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Digital Storytelling in Task-Based Reading: Reflective Teaching Practice and Pedagogical Transformation in a Chinese Third-Tier College

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ABSTRACT

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emphasizes real-world language use but remains challenging for college EFL teachers, particularly in reading classrooms. One such challenge is the resistance and skepticism surrounding the integration of Digital Storytelling (DST), which some educators view as overly complex or novel. Unlike the traditionally examination-oriented approach of TBLT, DST leverages technology to create a more engaging, motivating, and meaningful language learning experience. In addition to simultaneously enhancing students' language acquisition and digital literacy, DST empowers both third-tier college EFL teachers and learners to creatively express the "Chinese story" in alignment with national goals for moral and cultural education. This study investigates the experiences of five EFL teachers at Law & Business College, Hubei University of Economics, through analysis of their reflective teaching notes following their implementation of a 12-week DST-integrated TBLT course. Thematic analysis revealed three core themes: teachers' evolving beliefs, effective storytelling practices, and insights into digital professional development. Findings indicate that reflective practice not only enhances teachers' digital literacy but also supports more adaptive and student-centered lesson design. The study concludes by recommending the creation of DST-based professional learning communities and increased access to instructional models to support broader integration of digital media in TBLT pedagogy.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling Use; EFL Teachers' Perceptions; Reflective Notes; Technology-Enhanced Language Learning; Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

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1. Introduction

Since 2001, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been promoted in Chinese schools as a top-down approach to English instruction, as outlined in the 2017 edition of the National English Curriculum Standards of the Chinese Ministry of Education. While third-tier universities are increasingly using multimedia resources, many continue to rely on exam-driven practices—particularly through standardized assessments like CET-4 and CET-6—that emphasize memorization over communicative competence^[1]. In response to this examination-driven environment, Digital Storytelling (DST) has emerged as a technology enhanced instructional alternative. By enabling learners to create their own narratives using short digital films, DST fosters creativity, engagement, and autonomy^[2], offering a student-centred approach with the potential to transform classroom dynamics.

DST has proven an effective pedagogical tool in enhancing EFL learners' willingness to communicate, as it leverages trans-mediation to increase language proficiency and engagement^[3], and it advances media literacy by promoting active engagement with multimedia content^[4]. Within China's higher-education policy environment, phrases such as "telling China's stories well" and "moral and cultural education" characterize the contextual policy discourse^[5,6]. In this study, however, these phrases frame the instructional context rather than serve as evaluation criteria. Our TBLT-informed use of digital storytelling (DST) targets meaning-making, multimodal composition, and reading-writing integration. To avoid conflating policy discourse with the measurement of learning, task prompts remained open choice (e.g., local histories, campus life, family memories, intercultural comparisons), and assessment focused exclusively on linguistic and multimodal performance. In other words, learning outcomes are judged by pedagogical—not ideological—criteria.

Policy reforms, such as the Guidelines for College English Teaching^[7], advocate for a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred instruction. Integrating DST into TBLT has been identified as a promising strategy to address persistent challenges, including large class sizes and varying learning paces^[8]. Yet, implementation remains problematic. Traditional methods, like grammar-translation and audiolingual instructions, continue to dominate among teachers surveyed by Wu et al.^[9], revealing a significant gap between policy

aspirations and actual classroom practice.

Despite existing studies on EFL teachers' use of multimedia tools—such as Tencent for online instruction^[10] and computer-based technologies^[11]—most have focused on K-12 teachers^[12] or learners^[3], leaving a significant gap concerning the perceptions of teachers in under-resourced higher education settings, particularly those in third-tier colleges.

2. Problem Statement

Despite growing interest in TBLT and DST, practical implementation remains limited, especially in third-tier college English reading classrooms. Many teachers express uncertainty about DST because of its perceived complexity and novelty or misalignment with exam-focused instruction^[13]. Classroom silence, a longstanding phenomenon in Chinese EFL settings, is further intensified by insufficient digital training and inadequate understanding of cross-cultural narratives^[8]. Additional challenges include limited institutional support, low digital literacy, and unfamiliarity with DST's pedagogy^[14,15]. While mobile learning tools have been suggested as ways to integrate DST, their success relies on localized adaptation and careful instructional design^[16,17].

To address this gap, the present study explores perceptions of EFL teachers at L&B College following a 12-week DST-integrated College English Reading course. Using post-project reflections and interviews, it examines their views on DST integration into TBLT, effective classroom practices, and professional development needs. Then, the research question is guided by the following:

What are Chinese third-tier college EFL teachers' views and understandings regarding DST integration in TBLT?

3. Literature Review

3.1. Digital Storytelling and TBLT in Chinese Colleges

DST has increasingly gained traction in Chinese higher education as both a multimodal literacy practice and a student-centered instructional strategy. As Zhang and Gong note, third-tier colleges face challenges related to limited teaching resources and institutional innovation, making DST's flexible format particularly viable^[18]. Initially popularized in media studies, DST has been widely adopted across

disciplines such as history, business, and healthcare, due to its proven impact on learner engagement and comprehension^[19].

More than a technological enhancement, DST represents a pedagogical shift towards learner-centred instruction. Scholars argue that this shift enhances not only cognitive skills but also socio-emotional and intercultural competencies, equipping students for globalized academic and professional environments^[20–22]. Wuthnow found that DST enriched student voice and engagement by allowing multimodal expression^[23]. These findings suggest that DST naturally integrates with TBLT by promoting authentic and collaborative language practices.

Several studies have investigated how integrating DST into TBLT frameworks benefits Chinese EFL classrooms. Fu drawing from a regional case study in East Asia, advocates for an ecological approach to TBLT, emphasizing context sensitivity in instructional design^[24]. Wang using survey data from EFL teachers, finds DST to be highly compatible with output-driven language pedagogy^[25]. Harris and Leeming, in a quasi-experimental study, reported that students exposed to DST demonstrated stronger long-term language retention than those taught through traditional grammar-translation methods^[26]. Similarly, Zhang observed in a classroom-based study that DST mitigated learner silence during oral activities^[8], while Xiang reported improvements in writing complexity and cohesion in DST-integrated writing instruction^[15]. However, while these studies agree on DST's benefits for engagement and output, Fitri et al. based on comparative classroom observations, cautioned that its effectiveness is moderated by the level of scaffolding and student familiarity with digital tools^[27].

3.2. DST Training and Practice Among Third-Tier College EFL Teachers

In response to the national emphasis on new media literacy, teacher training initiatives in China have increasingly focused on DST integration. FLTRP-sponsored programs provide teachers with DST tools and design frameworks, thus reinforcing the pedagogical value of multimodal instruction^[6]. Wang et al. confirm that teacher familiarity with digital resources is foundational to successful DST adoption^[28]. In contrast, Huang using the technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) in a case study of rural

teachers, further emphasizes that pedagogical knowledge must complement digital proficiency to ensure the effective use of DST^[29].

Scholars also highlight the importance of aligning DST with culturally responsive curriculum design. Zhang and Xiang, both employing qualitative content analysis of DST projects, argue for storytelling tasks that enable students to “tell China’s stories well” in English, thereby contributing to national cultural goals^[13,15]. Liu, in a multiliteracies framework study, emphasizes that such projects enrich students’ identity development and cultural pride^[30]. Xiao found in an ethnographic case study that planning, rehearsing, and presenting digital narratives also improved students’ prosody, syntax, and fluency in spoken English^[31]. Although the literature generally supports DST as a culturally empowering tool, these benefits are closely tied to teacher preparedness and access to appropriate curriculum materials^[32].

3.3. Reflective Practice and Teacher Perceptions of DST

Reflective practices play a critical role in the successful integration of DST. Zhang et al., in a mixed-methods study combining journals and interviews, find that reflective journaling helps learners engage with language more deeply, encouraging vocabulary retention, narrative structure awareness, and emotional reflection^[33]. This aligns with Xiang’s argument that storytelling builds emotional intelligence and intercultural communication^[15].

Despite these, challenges persist in actual classroom practice. Estaji and Fatalaki observe a gap between teachers’ positive attitudes toward digital tools and their limited actual use—especially in third-tier colleges^[34]. This mirrors Sun^[35] and Salih & Omar^[36]’s findings, which suggest that educational reforms and the shift to online learning have improved teachers’ willingness to reflect and innovate. These include a lack of institutional support and confidence in collaborative practices^[37].

Debates continue around the most effective forms of teacher reflection, particularly in the context of implementing digital pedagogies like DST. Moradkhani notes that many teachers prefer peer observations over written reflections, revealing a preference for dialogic, collaborative development^[38]. Dheressa emphasizes that evaluation should not only solve instructional problems but also enhance teaching

and learning holistically^[39]. While Xie confirms that DST has demonstrated potential in improving student motivation and EFL outcomes, its success largely depends on teachers' readiness and pedagogical beliefs^[40].

Overall, the literature affirms that DST, when integrated with TBLT, enhances student engagement, multimodal expression, and intercultural communication. Chinese third-tier college EFL teachers generally view DST positively, especially when supported by reflective practice and institutional backing. Yet, gaps remain in teacher preparedness and reflective integration in under-resourced contexts. This study adopts a qualitative narrative approach to explore how EFL teachers engage with DST through reflective teaching and develop pedagogy in under-resourced contexts.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

A qualitative case study approach was used in this study to explore how EFL teachers perceived and implemented DST in a TBLT framework in a Chinese third-tier university. As a bounded system, the case is defined by a specific institutional context—Law & Business College of Hubei University of Economics, a designated third-tier university—as well as by a shared pedagogical intervention: DST was implemented in English reading classrooms during one semester (Fall 2023).

This design facilitates a deeper, contextualized understanding of real-world instructional challenges and pedagogical shifts, especially in under-researched educational environments. A case study approach facilitates the examination of complex interactions between teacher beliefs, digital practices, and curriculum goals within the confines of a specific time, location, and group of participants.

A purposive sample of five EFL instructors was chosen from a pool of 26 instructors at the college. The selection was based on information power, where the goal was to capture rich, relevant insights from teachers who had fully implemented the DST-integrated TBLT curriculum and demonstrated willingness to reflect on their experiences. According to Creswell & Poth and Braun & Clarke, small, information-rich samples are effective for qualitative research aimed at exploring nuanced pedagogical experiences^[41,42]. Purposeful sampling ensures that the selected participants are most

likely to provide the necessary depth of information that is central to this qualitative study.

During data collection, two primary sources were used: semi-structured interviews and reflections of the teaching experience. These instruments were used throughout the implementation process to capture teachers' evolving perceptions, digital practices, and instruction strategies. The data triangulation technique was used to identify recurring themes and patterns from interview transcripts and written reflections to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Because policy discourse can shape teachers' design decisions, we treated it as a sensitizing concept that guided analytic attention without predetermining categories. Specifically, we traced teachers' moments of alignment, translation, or negotiation with the policy discourse as they planned and reflected on DST. Throughout the analysis we kept reflexive memos to separate (a) description of the policy context from (b) claims about pedagogical effectiveness, and we used peer debriefing and member checking to enhance credibility.

4.2. Sample and Data Collection

The study was conducted at Hubei University of Economics Law & Business College, a third-tier university in southern China that offers 28 undergraduate programs. All freshmen at the institution are required to take a year-long College English course, which includes content focused on expressing and sharing Chinese culture.

From a pool of 26 EFL instructors, five were purposively selected to participate in this study. A total of two of the five teachers had 3–5 years of teaching experience respectively in a high school and a Normal College before moving to third-tier colleges. As for the other three, two of them worked at the third-tier college since the university was first established, and one young teacher arrived at the third-tier college three years ago after graduating. They were selected based on their active participation in the DST project, ensuring that the data collected reflected comprehensive experiences with digital storytelling. The remaining 21 teachers were not included because they either did not fully implement DST, did not complete their reflective notes or interviews, or lacked consent for data use. While the study is based on a small sample, qualitative research prioritizes

depth of insight over breadth, and as Creswell and Poth note, purposive sampling is suitable when the goal is to obtain rich, relevant insights from individuals directly engaged with the research focus^[41]. This study aimed to provide a deep understanding of how a specific group of teachers navigated the integration of DST in TBLT, which would be difficult to achieve with a larger, less focused sample. Future stud-

ies could expand this research by including a larger number of participants or by examining the experiences of students alongside those of teachers.

Table 1 provides the demographic profiles of these five participants—four female and one male—who all taught College English courses during the fall semester of the 2023–2024 academic year.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Title	EFL Teaching Experience
T1	Female	42	Associate professor	19 years
T2	Male	50	Lecturer	24 years
T3	Female	30	Lecturer	2 years
T4	Female	41	Lecturer	20 years
T5	Female	45	Lecturer	19 years

Data were collected in three stages:

Step 1: DST Classroom Implementation:

Teachers engaged in a half-semester teaching practice

using DST-based curriculum within College English reading classes, situated within the national syllabus context while preserving student choice over topics (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Teaching Themes related to DST preparation schedule.

Time Duration	Teaching Themes Related to DST Preparation	Teacher's Scaffolds	Any Multimedia Tool Use
Week4–week 5	Introducing digital storytelling to students.	Introducing the definition of digital storytelling and its educational usage. Then notify the students of the idea of <i>Talking about their own stories</i> .	QQ discussion, Chaoxing platform, mail response.
Week6–week7	Investigating students' personal needs for selecting the course	A questionnaire was designed in Chinese in order to collect the valid data.	Wenjuanxing
Week8–week11	Assigning a topic and creating digital stories.	Several interesting topics related to the course contents were assigned, introduced a couple of useful tools/software for creating digital stories.	Jian yin, Windows Movie Maker, iMovie software, Adobe Premiere Elements 9.
Week12–week15	Sharing videos & PPT in final Presentation	The evaluation rubric designed by the teacher.	Excel recording results.

DST tasks invited multiple content options and did not require ideological alignment. The rubric contained no policy-alignment items; instead, it assessed: (1) language accuracy and fluency; (2) narrative organization and coherence; (3) reading-to-writing integration (use of textual evidence); (4) multimodal orchestration (voice-over, timing, captions, image-sound fit); (5) audience awareness; (6) reflection/insight; and (7) technical execution and completeness. See **Appendix A**. The rubric of DST-TBLT assessment used in this study was developed by adopting and adapting existing frameworks in language testing and multimodal learning assessments. The language accuracy and fluency criteria were

directly influenced by Bachman & Palmer^[43] and the Council of Europe^[44]. The criteria for multimodal orchestration and technical execution were adapted from Lambert^[45] and Robin^[46], with a focus on how digital storytelling integrates multiple forms of media to enhance learning.

Step 2: Post-Project Written Reflections:

After the DST presentations, each teacher wrote a reflective note discussing their instructional design process, technology integration experiences, and how DST affected their professional perceptions.

Step 3: Post-Course Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Ten-

cent Meeting, allowing teachers to expand on their written reflections. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, was conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent for transcription and subsequent analysis. The interview questions covered three dimensions: teacher background, DST-related attitudes, and teaching practice. The interview transcripts were later used for thematic verification. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying details were removed from interview transcripts and reflective texts. Participation was voluntary, and teachers were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

4.3. Data Analysis

Analysing qualitative data was conducted through inductive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework^[42]. For familiarization, all interview transcripts and reflective notes were read multiple times. The second step was to generate codes using Microsoft Excel to capture teachers' perceptions and classroom strategies. As a third step, the codes were grouped according to potential themes. A review and refinement of these themes followed. A fifth element was defining and naming themes based on their pedagogical relevance. Finally, a thematic narrative explained how these themes addressed the research question.

By triangulating reflective notes and interview data, credibility and depth were enhanced. As a result of this recursive process, themes emerged organically. Also aligned with Creswell and Poth's data analysis spiral, which emphasizes iterative movement between data description, coding, interpretation, and meaning making^[41], within the context of DST-based TBLT instruction, the final themes focused on effective practices, digital literacy growth, and teacher training needs. In coding, references to policy discourse were marked but not treated as outcome criteria, but they served to identify teachers' align, translate, and negotiate moves in relation to DST design.

While this study focused on teachers' perceptions and reflective practices, the absence of student feedback is a limitation. Teachers' reflections and interviews provided a deep understanding of how DST was integrated into TBLT and how it influenced their teaching practices, but they do not fully capture the student experience.

5. Findings/Results

This section presents key findings derived from reflective notes and semi-structured interviews with five Chinese college EFL teachers (see **Table 1** for participant demographics). The findings are categorized into three core themes: (1) teachers' evolving beliefs about DST, (2) identification of effective storytelling practices in TBLT, and (3) insights into digital professional development. These themes are consistent with the actual teaching practices documented in the DST preparation schedule (see **Table 2**), which outlines the timeline, instructional scaffolds, and multimedia tools over the 12-week implementation. Quotations are anonymized and labelled as T1 to T5, which illustrate how their pedagogical beliefs and classroom practices evolved through engagement with DST.

5.1. Teachers' Evolving Beliefs about DST

The following subsections expand on these three themes and include quotations from teacher narratives, demonstrating how their experiences relate to the teaching timeline and DST classroom implementation activities. Teachers initially expressed hesitation and uncertainty about DST, especially in early implementation stages. However, after hands-on experience and guided reflection, all five participants developed more positive views about DST's pedagogical value.

I didn't know about DST mode. I felt scared and confused (Quoted from T3). The anxiety level of T3 was further heightened when she had to face her colleagues who were "pedagogical experts". As a result of acquiring some basic DST knowledge and being in the classroom, this novice teacher's level of anxiety appeared to be reduced.

Despite early challenges, teachers noted increased comfort and motivation over time. Most of the participants are pleased to receive more training, and more will be discussed in the next discussion section.

By viewing my reflective notes, I can critically evaluate how old ways of TBLT work with digital storytelling. Specifically, I need to know how to apply DST to redesign tasks that promote language learning through authentic tasks (Quoted from T4).

5.2. Identification of Effective Practices

The results of the study revealed that DST facilitated student collaboration, language output, and intercultural engagement. Using authentic and project-based learning strategies, teachers adapted textbook tasks to incorporate storytelling.

T1, one of the experienced teachers, documented her experiences with implementing a DST project in her college English reading class of unit three. During her class reflections, T1 noted the following observations and insights:

Writing, vocabulary, and speaking skills were practiced while my students crafted their story scripts. I think their language proficiency levels have improved, particularly the ability to speak English fluently and confidently. (Quoted from T1)

Based on T2's observations, he observed that peer collaboration and feedback positively impacted students' performance.

The students brainstormed ideas in pairs or small groups, provided constructive feedback, and supported one another (Quoted from T2). T2 notes that peer collaboration not only improved the quality of student stories but also fostered a sense of community among students.

Here is one of the specific authentic tasks named *How to be a good house guest in China* (from the unit three titled *Culture Link* project of the textbook).

Students get better at writing and narrating their stories, choosing appropriate language expressions, and practicing pronunciation and intonation. As students collaborate on planning, recording, and editing their multimedia presentations, sharing feedback, and peer reviewing each other's work, they learn through collaboration. (Quoted from T1)

The authentic and meaningful tasks require students to create digital stories related to real-life experiences and encourage students to draw from their cultural backgrounds, personal interests, and language learning goals when creating digital stories. As part of the written reflections, another case is presented below to elaborate further on the topic of

discussion.

I see increased task engagement when students work together on storylines, characters, and dialogue. Students express their ideas and contribute to the story using written and spoken language. Through collaboration, students negotiate meaning, provide feedback, and co-create narratives. (Quoted from T4)

Additionally, teachers redesigned lesson planning to emphasize learner production and DST tools:

After redesigning the lesson plan related to the DST preparation, normally I should assign some routine reading comprehension questions or role-play activities. However, after introducing Windows Movie Maker, I decided to require students to present their understanding of the text before making the multimedia products. (Quoted from T5)

As usual, T5 would prepare some reading comprehension questions to test students' understanding of unit one titled *A New Journey in Life* in class. However, during the first semester of the 2023–2024 college English class, T5 tried to induce students to make interpretations by requiring them to present their understanding of the text in the DST preparation.

This DST method, on the one hand, is useful to check students' understanding of the text, and more importantly, emphasizes students' productive skills. (Quoted from T5)

5.3. Insights into Digital Professional Development

Teachers acknowledged that despite initial unfamiliarity, DST integration spurred professional development and motivation. A strong need was expressed for more practical, hands-on training.

At the end of the semester, I was still very excited to use DST in my college English reading class. At the same time, I also used the editing software related to DST, and I also found a lot of joy in it. However, the FLTRP conference

training provided is mostly focused on concepts, but practical sharing is also very limited. I will seek more theme-related DST practical training in the future. Although I don't know how to find out those training sessions yet, I will pay attention to the corresponding press publishing conference trainings later. (Quoted from T5)

In the beginning, the topic of teachers' digital literacy was constantly brought up in FLTRP training. I didn't think any impact on my college English reading class until the school asked us to apply for a DST teaching-related research project. For the first time, I learned about it through literature review. After knowing what DST is, I found out if it is possible to use this TOOL in my classroom. After this semester's hard work, I have gained a lot. The students were originally reluctant to answer my reading questions, but now they are willing to explore the software, write scripts, and finally generate stories. I am still happy looking forward to the follow-up training on DST use. (Quoted from T2)

The new school policy now mandates all the teachers to attend different teacher training sessions, which should be up to 60 hours, but we teachers still have regular teaching hours up to 350 hours a year. We must complete those teaching hours, otherwise we fail at the year-end assessment. This training hours requirement sounds unappealing and imperative because we feel very tired. However, through this semester's experiment, DST is still very helpful to students' classroom participation and our teachers' use of software. I hope I can try my best to complete 60 hours next year and continue to use DST in my classroom. (Quoted from T3)

It is clear from these findings that DST enriched student learning while also influencing teachers' instructional beliefs and practices in under-resourced third-tier colleges.

6. Discussion

This discussion interprets and contextualizes the findings from the qualitative study, addressing the research question: What are Chinese third-tier college EFL teachers' views and understandings regarding DST integration in TBLT? It integrates thematic findings with existing literature, providing pedagogical implications.

6.1. Reflective Practice as a Catalyst for Belief Transformation

The findings reveal a dynamic transformation in teachers' beliefs about DST, evolving from initial uncertainty to a deeper appreciation of its pedagogical potential. T3's early statement—"I didn't know about DST mode. I felt scared and confused"—illustrates the anxiety and uncertainty that many novice teachers experience in technology-mediated contexts. This reflects broader findings by Estaji and Fata-laki, who documented the gap between teachers' interest in digital innovation and their confidence in applying it^[34].

However, through participation in DST projects and reflective teaching, participants developed more nuanced understandings. T4's statement—"By viewing my reflective notes, I can critically evaluate how old ways of TBLT work with digital storytelling"—demonstrates how DST served as a reflective mirror, allowing for pedagogical re-evaluation. This aligns with Zhang et al., who argue that reflective practice enables deeper linguistic and emotional engagement in digital learning environments^[33].

6.2. Integration of DST in TBLT Tasks

The study highlights the alignment between DST and TBLT, especially in fostering language production and collaborative meaning-making. T1 emphasized, "Writing, vocabulary, and speaking skills were practiced while my students crafted their story scripts," confirming literature claims that DST enhances fluency and confidence^[15,31].

Similarly, T2 observed that "peer collaboration and feedback positively impacted students' performance"—a finding echoed by Morgado & Vesala-Varttala, who identify DST as a facilitator of socio-emotional and intercultural competencies^[20]. The use of DST tools like Windows Movie Maker allowed T5 to shift from comprehension checks to

production-oriented activities: “I decided to require students to present their understanding of the text before making the multimedia products.”

These practices mirror Long and Hall’s argument for authentic task design^[47], and reinforce Fu’s ecological TBLT approach in Asian EFL contexts, where DST’s flexibility allows adaptation to institutional constraints^[24].

6.3. Navigating Institutional Barriers in Professional Growth

Despite gaining pedagogical insight, teachers still encountered barriers to DST implementation. As T3 pointed out, “This training hours requirement sounds unappealing... we feel very tired.” This reflects challenges documented in literature^[36,37], which emphasize time, training, and institutional fatigue as barriers to sustained innovation.

Nonetheless, the teachers expressed a willingness to continue learning: T5 stated, “I also found a lot of joy in it... I will seek more theme-related DST practical training in the future.” This reinforces Huang’s point that effective DST integration depends on both digital and pedagogical literacy^[29].

Similarly, T2 described a transformation from disengagement to proactive experimentation: “The students were originally reluctant... but now they are willing to explore the software, write scripts, and finally generate stories.” The data illustrate that DST not only changes student engagement but also teacher agency.

6.4. Tensions and Unexpected Contradictions

Despite the participants’ generally positive reflections on DST integration, subtle tensions emerged between their enthusiastic beliefs and practical hesitations. For instance, although T5 expressed excitement—“I also found a lot of joy in it... I will seek more theme-related DST practical training in the future”—the same teacher noted limited access to hands-on resources and practical workshops. This disjunction reflects what Moradkhani describes as the belief-practice gap, where teachers advocate innovation but struggle with application due to institutional or psychological barriers^[38].

Likewise, T3’s recognition that “DST is very helpful to students’ classroom participation” stands in contrast to their

concern that required training hours felt “unappealing and imperative,” revealing emotional fatigue and institutional overload. As Estaji and Fatalaki note, even tech-positive teachers in resource-scarce environments may experience motivational drop-offs if overwhelmed by administrative demands^[34].

This complexity mirrors findings from Zheng et al., who observed that even when teachers recognize digital pedagogies as valuable, time poverty and institutional inertia often impede full adoption^[37]. These tensions suggest that teacher enthusiasm is not always a guarantee of sustained implementation—especially in under-resourced third-tier contexts where digital optimism may clash with practical constraints. Additionally, teachers’ localization of policy discourse into personalized stories and tasks demonstrates the flexibility of DST within the national educational context, though policy alignment was never an explicit learning outcome in this study.

7. Conclusion

Using a qualitative case study design, this study examined five teachers’ experiences with DST use, their understanding of its reading classroom applications, and how reflective notes affected their perception of technology integration. The teachers gained their technical skills by using DST within the context of TBLT in the following way: (1) they reflected on what an effective DST classroom is; (2) they understood the principles of TBLT as well as how to adapt DST to meet the demands of the curriculum. We’ll address this extended question: Can teachers share and communicate daily after-class reflection journals through follow-up training?

Reflective journaling has been linked to the acquisition of professional skills and attitudes by teachers. It is possible that in the subsequent study, the author will learn more about the extended question by tracking down those five teachers.

In this study, the integration of Chinese stories in DST tasks aimed not only to strengthen language proficiency but also to connect language learning with cultural understanding. By encouraging students to create narratives rooted in their own cultural experiences, such as community heritage or personal family stories, the study facilitated a deeper con-

nection between language and culture. This approach aligns with national educational goals that promote cultural understanding and pride, especially through the lens of “telling China’s stories well” in English.

While DST tasks focused on language skills such as vocabulary development, narrative organization, and fluency, they also provided students with opportunities to explore and share aspects of Chinese culture. This process of cultural localization—transforming national policies into locally relevant topics—encouraged students to not only enhance their English proficiency but also develop a greater appreciation for their cultural identity.

By embedding cultural elements into the language learning process, DST proved to be a powerful tool for bridging the gap between linguistic skills and cultural competence. The study highlights how language education, when integrated with culturally relevant content, can foster more meaningful and engaging learning experiences.

7.1. Recommendations

According to this study, it is possible to improve the integration of DST into TBLT programs at third-tier Chinese colleges by making several practical and pedagogical recommendations. Firstly, sustained teacher training programs should focus equally on technical as well as pedagogical aspects of DST. A hands-on workshop and a collaborative demonstration should accompany theoretical overviews in these trainings. Secondly, institutions should consider implementing reflective journals as a professional development requirement. In this study, teachers suggested daily after-class reflections as a means of supporting continuous learning and facilitating peer sharing. Teachers should also be provided with flexible guidelines for integrating DSTs, so that they can adapt digital tasks to match their learners’ linguistic levels and cultural contexts. As a final recommendation, school administrators should provide structural support, including adjusted workloads and access to updated technology, to reduce teacher fatigue.

7.2. Limitations

This study has several limitations. It involved only five EFL teachers from one third-tier Chinese college, which limited its generalizability. An institution’s unique context may

not reflect broader educational settings. The data were based on self-reported reflections, which might introduce bias, as participants may emphasize successes. Furthermore, the study only included teacher perspectives, omitting student opinions and classroom outcomes. Finally, it captured only one semester’s experience, providing limited insight into the long-term effects and sustainability of DST integration in TBLT. There is a need for future research to use broader samples and longitudinal, multi-perspective designs. We describe how policy discourse contextualized teachers’ decisions, however, policy alignment was not operationalized as a learning outcome, and our claims are limited to linguistic and multimodal performance within DST. Future research could address this gap by incorporating student perspectives, such as their feedback, reflections, or digital storytelling projects, to offer a more comprehensive view of the learning outcomes. This could also enrich our understanding of how DST impacts student engagement, language acquisition, and cultural learning.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, T.N. and N.A.B.N.S.; methodology, A.B.A.A.; software, T.N. and N.A.B.N.S.; formal analysis, T.N.; investigation, T.N.; resources, T.N.; data curation, T.N. and N.A.B.N.S.; writing—original draft preparation: T.N.; writing—review and editing, T.N. and N.A.B.N.S.; supervision, A.B.A.A.; project administration, A.B.A.A. All the authors have read and agreed to the published version of this manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study as it involved only teacher participants in a 12-week digital storytelling-based teaching practice program and posed minimal risk without collecting sensitive personal data. Institutional permission was obtained from the Law & Business College affiliated with Hubei University of Economics.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, T.N., upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and institutional restrictions.

Appendix A

This rubric is used to assess student-created digital stories (DSTs) as part of a TBLT framework. The rubric evaluates the following seven dimensions, with scores ranging from 0 to 4, where 0 indicates a complete failure to meet the standard and 4 indicates full mastery.

Rubric of DST-TBLT Assessment

Seven Dimensions	Assessment Criteria Description	Tick If Applicable to the Criteria Description					Needs Improvement	Remarks
		4	3	2	1	0		
Language Accuracy and Fluency	4: No errors in language, grammar, or vocabulary; expression is fluent.							
	3: Occasional errors that do not affect understanding; grammar and vocabulary are mostly accurate.							
	2: Significant errors in language that hinder understanding; grammar and vocabulary use are inconsistent.							
	1: Frequent errors that severely hinder understanding.							
	0: No coherent language or completely unintelligible.							
Story Structure and Coherence	4: Clear structure with a compelling beginning, middle, and end; logical flow and coherence.							
	3: Mostly clear structure, though some sections may feel disjointed.							
	2: Story structure is unclear, with significant lapses in logic or coherence.							
	1: Disorganized and incoherent narrative.							
Integration of Reading and Writing	4: Effectively integrates reading materials and personal creation, enriching the story's depth and context.							
	3: Reading materials are well-integrated, though not fully utilized.							

Seven Dimensions	Assessment Criteria Description	Tick If Applicable to the Criteria Description					Needs Improvement	Remarks
		4	3	2	1	0		
Integration of Reading and Writing	2: Little integration of reading materials into the creation, weak connection between the two.							
	1: No integration of reading materials with the creation.							
	0: No reading materials used.							
Multimodal Coordination	4: Excellent coordination of multimedia elements (images, video, audio) that enhances story meaning and emotional expression.							
	3: Good coordination, but some elements do not fully align with the story.							
	2: Minimal coordination, with several elements that are poorly matched or irrelevant.							
	1: Poor use of multimedia, elements do not support the story.							
	0: No use of multimedia elements.							
Audience Sensitivity	4: Fully aware of the target audience, with the language and emotional expression precisely matching audience needs.							
	3: Considered audience, but not always well-matched in terms of tone or content.							
	2: Weak awareness of audience, language and emotional expression poorly matched.							
	1: No awareness of audience, mismatched language and emotional expression.							
	0: No consideration of the audience.							
Reflection and Insight	4: Deep reflection on the story creation process, with clear understanding of language and technical choices, and personal growth.							
	3: Some reflection on the process, with good understanding of language and technical choices.							
	2: Shallow reflection, limited understanding of the creation process.							
	1: Little to no reflection or understanding of the learning process.							

Seven Dimensions	Assessment Criteria Description	Tick If Applicable to the Criteria Description					Needs Improvement	Remarks
		4	3	2	1	0		
Reflection and Insight	0: No reflection.							
	4: Fully completes all tasks; excellent technical execution, professional presentation.							
	3: Most tasks completed; good technical execution with minor errors or missing elements.							
	2: Major tasks incomplete; technical issues impact presentation.							
	1: Many tasks incomplete; major technical issues.							
Technical Quality and Completion	0: No tasks completed or technical execution was completely flawed.							
Total Score:								
The score for each dimension ranges from 0 to 4, with a total score range of 0–28.								
24–28: Excellent								
18–23: Good								
12–17: Average								
6–11: Below Average								
0–5: Unacceptable								

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