [ika.kana@unmuha.ac.id](mailto:ika.kana@unmuha.ac.id)

development in technical aspects of writing—such as text organization and coherence—was only moderate, suggesting that DST may be more effective for stimulating cultural engagement and creative expression than for mastering formal writing conventions. These results underline the value of culturally responsive pedagogies in second language writing instruction.

**Keywords:** *Aceh culture; Digital storytelling; English writing skills; Local wisdom*

## **1. Introduction**

Many aspects of English language instruction in higher education have changed as a result of the rapid development of technology in the industry 4.0 era (Habiburrahim et al., 2022a; Mulyani et al., 2022). Such technological progress has also significantly shaped writing, one of the essential competencies in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. Nevertheless, many students still struggle to improve their English writing skills even with the growing availability of digital tools. ELF students face a number of issues in writing including difficulties expressing ideas effectively in English (Sarair et al., 2019), limited critical thinking skills (Sarair et al., 2024), inadequate use of digital media for writing practice (Limbong et al., 2024), and lack of cultural relevance in learning materials (Mulyani et al., 2024).

Previous studies have suggested that digital-based methods can enhance the teaching of writing in EFL contexts (Yuniarti et al., 2023; Dewi et al., 2022; Salikin & Tahir, 2017; Mali & Salsbury, 2021). Furthermore, digital storytelling (DST) has become a successful method for encouraging writing skills and creativity (Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021; Ngoi et al., 2024). Yet, studies incorporating local cultural values into digital-based writing instruction are still lacking, despite the fact that the integration of technology in writing has been extensively studied (Al-Wasy, 2020; Hsu & Lo, 2018).

Local wisdom is crucial in forming students' cultural and linguistic identities in Indonesia. Traditions such as *Meugang* and *Peusijek* in Acehese culture offer a wealth of moral values and stories that can serve as interesting and meaningful material for EFL writing (Mulyani et al., 2024; Arjaya et al., 2024). Incorporating these cultural components into DST helps promote cultural preservation and enhance language proficiency, as well as provide students real and contextually relevant content. Such integration is in line with worldwide educational trends that prioritize local wisdom and culturally responsive pedagogy in the digital age (Arjaya et al., 2024; Habiburrahim et al., 2022b).

Although previous studies have acknowledged DST as a tool that fosters engagement and creativity, little attention has been given to its application within the context of local cultural heritage, especially Acehese wisdom, to enhance EFL writing skills. This study thus addresses that gap by examining how the integration of digital storytelling with Acehese local wisdom can function as a holistic approach to improving students' writing competence and cultural awareness. It specifically aims to assess how well this method works to enhance students' writing abilities and investigate how they

feel about including cultural elements into digital writing exercises. As such, the research questions posed in this study are as follows:

- 1). How does digital storytelling influence students' English writing skills?
- 2). What are students' perceptions of using digital storytelling to integrate Acehese local wisdom into their English writing?

## **2. Literature review**

This section discusses relevant theories and previous studies to lay the groundwork for the current study. A broad knowledge of theoretical views is needed as this helps the study more understandable to readers and assures that its findings can be used as a pertinent reference by future researchers.

### *2.1. Integrating technology in EFL writing*

The approach of higher education to teaching and learning English writing has changed considerably due to the rapid technological advancement. A number of studies have shown that students in tertiary education can access real materials, participate in interactive learning, and practice writing on a variety of platforms in technology-enhanced learning environments (Hyland, 2019; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). Research has also demonstrated that digital tools like blogs, online learning management systems, and collaborative platforms boost students' writing motivation and autonomy (Yunus, 2018). Moreover, multimodal composition, in which students include text, images, and video into their writing, is made possible by technology, which in turn helps enhance the learning process and engagement. Therefore, incorporating technology into writing lessons has emerged as a crucial strategy to help EFL students improve their writing skills.

### *2.2. Challenges in developing EFL writing skills*

English writing is receiving more attention today; yet, many EFL learners still face difficulties to improve their writing skills. EFL learners have frequently encountered problems in applying proper grammar and vocabulary, organizing content, coming up with ideas, and expressing critical thinking in English as a second language (Hyland, 2003; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Earlier research also found that EFL learners in Indonesia have difficulty translating their ideas from their native tongue into English, which leads to a lack of consistency and cohesiveness in their writing (Alwasilah, 2013). To add, EFL learners' interest and engagement are often diminished when learning materials lack cultural relevance (Nunan, 2015). As such, tackling these issues calls for creative methods that link writing activities to EFL learners' cultural backgrounds and life experiences in addition to enhancing their language ability.

### *2.3. Digital storytelling in language learning*

As a contemporary teaching method for learning the English language, digital storytelling (DST) allows learners to create narratives using text, audio, video, and

graphics by combining digital media and traditional storytelling (Robin, 2008). DST has multiple benefits for EFL learners given that it helps with language acquisition by stimulating learners' critical thinking, creativity, and teamwork (Yang & Wu, 2012). DST also aids learners in expressing their cultural and personal stories in English during writing lessons, which expands the learners' vocabulary and narrative skills (Hafner & Miller, 2011). The multimodality of DST also encourages EFL learners to have deeper engagement with the writing process and also introduces them with diverse learning styles (Cheung, 2024). This implies that teaching English writing in real-world, culturally appropriate circumstances, such as DST, can assist EFL learners bridge the gap between language acquisition and meaningful communication.

#### *2.4. Local wisdom in education*

Local wisdom, linguistically, relates to community ideas and values which influence behavior, whereas in anthropology, it is considered local intelligence or knowledge that constitutes the core of cultural identity (Sukma et al., 2022). Incorporating local knowledge into the curriculum enhances learning experiences by making them more pertinent and contextualized, while also promoting cultural identity in educational settings (Warman & Rahman, 2025). For instance, in Indonesia, incorporating cultural traditions into English study allows students to explain local practices in global languages, contributing to intercultural competency (Agustina & Kencana, 2023). Writing assignments can benefit from the cultural and historical relevance of Acehese customs such as *Meugang*, a communal feast held prior to Ramadan, and *Peusijek*, a ceremonial blessing. Incorporating local knowledge into instructional materials boosts both cognitive and affective learning outcomes by bridging the gap between local reality and global knowledge (Agustina & Kencana, 2023). Therefore, combining local wisdom with DST presents a viable option to enhance EFL writing education while conserving cultural heritage.

Overall, the literature highlights four interrelated ideas: the growing use of technology in EFL writing instruction, the ongoing difficulties students face in developing writing skills, the benefits of digital storytelling, and the importance of local wisdom in making learning meaningful. Technology has opened new opportunities for interactive and multimodal writing; however, many Indonesian EFL learners still face some difficulties with generating ideas, organizing their thoughts, and staying engaged in writing. These kinds of challenges indicate that technological tools need to be paired with approaches that connect writing activities to learners' cultural backgrounds and real-life experiences. To this end, DST offers such potential as it encourages creativity, supports language development, and allows learners to express personal and cultural narratives. Nevertheless, research that combines DST with culturally relevant content, especially Acehese local wisdom, remains limited. Thus, integrating the two may not only enhance students' writing competence, but also strengthen their cultural awareness. For this reason, the current study aims to explore how DST infused with Acehese wisdom can

improve students' writing and how students perceive the inclusion of local culture in digital writing tasks, which directly informs the research questions of this study.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Research method

To assess how well DST based on Acehese local knowledge improves students' English writing abilities, this study used a quasi-experimental mixed-methods methodology. Purposive sampling was used to choose 20 English majors from several universities in Aceh. The inclusion criteria were: (1) students currently enrolled in Writing courses, (2) students from different year levels within the English education program, (3) prior exposure to digital learning platforms, and (4) familiarity with Acehese cultural values and traditions as a basis for DST.

A questionnaire as well as pretest and posttest writing assignments were used to gather data. An analytical rubric was used to evaluate the writing assignments, which tracked gains in vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, organization, and content. Students' opinions were obtained through questionnaires modified from earlier research (Beldjenna, 2025; Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021). This questionnaire gathered students' perceptions of using digital storytelling that incorporates Acehese local wisdom as a way to enhance their English writing skills. It started with basic demographic questions, e.g., gender, study program, semester, age, and prior experience with digital storytelling. The main section consisted of 12 statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale (from Strongly Disagree = 1 to Strongly Agree = 5). These statements explored students' experiences and opinions related to cultural awareness and appreciation, confidence, writing skill, as well as motivation and engagement. In order to identify significant differences in the writing performance of the students, data analysis was carried out using SPSS version 23 for the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, since the writing score distribution did not meet the assumption of normality. In addition, validity and reliability tests, as well as descriptive statistical analysis, were conducted for the questionnaire responses.

#### 3.2. DST workshop procedure

The DST program was carried out through a six-day workshop, with each session running for about 1.5 hours, resulting in a total of nine hours of instruction. The workshop used StoryJumper, an online digital book creator that allows students to combine text with images, voice, and other multimedia elements to produce their own stories. The sessions were organized step by step so that participants could gradually build their digital stories. On Day 1, participants were given an overview to digital storytelling and sample projects, as well as guided through the basic functions of StoryJumper while creating their own accounts. Day 2 focused on brainstorming Acehese cultural topics and planning story ideas. On Day 3, participants developed their own ideas into written scripts, paying attention to narrative flow, language use, and clarity. Day 4 was spent moving their drafts to StoryJumper, adding some images, and organizing story pages. On Day 5, participants

worked on their digital books by editing the content and modifying the layout to improve the finished product. On the final day, Day 6, participants presented their digital stories to the class, shared comments, and reflected on what they learned during the writing and production process.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

This section presents and discusses the study findings in respect to the research questions. It starts with a description of the participants' demographic information to provide context. The findings are organized into two main parts: (1) the influence of DST on students' English writing skills, measured through pretest and posttest scores, and (2) students' perceptions of using DST to integrate Acehese local wisdom into English writing, analyzed through questionnaire responses, along with the discussion.

##### 4.1. Demography of the participants

A total of 20 English majors from four universities in Aceh were initially recruited, but only 16 were included in the final analysis because several did not fully attend the DST workshop. To ensure the reliability of the intervention results, only those who completed the full program were analyzed. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants.

**Table 1**  
Participants' demographic information.

No.	Variable	Category	Number of Participants (N)	Percentage (%)
1	Gender	Male	4	25.0
		Female	12	75.0
2	Age	18–20	5	31.3
		21–23	10	62.5
		>24	1	6.3
3	Semester	2	2	12.5
		4	2	12.5
		6	10	62.5
		8	2	12.5
4	University	Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh	8	50.0
		Universitas Syiah Kuala	3	18.8
		Universitas Serambi Mekkah	2	12.5
		UIN Ar-Raniry	3	18.8
5	Previous Experience with Digital Storytelling	Yes	8	50.0
		No	8	50.0

Table 1 describes that the participants in this study consisted of 16 English majors, of whom the majority were female (75%), while only a quarter were male (25%). In terms

of age distribution, most participants were between 21 and 23 years old (62.5%), followed by those aged 18–20 (31.3%), with only one student older than 24 (6.3%). The participants represented different academic levels, although the largest group was in the sixth semester (62.5%), with smaller but equal proportions in the second, fourth, and eighth semesters (12.5% each). With regard to institutional background, half of the students were enrolled at Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh (50%), while the rest came from Universitas Syiah Kuala (18.8%), UIN Ar-Raniry (18.8%), and Universitas Serambi Mekkah (12.5%). To note, the group was fairly even in terms of prior exposure to DST, with 50% indicating previous experience and 50% claiming no prior experience. This distribution suggests that the sample was relatively diverse in terms of their academic levels and institutional backgrounds, while at the same time being balanced in their previous experiences with DST.

Table 1 displays that the participants showed a range of demographic backgrounds, providing a varied yet balanced sample for this study. Following this, the next section discusses the results of the pretest and post-test analysis to examine whether the use of DST influenced students' English writing skills.

#### 4.2. Influence of digital storytelling on students' English writing skills

The first research question inquires: *How does digital storytelling influence students' English writing skills?* To address this, the students' writing performance was measured using a pretest and post-test design. The pretest measured students' initial writing abilities prior to participating in the DST intervention, and the post-test assessed their writing after the intervention.

Prior to analysis, the normality of the data was calculated using the Shapiro–Wilk test, which indicated that the data did not meet the assumption of normality ( $p = 0.023$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). As a result, the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test, a non-parametric alternative to the paired-samples t-test, was employed to analyze the score differences.

The results of the Wilcoxon test revealed a consistent improvement: all 16 participants achieved higher scores in the posttest compared to the pretest (Positive Ranks = 16). The test also produced a statistically significant result (Asymp. Sig. [2-tailed] = 0.000,  $p < 0.05$ ), confirming that the difference between pretest and posttest scores was significant. These findings demonstrate that the DST intervention had a statistically significant positive effect on students' writing performance. In other words, students' ability to write in English, particularly when integrating Acehese local wisdom, improved considerably after the intervention.

**Table 2**

Wilcoxon signed-ranks test results for pretest and posttest writing scores.

Category	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Negative Ranks (Posttest < Pretest)	0	0.00	0.00		
Positive Ranks (Posttest > Pretest)	16	8.50	136.00	-3.520	0.000
Ties (Posttest = Pretest)	0	—	—		
<b>Total</b>	16				

*4.3. Students’ perceptions of digital storytelling for writing about Acehnese culture*

The second research question inquires: *What are students’ perceptions of using digital storytelling to integrate Acehnese local wisdom into their English writing?* To answer this, data were collected by means of a structured questionnaire, focusing on various aspects of students’ experiences, including cultural awareness & appreciation, confidence, writing skills, and motivation & engagement.

Prior to the analysis, both reliability and validity tests were calculated to ensure the quality of the instrument. The reliability test yielded a Cronbach’s Alpha value of .884 for the 12 items, which indicates a high level of internal consistency. For validity, item-total correlations were examined using Pearson correlation. The results showed significant correlations for all items, with coefficients ranging from .508 to .865 ( $p < .05$ ), confirming that each item was valid in measuring the intended construct. The following section presents the descriptive statistics and interpretations of students’ responses, providing insight into how they perceived the integration of Acehnese cultural content in their DST projects.

**Table 3**

Summary of students’ perceptions by dimension.

Dimension	Item	Statement	Mean	SD	Interpretation
	1	I enjoyed creating a digital story based on Acehnese cultural themes.	3.88	1.025	High (Agree)
Cultural Awareness & Appreciation	2	Incorporating Acehnese traditions helped me appreciate the cultural value of my writing	4.25	.683	Very High (Strongly Agree)
	3	I knew how to represent Acehnese culture appropriately in my story.	3.62	.500	High (Agree)

Confidence	4	I successfully applied Acehese traditions or wisdom in my digital storytelling project.	3.56	.727	High (Agree)
	5	I was confident in sharing my Acehese story in English with others.	3.56	1.504	High (Agree)
	6	I believed in my ability to write well in English, even when including Acehese cultural content.	3.62	.500	High (Agree)
Writing Skills	7	Using Acehese proverbs, folktales, or traditions in my story improved my writing ideas.	3.75	1.000	High (Agree)
	8	Digital storytelling with Acehese cultural content improved my ability to write coherent and well-structured paragraphs.	3.31	1.401	Moderate (Neutral)
	9	Digital storytelling with Acehese cultural content expanded my English vocabulary.	3.62	.500	High (Agree)
Motivation & Engagement	10	Digital storytelling with Acehese culture increased my interest in writing in English.	3.88	.806	High (Agree)
	11	Using Acehese culture in digital storytelling encouraged me to participate more actively in English learning.	3.94	.772	High (Agree)
	12	I felt motivated to continue learning English when using Acehese culture in storytelling.	3.69	.602	High (Agree)

Table 3 describes that the students generally held positive perceptions of DST as a tool for integrating Acehese culture into English writing. The results of the questionnaire showed mean scores from moderate to very high ( $M = 3.31\text{--}4.25$ ), with the

highest score attributed to Item 2, which stated that incorporating Acehese traditions enhanced students' appreciation of cultural values in their writing ( $M = 4.25$ ). This finding corroborates those in previous research on the potential of DST to strengthen cultural awareness and identity in language learning. Studies by Yang and Wu (2012) and Razmi et al. (2014) reported that DST allows students to draw on personal or local cultural experiences when writing English, resulting in deeper engagement and intercultural understanding. Hence, in the present study, cultural grounding works because storytelling activates these students' prior cultural knowledge, emotional connection, and identity expression, which ultimately makes writing personally meaningful and therefore more engaging. The considerable focus on Acehese cultural elements seems to have helped the students appreciate their own heritage while also practicing English writing at the same time.

In addition to cultural awareness, the results also displayed high levels of enjoyment ( $M = 3.88$ ), motivation ( $M = 3.69$ ), and active participation ( $M = 3.94$ ). These findings are in line with Castañeda (2013) who revealed that DST fosters high motivation and engagement by allowing learners to take ownership of their creative work. Her study found that learners referred to their digital stories as "a piece of me," which expressed the sense of pride and personal investment that motivated them to participate actively in the learning process. This explains why in the current study the students also showed high levels of enjoyment, motivation, and active participation when integrating Acehese cultural elements into their writing. The increase in motivation can be understood by student ownership and creative autonomy inherent in DST, where learners act as authors of their own stories rather than passive task-doers. This sense of personal agency stimulates intrinsic motivation and emotional involvement, which lead to greater engagement throughout the learning process. Ajabshir (2024) also highlighted that DST engaged students emotionally, cognitively, and socially through collaboration and multimodality, i.e., a mechanism that helps explain the reason that students in this study displayed enjoyment and active participation throughout the workshops.

With regard to language development, students agreed that DST helped expand vocabulary ( $M = 3.62$ ) and improved idea generation through the use of cultural elements such as proverbs and folktales ( $M = 3.75$ ). This can be explained by the multimodal and contextual nature of DST, which links new vocabulary to images, audio, and cultural scenarios, making words easier to retain through dual-coding and meaningful connections (Jwair, 2023). Kristiawan et al. (2022) also observed that DST not only increases vocabulary, but also boosts learners' motivation and cultural identity representation in Indonesian EFL settings. Nasir et al. (2024) further added that the narrative style of DST allows for creative thinking, which is a capacity that necessitates learners to select suitable vocabulary while creating plots, characters, and cultural elements. To add, there was also variability in students' confidence when sharing stories in English ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.504$ ). This situation may be influenced by the supportive and low-pressure environment of digital storytelling, all of which aids in building students' self-efficacy thru repeated

practice and sharing; still, the development remains uneven due to learner differences in proficiency and willingness to take risks (Tecedor, 2024).

The item related to paragraph structure was the lowest rating in this study ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 1.401$ ), which showed only moderate improvement. It means that DST is quite effective in motivating learners and fostering cultural expression; however, its impact on the technical aspects of writing, e.g., coherence and paragraph organization, is less direct. Previous research also confirms this mixed pattern. According to Ajabshir (2024), DST increased lexical diversity, syntactic complexity, and accuracy, but it had very little effect on fluency, which could undermine confidence in structured writing. Additionally, Alemi et al. (2022) argued that organization and coherence require explicit instruction and iterative revision, which helps to explain why there has not been as much progress in this area. Their results are consistent with the current study, which concludes even though cultural digital storytelling boosts students' motivation and expressiveness, these students nevertheless need specific instruction on how to create coherent, academic-style paragraphs for their writing.

To put simply, the discussion summarizes how DST has made students more eager to write in English by making the task feel meaningful and relatable to their lives. This study also supported earlier research that showed how DST has inspired students and boosted their confidence and creativity. Yet, the study has identified a few shortcomings related to technical writing elements, i.e., the need for a more comprehensive teaching strategy that brings together academic writing and storytelling. In short, DST helps enhance students' engagement and writing development not just because it is novel, but because it is multimodal, culturally grounded, and learner-centered. These mechanisms make writing meaningful, memorable, and enjoyable, which eventually facilitate vocabulary growth, idea generation, and cultural appreciation.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study investigated the effects of Digital Storytelling (DST) on students' English writing performance and their perceptions regarding the integration of Acehese cultural content. The findings demonstrate a statistically significant positive impact of the DST intervention on overall writing proficiency. Participants successfully embedded Acehese cultural elements into their narratives, a process that enriched their ideational content and fostered a deeper connection with local heritage. Student perceptions of the methodology were overwhelmingly positive, with reports of high motivation, engagement, and enjoyment. Pedagogical benefits included perceived vocabulary expansion and enhanced ideation. Crucially, many students reported increased confidence in English self-expression, though the degree of this increase varied individually. However, improvements in technical writing aspects—specifically paragraph organization and textual coherence—were only moderate. This suggests that while DST is highly effective for stimulating cultural engagement, creativity, and affective domains of learning, its direct impact on mastering formal writing conventions is more limited.

The study has several pedagogical implications. First, DST serves as a viable framework for integrating local cultural values into English language curricula, thereby enhancing student engagement, motivation, and cultural identity. Second, to maximize learning outcomes, DST should be strategically combined with explicit instruction targeting textual coherence, paragraph structure, and academic writing conventions. Third, the use of culturally grounded pedagogies like DST is particularly significant in multilingual settings, as it validates students' cultural identities within the language learning process. Future research should explore optimal models for combining DST with structured writing instruction and examine the adaptability of this approach across diverse cultural contexts. Such investigations would contribute to developing pedagogical strategies that simultaneously advance linguistic competence and support cultural preservation.

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