Utilizing a Digital Storytelling Strategy to Develop Formal Language Preparatory Schoolers' EFL Critical Reading Skills

Aya Hamed Mohammed Abo El Hassan

(An EFL Teacher)

Dr. Adel Abd AlHaliem AlSheikh

Professor of Curriculum& Instruction (TEFL)

Faculty of Education,

Mansoura University

Dr. Heba Abdullah Mohammed

Lecturer of Curriculum & Instruction (TEFL)

Faculty of Education,

Zagazig University

The current study aimed at developing the EEL formal language preparatory school students' critical reading skills by using a digital storytelling strategy. The study adopted the quasi-experimental design. Participants of the research were sixty students of first year formal language preparatory School. They were selected from Abo El-Mahassen Sengab Formal Language School during the academic year 2023-2024: (30 students for the control group and 30 students for the experimental group). Instruments used were a critical reading checklist and a pre/post critical reading test designed by the researcher. The experimental

group was taught by the use of the Digital Storytelling Strategy whereas the control group was taught through regular instruction. The obtained data were analyzed using the Statistics Package for Social Science (SPSS Version 26). Results revealed that the Digital Storytelling Strategy had a significant effect on developing the EFL critical reading skills of formal language preparatory school students.

Key words: Critical reading skills, Digital Storytelling Strategy, EFL.

استخدام استراتيجية السرد القصصي الرقمي لتنمية مهارات القراءة النقدية باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لدى طلاب المرحلة الإعدادية الرسمية للغات

الملخص:

هدفت الدراسة ألى تنمية مهارات القراءة النقدية باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لدى طلاب المرحلة الإعدادية الرسمية للغات باستخدام استراتيجية السرد القصصي الرقمي. طبقت الدراسة الحالية على عينة من طلاب الصف الأول الإعدادي تم اختيارهم من مدرسة أبو المحاسن سنجاب الرسمية للغات للعام الدراسي 2023-2024 حيث تكونت العينة من مجموعة من الطلاب عددهم ستون طالبًا وتم تقسيمهم إلى مجموعتين (٣٠ طالبًا للمجموعة الضابطة ودرست وفقًا للطريقة التقليدية و٣٠ طالبًا للمجموعة التجريبية ودرست وفقًا لاستراتيجية السرد القصصي الرقمي). قامت الباحثة بتصميم اختبار لقياس مهارات القراءة النقدية باللغة الإنجليزية وتم تطبيقه على كل من

المجموعتين قبليًا وبعديًا للوصول إلى مدى دلالة الفروق بين متوسطات الدرجات للمجموعتين الضابطة و التجريبية. تم تدريس المجموعة الضابطة التجريبية باستخدام استراتيجية السرد القصصي الرقمي بينما تم تدريس المجموعة الضابطة باستخدام الطريقة العادية. تم تحليل البيانات التي تم الحصول عليها باستخدام المجموعة الإحصائية للعلوم الإجتماعية SPSS الإصدار ٢٦). أوضحت نتائج الدراسة أن استخدام استراتيجية السرد القصصي الرقمي كان لها أثر إيجابي في تنمية مهارات القراءة النقدية لدى طلاب المرحلة الإعدادية الرسمية للغات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مهارات القراءة النقدية، استراتيجية السرد القصصي الرقمي، الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

Introduction:

Critical reading is an effective skill in determining the purpose of writing, making evaluations, finding logical inferences, and looking deeply at what is told with critical essence. Critical reading, which is an important skill, is closely related to the acquisition of critical perspective. In this context, the role of teachers in students' gaining critical skills is quite large. For students to develop critical skills and have a critical perspective, first of all, the teacher must have this act. For this reason, the teacher should have sufficient knowledge and teaching competencies to enable students to gain a critical perspective.

Ahmed (2018) referred to the significance of critical components in EFL textbooks. It can be exemplified as follows; the capacity of students to generate sentences about what they read via transforming thoughts into language and furnishing them with critical exercises to help them think critically. Students can execute compensation of strategies to overwhelm the lack of language skills such as paraphrasing and using imaginative expressions. Actual cooperation and communication among students outside the classroom can be achieved via critical tasks in the language textbooks. As for observing the individual ideas, talents and thoughts as critical missions of students, the classroom work becomes more varied and enjoyable.

Ebrahim (2017) reported that critical reading is one of the highest processes that follow literal and reading comprehension. It happens when the reader tries to manipulate a passage beyond the limits presented by the author. Thus, critical reading leads a reader to go behind the text, distinguish reasons for contradiction in the text and synthesize information and propose conclusions.

Moorman (2013) identified some critical reading skills such as; thinking during reading, differentiating between facts and

opinions, communicating with the writer via a written text, classifying and selecting the important ideas, guessing what would happen while reading a text and understanding deeply to solve problems. Then, the problem with critical reading is that it was a greatly ignored field of reading skills. Most textbooks specify little or no space for it and when they do so, it is usually combined with critical reading. Yet, it is a field that requires special emphasis, different treatment and special strategies.

Improved critical reading skills encourage students to express freely in their words, their point of view via the personal comprehension of the text. Critical reading skills aid students to read analytically and critically to state judgments about what they read without relying on the literal compression of the words within the script. Teachers can inspire students to read critically and comprehend the ambiguous meanings of what they read. Communication features encourage students to contribute socially to exchanging knowledge and also communicate with their instructor positively and continuously (Cheung & Hennebry-Leung, 2023).

According to Hudson (2007), critical reading skills are skills that help the learners be able to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what is read. When teachers expose students to critical reading skills, they will also make students see the cause and effect or comparing relationships in the text, or adopting critical stance toward the text. In other words, when educators teach critical reading skills, they will develop students to be critical thinkers as well because when students do critical reading, it will lead to critical thinking. Students need to have fully understood a text where they will analyze, synthesize, and evaluate it, then only they will think critically about a text, choose or reject the ideas put forward, agree or disagree with the issues, and most important of all they know the reasons why they do it.

In this case, EFL critical reading is the key component of productive thinking as critical thinking is designated as a mental activity used to construct ideas (Syahrin et al., 2019).

Because of the importance of critical reading skills, AbdelRasoul (2014) examined the use of reading circles strategy to develop preparatory students' critical reading skills and social skills. The participants were 44 students from Sohag Experimental

Preparatory School. The study used a quasi-experimental design. The instruments of the study were a social skills questionnaire and pre-post critical reading skills test. The results of the study indicated the significant of developing students' critical reading skills and social skills.

Also, Ahmed (2014) studied the effect of using a web quest program on developing some EFL critical reading process writing skills and decreasing writing apprehension of the first year experimental secondary school students. The participants were 60 students from Fakus Experimental Secondary School. The study adopted a quasi-experimental design. Instruments were an EFL critical reading test, a writing test and a writing apprehensions scale. Results of the program of web quest critical reading and writing proved to be effective in developing some EFL critical reading skills.

This encourages the researcher to use digital storytelling strategy to develop critical reading skills for preparatory school students. The researcher conducted a pilot study on a sample of 30 students of first year preparatory school students at Abo El-

Mahassen Sengab Formal Language School. She designed critical reading test to measure the student's critical reading skills. Results showed that students got low marks in most of EFL critical reading skills.

Smeda et al (2014) claim that digital storytelling has the potential to engage students in the integration of various discipline information in the classroom in addition to transmitting topic knowledge. Therefore, the digital storytelling pedagogical method is not only a merger between old and modern technologies but also a tool for classroom interaction that may aid in creating a constructivist learning environment.

In addition, the use of stories as a teaching method can help students understand difficult concepts. The official curriculum guidance for storytelling in the classroom relies on established story scripts in order to encourage students to recount or retell and modify an existing story. Such a method is helpful in evaluating children's writing abilities, as well as their capacity to understand, retain, and adhere to a certain storytelling style (Kucirkova, 2018).

Hence, Ohler (2013) offers an excellent example of the benefits of using digital storytelling in the classroom for enhancing student learning and engagement as well as empowering instructors with limited technological skills. Digital storytelling is effective at promoting the use of digital technology because it essentially combines still images, voice-over narration, music, titles, and transitions. Using the digital story to teach students media literacy is a successful teaching strategy. Additionally, according to Ohler, digital storytelling encourages students to combine creativity and critical thinking to come up with creative solutions to challenges. Students can also use digital stories to improve the academic material in their own tongue.

So, the purpose of using digital storytelling strategy is to help students become active readers, make them focus on the text, attract their motivation, have a long-term memory in comprehending the text and increase their score on the test.

Context of the problem:

The researcher informally interviewed some students in the preparatory stage and found that they suffer from weakness in their critical English reading skills and having reviewed some studies in the Egyptian context, she found that:

1- The students have negative attitudes toward reading and this influences their EFL learning.
2- Learners in this context do not like to read and they only read to get grades to help them only pass examinations.
3- The culture of EFL reading for enjoyment or for expanding general knowledge is nearly absent.

Statement of the problem:

The problem of the present study can be stated in the following statement:

"Preparatory students have weakness in EFL critical reading skills." The researcher proposed using a digital storytelling strategy to overcome such weakness.

Questions of the study:

More precisely, the study addressed the following question:

How can a digital storytelling strategy help first year preparatory school students develop their critical reading skills?

In order to answer the main question above, the following sub-questions could be raised:

a) What are the critical reading sub-skills targeted for preparatory school students?

b) What is the actual level of preparatory school students' EFL critical reading skills?

c) How can a digital storytelling strategy be designed to develop preparatory school students' EFL critical reading skills?

d) To what extent does the Digital Storytelling Strategy have an effect on developing preparatory school students' EFL critical reading skills?

Aims of the study: This study aimed at:

- Developing critical reading skills for EFL first year preparatory school students.

Significance of the study:

- Results of the current study would hopefully help the following:

1- EFL preparatory students:

- It may improve their EFL critical reading skills.

- It may provide them with a suitable environment void of stress or anxiety to practice EFL critical reading skills?

2- Teachers of English:

- It may provide them with guidelines for using this strategy to enhance students' critical reading skills.

3- Supervisors:

They may use the Digital Storytelling Strategy to set training courses for EFL teachers.

4- **Curriculum designers:**

> They may consider Digital Storytelling in designing and preparing EFL textbooks.

5- **EFL researchers:**

> - It may guide other researchers to conduct further studies on developing EFL skills through using Digital Storytelling other than critical reading skills.

Delimitations of the study:

The current study was delimited to the following:

1) A group of first-year formal language preparatory stage students at Abo El-Mahassen Sengab Formal Language School at Mit Mohsen village in Dakahlia governorate, Egypt as they lack critical reading skills.

2) Some critical reading skills that will be approved by the jury members and suitable for students.

Definition of terms:

Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling (DS) is essentially the act of conveying stories using computer-based technologies. Its narratives, electronic memoirs, documentaries, interactive storytelling, and even digital essays are terms used to describe the process (Shelton et al., 2017).

Operationally, the researcher defined a digital storytelling strategy as a teaching technique in which the first year preparatory students are learning through multimedia elements, including photos, recorded narration, video clips, music and animation, for developing their critical reading skills.

Critical reading

According to Hudson (2007), critical reading skills are skills that will enable pupils to evaluate, synthesize, and analyze what they read. Help students to be able to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what is read. Teachers who expose their students to critical reading skills, will also make students see the cause and effect or comparing relationships in the text, or adopting critical stance toward the text.

Operationally, critical reading skill is the ability of EFL first year preparatory school students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what is read.

Literature review:

Critical reading

The concept critical reading has been recently put forward as a model approach especially in education, and can be regarded as an attempt of re-reading which requires handling many concepts affecting life directly or indirectly with a wider perspective. Arıcı (2012) defined critical reading as „ideal reading" He supported that critical reading is a communicational interaction with a text and the ability to comment and analyze the text. An individual's ability to keep what he has read in his mind for a long time can only be possible with critical reading.

Critical reading plays a key role in the development of basic language skills, and can be defined as making an inference by reasoning, questioning, evaluating, a text and reaching a conclusion (Celik, 2017). Özdemir (2017) argued that it is necessary to understand the basic ideas and to explore ways to critical reading.

If everything written can be enhanced around basic ideas, and if different ideas can be identified and reproduced, then critical reading can be realized as well. To improve critical reading skills, it is important how the reader comprehends the text. When a reader understands that his/her critical reading skill is inadequate, s/he will not have the desire to read critically or will read less.

Digital Storytelling Strategy

By raising students' motivation, it aids teachers in developing constructivist learning settings that encourage group cooperation and peer-to-peer communication in order to foster creative problem solving. Digital storytelling can also be used to encourage learners to think critically and deeply while supporting the development of integrated curricula. Additionally, by building on prior experiences and helping students create compelling social connections, digital storytelling enables students to engage in active learning processes (Salem, 2022).

Digital storytelling is not a new concept, despite the current focus on multimedia technologies. Joe Lambert and the late Dana Atchley contributed to creating the digital storytelling movement in the late 1980s as cofounders of the Centre for Digital Storytelling

(CDS), a non-profit community arts organization in Berkeley, California. Digital storytelling manages computer users to tell stories creatively by following the conventional steps of choosing a subject, doing some research, writing a script, and creating an engaging story (Robin, 2016).

Frazel (2011, p.2-3) sets six advantages of digital storytelling for teaching English to young learners which include (1) increasing student motivation and engagement in core curriculum material; (2) offering educators a hands-on, active instructional format that helps them meet the needs of diverse student groups; (3) encouraging group activities in the classroom; (4) allowing personalization within the context of a class assignment; and (5) offering opportunities to apply emerging technologies. (6) Promoting collaborative instruction and learning across the curriculum.

Method and procedures

Research design

The current study adopted the quasi-experimental design using two groups, experimental and control. The experimental group was instructed using the Digital Storytelling Strategy whereas the control group was instructed in the regular way.

Participants

Participants include 60 first year preparatory students, in the second semester of the academic year (2023- 2024) from Abo El-Mahassen Sengab formal language school. They were assigned equally into two groups, experimental (30) students and control (30) students. It was assumed that the participants formed a homogeneous group as they were drawn intentionally. So they were expected to have a lot in common and would not differ much regarding the quality of experience or their ages.

Instruments

The following instruments were designed and implemented.

   1- A critical reading skills questionnaire.

2- A critical reading skills test.

Verifying the study hypotheses

- The first hypotheses

It was hypothesized that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the post administration of the critical reading skills test results, in favor of the experimental group ones. The results have been presented in Table (1).

Table (1): T-test results of the experimental and control groups on the post critical reading test

skills	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig.
Analytical skills	experimental	30	8.733	1.337	13.856	58	0.05
	control	30	3.867	1.382			
Evaluating skills	experimental	30	8.600	1.303	13.228	58	0.05
	control	30	4.000	1.389			
Inferring skills	experimental	30	8.533	1.479	6.117	58	0.05
	control	30	4.933	2.864			
Total	experimental	30	25.867	1.569	31.352	58	0.05
	control	30	12.133	1.814			

It's clear from Table (1) that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control group at (0.05) level in favor of experimental group. This means that the Digital Storytelling Strategy was effective in enhancing students' critical reading skills. Thus, the first hypothesis can be confirmed. The researcher attributes these differences to the proposed strategy.

- **The second hypothesis**

It was hypothesized that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group in the pre-post test results of overall EFL critical reading and its sub-skills, in the favor of the post-test ones. This is shown in Table (2).

Table (2) t-test results of the experimental group in reading skills on the pre/post critical reading test

skills	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig.
Analytical skills	Pre	30	3.933	1.337	-15.375	29	0.05
	Post	30	8.733	1.337			
Evaluating skills	Pre	30	4.067	1.334	-14.297	29	0.05
	Post	30	8.600	1.303			

skills	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig.
Inferring skills	Pre	30	3.533	1.547	-13.577	29	0.05
	Post	30	8.533	1.479			
Total	Pre	30	11.667	1.826	-28.848	29	0.05
	Post	30	25.867	1.569			

Table (2) indicates that there is a statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level between the mean scores of the experimental group the pre and the post administration of the critical reading test in favor of the post administration. Therefore, the second hypothesis was accepted.

- **The third hypothesis**

It was hypothesized that using the Digital Storytelling Strategy has a positive large effect on the experimental group students' EFL critical reading skills. Results are shown in Table (3).

Table (3) Effect size of digital story telling strategy in developing critical reading skills

Skills	$\eta2$	**Effect size**
Analytical skills	0.891	**High**
Evaluating skills	0.876	**High**

Skills	$\eta2$	Effect size
Inferring skills	0.864	High
Total	0.966	High

Table (3) shows the effect size of the proposed program on the overall score for testing critical reading skills, where the values of (η 2) in each skill and the total score of the test ranged between (0.864, and 0.966). Results also show that the effect sizes of the proposed program on the experimental group performance on critical reading skills as a whole is high.

Results of the study:

1- The experimental group outperformed the control group in the results of the post administration of the EFL critical reading skills test.

2- The post administration outperformed the pre one in the results of the EFL critical reading skills test results.

3- Using the Digital Storytelling Strategy had a large effect size on the experimental participants' overall main skills of EFL critical reading skills test results.

Conclusion:

This research aimed to investigate the effect of using a digital storytelling strategy on developing some critical reading skills among first-year preparatory students. A new breakthrough in the curriculum has made it necessary to take care of all language skills. Every teacher must be interested in developing these skills to help them achieve the objectives of the curriculum, achieve the desired results and maximize the use of these curricula to benefit the learner in community and with other communities if needed.

Despite the importance of EFL critical reading skills, there has been little research into how to develop them, particularly through digital storytelling. Therefore, this research is interested in developing EFL critical reading skills by using digital storytelling strategy.

A pilot study was conducted for investigating the level of the learners' EFL critical reading skills. The researcher administered an EFL critical reading test to 30 learners from Abo El-Mahassen Sengab Formal Language School, Dakahlia Governorate. The results of the pilot study revealed that the learners' level of critical

reading skills needed to be improved. Therefore, the current research aimed to investigate the effectiveness of using digital storytelling strategy in developing some EFL critical reading skills.

Results of the research showed that after the experiment, learners of the research have improved their performance in the post-test. In addition, t-test value of the study participants indicated that the results of post-test were better than the results of pre-test. It is clear that using digital storytelling strategy is more effective than using the regular way.

References:

Abdelrasoul, M. (2014). Using Reading Circles Strategy for Developing Preparatory Students' Critical Reading Skills and Social Skills. Online Submission.

Ahmed, M. (2018). How English Language Learning textbooks develop learner's communication skills, critical language production, critical thinking, and collaborative learning. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Management*, 6 (01), 66-76.

Ahmed, M. A. E. A. S. (2014). The Effect of Using a Web Quest Program on Developing Some EFL Critical Reading Process Writing Skills and Decreasing Writing Apprehension of the First Year Experimental Secondary School Students. *Arab World English Journal*, 5(1).

Arıcı, F. (2012). Reading Education, 3rd Edition, Pegem Akademi, Ankara

Celik, B. (2017). Effects of extensive reading on learners: How it develops certain points in vocabulary and sentence structure. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 8(2), 73. https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v8n2p73

Cheung, A., & Hennebry-Leung, M. (2023). Exploring an ESL teachers' beliefs and practices of teaching literary texts: A case study in Hong Kong. Language Teaching Research, 27(1), 181-206.

Ebrahim, S. (2017). Using A Metamemory Based Program in Developing EFL Secondary School Students Critical Reading Skills. *Educational and Psychological Studies*, 94 (1), 285-309.

Frazel, M. (2011). Digital Storytelling. Guide for Educators. International Society for Technology in Education. Washington.

Hudson, T. (2007) Teaching second language reading. Oxford: *Oxford University Press*.

Hudson, T. (2007). *Teaching second language reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kucirkova, N. (2018). Children as authors of digital books. London, UCL Press.

Moorman, K. (2013). Integrating creativity and reading a functional approach. Proceedings of the 22 Annual Cognitive Science Conference Institute of Technology College of Computing. Atlanta.

Ohler, J. B. (2013). *Digital storytelling in the classroom: New media pathways to literacy, learning, and creativity*. Corwin Press.

Özdemir, E. (2017). Eleştirel Okuma (10. Baskı), Bilgi Yayınevi, Ankara.

Robin, B. (2016). The power of digital storytelling to support teaching and learning. Digital Education Review, 30, 17-29. https://doi.org/10.1344/der.2016.30.17-29

Salem, A. (2022). Multimedia Presentations Through Digital Storytelling for Sustainable Development of EFL Learners' Argumentative Writing Skills, Self-Directed Learning Skills and Learner Autonomy. Frontiers in Education, 7, 2-17. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.884709

Shelton, C. C., Archambault, L. M., & Hale, A. E. (2017). *Bringing Digital Storytelling to the Elementary Classroom:* Video Production for Preservice Teachers. *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher* Education, 33(2), 58-68.

Smeda, N., Dakich, E., & Sharda, N. (2014). The effectiveness of digital storytelling in the classrooms: A comprehensive study. Smart Learning Environments, 1, 1-21.

Syahrin, A., Dawud, D., Suwignyo, H., & Priyatni, E. (2019). Critical thinking patterns in student's scientific works. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 81, 21-36. https:// doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2019.81.2