

Exploring Cultural Identity and Language Development Through Digital Storytelling: Tales of Culturally-Linguistically Diverse Secondary Students

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This study explores how digital storytelling influences the cultural identity development of secondary culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students from Bhutanese-Nepali backgrounds. Utilizing the theoretical framework of multiliteracies, cultural identity and sociocultural theory in Second Language Development, this research investigates the benefits and challenges of digital storytelling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, digital story artifacts, and observations during a seven-week after-school program. The findings reveal that digital storytelling allows CLD students to connect deeply with their cultural identities, express their experiences, and advocate for themselves and the broader immigrant community. Students integrated linguistic, visual, and audio elements to create rich, multimodal narratives, enhancing their language skills in both heritage languages and English. However, they also faced challenges such as technical difficulties and language barriers, underscoring the need for additional support.

Key Words: Digital storytelling, culturally and linguistically diverse students, Bhutanese-Nepali immigrants

INTRODUCTION

Digital storytelling combines technology with personal narrative, offering culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students a distinctive platform to express their experiences and cultural backgrounds. Research underscores its advantages for language acquisition, such as vocabulary development (Leong et al., 2019), literacy skills (Vu et al., 2017; Yang, 2012), oral English competency (Kim, 2014; Nair & Yunus, 2021), and enhanced meaning-making through multimodal composing (Balaman, 2018; Vinogradova et al., 2011). Moreover, it aids students in building cultural awareness and identity (Johnson & Kendrick, 2017; Nair & Yunus, 2021; Skinner & Hagood, 2008) while also enabling them

to explore social issues like injustice and empathy (Castañeda et al., 2018; Vinogradova et al., 2011).

Given these wide-ranging benefits, digital storytelling emerges as an impactful tool in supporting the overall development of CLD students. While the literature tends to generalize the experiences of CLD students, often overlooking the unique challenges and cultural dynamics faced by less represented groups. This gap in the research limits the understanding of how digital storytelling can be tailored to support the diverse needs of all CLD students, particularly those from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to address this gap by investigating the role of digital storytelling in the cultural identity development of immigrant secondary students from Bhutanese-Nepali backgrounds. Specifically, this research aims to understand how these students navigate their dual identities—balancing their Bhutanese-Nepali heritage with their experiences in the U.S.—through the creation of digital stories. By focusing on this specific group, the study seeks to provide insights into the cultural and linguistic challenges these students face, as well as the strategies they employ to overcome them. Furthermore, this study will explore how digital storytelling can serve as a bridge between students' cultural heritage and their current educational experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment, thus leading to pedagogical support of CLD students learning in K-12 classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the theoretical and research literature on supporting CLD students' learning through the lenses of social cultural theory and second language development, multiliteracies and digital storytelling, as well as cultural identity and digital storytelling.

SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY AND SECOND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT.

One key task for CLD students is to learn to use academic English for social purposes. Academic language is distinct from everyday language, characterized by specific vocabulary, grammar, and discourse features (Cummins, 1981; Fang, 2008; Fillmore, 2009; Martin & Rose, 2007). For example, Fang and Schleppegrell (2006) demonstrated that nouns and nominal groups in academic texts expand information, establish references, and vary across different academic registers. Sociocultural theory, rooted in the work of Vygotsky (1978), and later further elaborated by other research (Ellis, 2008; Kozulin et al., 2003; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain & Lapkin, 2001; Van Lier, 2004), underscores the significance of social interaction in the development of cognitive and linguistic abilities. Sociocultural theory proposes that learning occurs through social interactions within a cultural context, where more knowledgeable individuals provide support, or scaffolding, to learners. When CLD students engage with peers or mentors who have higher linguistic proficiency, these interactions create opportunities for CLD students to practice academic language in meaningful ways. In a digital storytelling project, student interaction creates authentic context in which students articulate complex ideas, argue points of view, and engage in academic writing. This calls for a future understanding of how digital technologies can support second language development in multimedia learning environments for CLD students.

MULTILITERACIES AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING.

The multimedia nature of digital stories and digital storytelling blend linguistic, visual, and audio elements, enabling students to leverage their cultural backgrounds while navigating the multimodal discourse (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2003; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). The New London Group (1996) proposed four elements in multiliteracy pedagogy:

situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformative practice. When CLD students are allowed to create digital stories, they situate themselves in personal and family immigration histories. Additionally, students engage in 'critical framing' and 'transformative practice' (New London Group, 1996, p.83), which involve critically engaging with content, organizing multimodal materials, and advocating for themselves and the wider immigrant community. Recent studies have elaborated on the importance of multiliteracies in contemporary education. Cope and Kalantzis (2016) argue that digital storytelling creates a multimodal learning environment that is especially beneficial for CLD students. Hull and Katz (2006) found that when immigrant students articulate their narratives through digital storytelling, they develop a stronger sense of agency and identity. Pandya and Ávila (2014) found that students are more engaged when they can connect their learning to their personal and cultural identities. Given the language development needs for immigrant students as they grow up in secondary schools, understanding the multiliteracy approach would shed light to support CLD students' learning.

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING.

Researchers studying cultural identity among English as a Second Language (ESL) and international students find that it is dynamic and fluid (Norton, 2000; Peirce, 1995; Sole, 2004). As students navigate through new linguistic and cultural lands, they learn to explore who they are and construct their cultural identity that is related to both their heritage culture and the new culture. Digital storytelling is a powerful tool, assisting CLD students to reflect on their lived experiences and make sense of who they are. Studies show that digital storytelling helps students negotiate their multilayered cultural identities (Vinogradova, 2011), maintain their cultural heritage while simultaneously acquiring new literacies (Vasudevan, 2019), and foster a sense of pride and validation (Cummins et al., 2015). When students share their stories, they contribute to a richer, more inclusive educational environment. This inclusivity ultimately fosters a community of learners who respect and celebrate cultural diversity.

METHODS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study examines the impact of creating digital stories on secondary CLD students through the lenses of multiliteracies and cultural identity. The research is guided by three questions:

1. How do secondary CLD students perceive their cultural identity and cultural heritage through the lens of digital storytelling?
2. How does digital storytelling impact language development in CLD students?
3. What are the affordances and challenges that secondary CLD students encounter when engaging in digital storytelling practices?

CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

The qualitative study was conducted as an after-school enrichment activity at a community center serving Bhutanese-Nepali refugees on the East Coast of the US. These students and their families fled Bhutan for Nepal due to religious persecution and eventually resettled in the U.S. IRB approval was obtained, and all participants provided assent and parental consent to complete the study. The study lasted seven (7) weeks, with students meeting for 1.5 hours each week to produce digital stories of their selected topics. Students can choose to work individually or in groups. Eight secondary students (ages 13 to 17) participated, assisted by a student-teacher facilitator majoring in secondary social

studies. All students were immigrants from Nepal, though some arrived in the U.S. at a young age. Table 1 provides detailed demographic information. Figure 1 shows students working in groups.

Table 1. *Participants demographic information*

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Grade level	Ethnicity	Number of years in the U.S.	ESL services
Salmee	F	14	9	Nepal	10	N
Hartaj	M	13	8	Nepal	10	N
Iniya	F	17	11	Nepal	3	Y
Palisha	F	16	11	Nepal	4	Y
Tashi	F	16	11	Nepal	8	N
Garvesh	M	14	9	Nepal	11	N
Pratika	M	15	9	Nepal	8	N
Sang	M	14	9	Nepal	9	N



Figure 1. Students collaborate on their digital storytelling project

DATA SOURCES AND DATA ANALYSIS

During the course of the project, a variety of data were collected, including semi-structured interviews, digital story artifacts, and observations: 1) *Semi-Structured Interview*. All students participated in a 60-minute semi-structured interview. Questions focused on their experiences in the U.S., their cultural backgrounds, and their reflections on the digital storytelling project. Sample interview questions include: How did you use your literacy skills, such as reading and writing skills in the project? Did you have any challenges? How did you overcome these challenges? What did you learn about your family, community and yourself through this project? What would you like to know more about concerning your family, your community, or yourself that you did not find out in this project? 2) *Digital Story Artifacts*. Students created digital stories. Each digital story was approximately 5-10 minutes long. These artifacts were analyzed to understand how students represented their identities and cultural heritage as well as how they perceive their lives and immigration in general. It is important to note that only six students completed

their digital stories. Four movies were made with three focusing on immigration and one about a personal Vlog. Detailed information about each digital story is included in the next section. 3) *Observations*. Observations were conducted during the digital storytelling sessions. Field notes focused on student interactions, engagement levels, and the challenges they encountered during the creation process. Pictures of students' drafts and writings were taken as well.

The data analysis began with transcribing interviews and digital stories, and organizing field notes. These were reviewed multiple times to generate initial codes like cultural identity influence and enhanced creativity, derived from both linguistic and non-linguistic elements. Axial coding then grouped these into larger categories such as cultural identity, language development, perceptions, benefits, and challenges. Following the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), consistent themes emerged among all participants, encapsulating the study's primary findings.

DIGITAL STORIES DESCRIPTIONS

This section shows each digital story made by students with different format and content. The four (4) digital stories consist of two (2) individual digital immigration documentary, one (1) group immigrant digital story and one (1) personal video-log (Vlog).

STORY I: SALMEE'S IMMIGRATION DOCUMENTARY (DURATION: 6'02"). This individual documentary opens with an intimate and revealing interview with Salmee's father, who recounts his personal journey to the United States as a refugee. He shares insights into the emotional and physical challenges he faced during his migration, providing a heartfelt narrative that sets the tone for the film. His perspectives on the broader immigrant experience in the U.S. offer a poignant commentary on the struggles and resilience of immigrant communities. Salmee then shifts focus to a broader discussion on the systemic challenges that immigrants encounter in their daily lives. This segment is visually enriched with powerful images of immigrant protests, poignant news headlines, and thought-provoking quotes from various individuals. These visual elements serve to highlight the ongoing struggles and societal issues surrounding immigration. To provide a contemporary and localized perspective, Salmee conducts interviews with members of her school's "Global Minds" club. These students share their own views and experiences regarding immigration, adding depth and diversity to the narrative. Their testimonies reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of immigration, as seen through the eyes of the younger generation. The documentary concludes with a heartfelt and articulate explanation from Salmee herself, outlining the purpose of her film. She emphasizes her desire to educate others about the immigrant experience and to offer support and solidarity to those who, like her family, have overcome significant hardships. Her closing remarks serve as a call to action, encouraging empathy and understanding within the broader community.

STORY II: HARTAJ'S IMMIGRANT DOCUMENTARY (DURATION: 8'34") Hartaj's documentary delves into the rich and complex experiences of his family's immigration journey, spanning from Bhutan to Nepal and finally to the United States. The film is structured around three interviews with his immediate family members: his mother, father, and grandmother. Each interview provides the perspective on the family's migration story. Hartaj's mother recounts the initial move from Bhutan to Nepal, discussing the reasons behind their departure and the challenges they faced in the refugee camps. Her narrative is filled with emotional reflections on leaving behind a homeland and adapting to life in a transitional environment. The interview with Hartaj's father focuses on the subsequent journey from Nepal to the United States. He discusses the logistical and bureaucratic hurdles they encountered, as well as the cultural adjustments required in their new home. His story highlights the perseverance and resilience necessary to navigate the complex

immigration process. Hartaj's grandmother provides a generational viewpoint, sharing her memories of Bhutan and the impact of displacement on her and her family. Her reflections add depth to the documentary, offering a historical context that enriches the family's narrative. All interviews were meticulously conducted using pre-designed questions created by Hartaj. These questions ensured a comprehensive exploration of each family member's experiences and thoughts. To make the interviews accessible to a wider audience, the answers were translated into English captions, enhancing clarity and understanding. The documentary concludes with a series of powerful statements about the immigrant experience in the U.S. Hartaj supports these statements with census data and quotes from various reputable sources. This segment provides a broader societal context, illustrating the widespread impact of immigration and the contributions of immigrant communities to American society.

STORY III: NEPALIS IN AMERICA BY INIYA, PALISHA, AND TASHI (DURATION: 10'39"). This group documentary "Nepalis in America," created by Iniya, Palisha, and Tashi, offers a collective approach examining into the journey of Nepali immigrants from Bhutan to Nepal and finally to the United States. The digital story opens with an informative narrative providing the historical context of Nepali migration. This group used a combination of online pictures and census data to illustrate the forced migration journey, which set the tone for the personal stories that follow. The group conducted a series of interviews with three Nepali adults who share their personal experiences of leaving Nepal and starting new lives in the United States. These interviews show the emotional and logistical challenges of migration, as well as the cultural adjustments and opportunities they encountered in their new homeland. Each adult's story adds depth to the understanding of the Nepali immigrant experience, highlighting both individual and shared struggles. Following the adult interviews, the documentary features a local U.S. school staff member who provides insights into her interactions with immigrant students. She discusses the unique challenges these students face and the support systems in place to help them succeed. This perspective is further enriched by a teacher who recounts her experiences working with ESL students, emphasizing the educational hurdles and triumphs encountered by immigrant children. The focus then shifts to the voices of two Nepali students who talk about their school life in the U.S. They share how their cultural background influences their education and social experiences. These student interviews offer a glimpse into the younger generation's adaptation and integration into American society, illustrating the blend of cultural retention and assimilation. This documentary concludes with a powerful message about the diverse tapestry of the U.S. immigrant population. It highlights how immigrants from various backgrounds come together to create a vibrant and multicultural society. This concluding segment emphasizes unity and the shared experiences of immigrants, regardless of their origins.

STORY IV: MY LIFE BE LIKE BY GARVESH (DURATION: 7'50"). This individual Vlog took a different approach than the other three digital stories. Garvesh's documentary offers a glimpse into his everyday life, capturing the daily moments that define his routine as a student in the U.S. secondary school. The digital story begins with a depiction of Garvesh's early morning routine, as he wakes up, prepares for the day, and begins his journey to school. Then he captures his daily journey on the school bus through his neighborhood. The visuals of the neighborhood not only provide context for Garvesh's environment but also subtly introduce the viewer to the cultural and social landscape that shapes his experiences. Once at school, the documentary shifts focus to Garvesh's experience in various classes, with each class providing a snapshot of his learning environment. The documentary presents these scenes with a blend of images and brief video clips, allowing the viewer to experience the rhythm and flow of a typical school day from Garvesh's

perspective. Garvesh included an interview with one of his classmates, sharing the social interactions that are part of his school experience. Another key moment in the documentary is a short classroom scene featuring Garvesh's German teacher. Instead of traditional video footage, this scene is depicted through a series of pictures, capturing the teacher singing with the class. The documentary concludes with Garvesh's return home, where he is shown preparing a snack in a familiar and comforting setting. This final scene brings the narrative full circle, reinforcing the routine nature of his day while also emphasizing the importance of home and family life in his overall experience.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from the analysis from the data gathered from semi structured interviews, the digital story artifacts and the observation notes. Thematical results are presented for each research question.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: CULTURAL IDENTITY EXPANDED AND CONNECTED TO SOCIETY VALUES

The first research question explores how digital storytelling influences the cultural identity development of secondary CLD students. Rich data indicated that CLD students utilized digital stories as a powerful medium to connect with their cultural identity. Among the four digital stories analyzed, three centered around immigration. For example, Tashi chose immigration because "*it is the first thing that came into my mind.*" In Hartaj's story, all interviews were conducted in Nepali, which he then translated into English, displaying the translations as captions. These stories incorporated traditional cultural artifacts, images of cultural clothing and festivals, and traditional music to emphasize their cultural ties. Students also reported learning about the history of Nepalis, which they found significant. Garvesh's movie focused on his daily life. Although it does not directly focus on his culture, from the scenes selected, it is evident that his movie reflects his cultural roots. For example, his room features cultural artifacts used as decorations.

While students maintained strong cultural roots, their identities evolved over time, either voluntarily or unconsciously. For instance, Palisha, after living in the U.S. for four years, experienced some heritage language loss, as evidenced by her remark, "*I need my sister's help because she is a better translator than I am.*" This shift highlights the difficulties of maintaining cultural connections while adapting to a new linguistic context, revealing a change in self-perception and a reliance on others for cultural support. Garvesh's identification as "*American,*" also emphasized through his film's focus on a non-immigration-related topic, suggests a strong alignment with the dominant culture. This may indicate either a high degree of assimilation or a deliberate choice to embrace his new cultural identity, especially given his young age and early immigration. In contrast, Salmee's self-identification as "*human*" reflects a universalist perspective, focusing on commonalities over cultural specifics and possibly indicating a desire to transcend cultural boundaries. Her film, which incorporates perspectives from other non-immigrant students, further demonstrates her embrace of inclusivity. Pratika's unique description of himself as "*outside white on the inside, I mean, technically, chameleon, technically*" reveals a complex and potentially conflicted sense of self, suggesting an adaptive identity that navigates multiple cultural influences and expectations. Collectively, these varied self-identifications and experiences underscore the fluid and multifaceted nature of cultural identity, illustrating how students actively construct and reconstruct their sense of self as they balance the influences of their heritage with the demands and opportunities of their new environment.

It was also observed through the movie creation that students linked their personal cultural identities to broader societal and historical contexts, illustrating **the**

interconnectedness of individual experiences with larger cultural narratives and social issues. Through interviews with individuals outside their families, students expanded their focus, aiming to educate and assist others. Salmee explained, *“I would want to show it [the movie] to, like, more Nepalis like me, I can help new immigrants to understand, because most of us, so probably like, immigrants like us, that like, understand.”* In another movie titled *“Nepalis in America”*, students incorporated school staff and teacher’s perspectives on immigration. This demonstrates that students have moved beyond perceiving immigration as solely a personal experience and are now motivated to advocate for the immigrant population on a broader scale.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: INCREASED LANGUAGE SKILLS IN BOTH ENGLISH AND HERITAGE LANGUAGE

The second research question investigates how digital storytelling impacts language development. The primary data for this inquiry come from Iniya and Palisha, who are currently receiving ESL services. This focus does not suggest that CLD students who have exited ESL programs use flawless English; rather, it highlights that the language development of those still in ESL classrooms may be more visible compared to their peers who no longer require these services.

Iniya, Palisha, and Tashi worked together on the project, with Tashi, who no longer needed ESL services, assisting Iniya and Palisha. Field notes indicate that *“Tashi provided the English translation for some words Iniya and Palisha used in Nepali.”* During the interview about their movie, Iniya noted that they encountered English words that were *“very long, like never heard of it.”* The group’s film featured academic vocabulary and complex grammatical structures. For example, the transcript shows:

“In 1991, there was widespread repression in southeastern Bhutan; people began to flee the country, mostly back to Nepal through India, creating a humanitarian crisis. In 2005, the USA and other countries expected to take in the refugees. In 2006, resettlement began, managed by IOM.”

Although the sentences were not completely grammatical, they incorporated complex academic vocabulary, such as *“resettlement,”* and advanced grammatical structures, including subordinate clauses and passive voice. This demonstrates that students were advancing in their use of academic English to express their ideas. Additionally, the digital storytelling project offered CLD students opportunities to enhance their heritage language skills. Nepali was used in two movies during interviews with family members. Hartaj mentioned that he wrote all his interview questions in English but *“I said to them in Nepali.”* The girls’ group used both English and Nepali while creating their movie and transcribed interviewees’ responses from Nepali into English.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: MULTIMODAL REPRESENTATION ENABLED PEER COLLABORATION YET CHALLENGES REMAIN

Besides the opportunities that digital storytelling provides for students to showcase their cultural identity and develop both their heritage language and English, as discussed in Research Questions 1 and 2, the data also reveal that digital storytelling offers a multimodal platform that enables students to express their interests, highlight issues of concern, and advocate for themselves and the broader immigrant community. By integrating linguistic, visual, and audio elements, digital stories provide students with enhanced opportunities to convey meaning. Students incorporated various resources, including online photos, maps, quotes, census data, cultural artifacts, traditional music, and their own narratives to create a rich multimodal representation. These diverse modes add depth and complexity to their work. For instance, Hartaj used a brown background and a

depiction of a religious figure, coupled with statements about immigration, reflects his deep connection to his cultural heritage while expressing a strong interest in immigration issues. Similarly, the girls' group included an image of traditional Nepali clothing while discussing the historical context of Nepali migration. Although their narration was not entirely grammatical, the accompanying photo enriched their explanation, as illustrated by the phrase, "*In 1989 southern are required to... goodness costumes, culture and religion.*" The multimodal nature of digital storytelling thus offers CLD students a valuable means of overcoming linguistic barriers by allowing them to use visual and auditory elements to enhance and clarify their narratives.

PEER COLLABORATION.

Peer collaboration is also identified in the data as another affordance of digital storytelling. Students worked together to help each other with using editing software, finding and organizing resources, and using English. For example, in figure 1, Iniya and Tashi were working together to organize pictures they found online. The field notes echoed that "*Hartaj used this editing software in the past, so he helped other students with software questions.*" The peer collaboration fostered English language development. For instance, Palisha mentioned that "*Tashi has been here for a longer time, so her English is better, and she helped us* (referring to herself and Iniya)."

CHALLENGES REMAIN AND JOURNEY TO MOVE FORWARD.

Students reported various challenges, including procrastination, editing difficulties, time constraints, and language barriers. Sang, who did not complete his video, admitted, "*Procrastination, like, lot of footage, never wanted to actually edit.*" Salmee shared her challenges, stating, "*Probably the editing, like the interviews was easy, cuz I like annoying people.*" The girls' group, consisting of Iniya, Palisha, and Tashi, explained their struggles in the interview: "*My mom was four minutes but it took four hours to do subtitles because I needed my sister's help and we were arguing all the time.*" Iniya mentioned that she had difficulties finding English words and she used a lot of Nepalis during the meetings with other two team members (field notes, 2/19). In fact, Tashi, who no longer needed ESL services but maintained a close relationship with Iniya and Palisha, provided a lot of English support.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that digital storytelling significantly influences secondary CLD students' cultural identity and heritage. By creating digital stories, students deepened their connection to their cultural roots, developed their cultural identity, and gained empowerment through sharing their narratives. This aligns with previous research, demonstrating that digital storytelling enhances cultural awareness and identity development (Hull & Katz, 2006; Johnson & Kendrick, 2017; Morrell et al., 2015; Nair & Yunus, 2021; Rish & Caton, 2020; Skinner & Hagoood, 2008).

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND MULTILITERACIES

Digital storytelling allows CLD students to integrate linguistic, visual, and auditory elements, facilitating a deeper exploration of their cultural identities. Students used various multimodal resources—such as pictures, quotes, cultural artifacts, and traditional music—to reconnect with their cultural heritage while navigating new contexts. By focusing on personal and family immigration histories, students situated their projects around significant personal experiences. They extended their focus to broader immigrant experiences, critically examining immigration as a societal issue and transforming their narratives to a larger context. This approach reflects the elements of multimodal

pedagogy proposed by the New London Group (1996), including situated practice, critical framing, and transformative practice. Previous studies corroborate these findings, noting that digital storytelling increases engagement with personal and cultural identities (Pandya & Ávila, 2014), and strengthens a sense of agency and identity (Hull & Katz, 2006).

CLD students actively reconstruct their cultural identities, ranging from feeling like a "chameleon" to fully embracing their new cultural identity as "American" or adopting a universal perspective as "human." This aligns with research on ESL students' cultural identities, which are fluid, changing, and multilayered (Norton, 2000; Peirce, 1995; Sole, 2004; Vinogradova, 2011). Students' choices of language—English only or English and Nepali—reflect their cultural identity construction and reconstruction processes. For instance, Salmee's identification as "human" is reflected in her choice of a movie topic and language use (i.e., English).

When students broadened their personal cultural identity to include a wider context, they sought greater acceptance and understanding, fostering inclusivity and advocating for immigrant needs. This approach aligns with Bennett's (2019) emphasis on multicultural education, which focuses on core values like cultural diversity, community responsibility, and respect for human dignity and rights.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN BOTH ENGLISH AND HERITAGE LANGUAGE

Digital storytelling enhanced language skills in both English and heritage languages. Data reveal that students successfully employed academic English, including specialized vocabulary and complex grammatical structures, with peer support. This finding aligns with Lantolf and Thorne's (2006) assertion that social interactions, cultural tools, and collaborative activities are crucial for language learning. Regarding heritage language loss, studies (Wang, 2023; Zhou & Liu, 2023) highlight the importance of maintaining heritage languages for the overall well-being of immigrant families. Factors contributing to heritage language loss include insufficient resources outside the family, limited parental involvement, and societal and personal pressures (Curdt-Christiansen & La Morgia, 2018; Shen & Jiang, 2021; Sok & Schwartz, 2024; Wang, 2023; Zhou & Liu, 2023). The data suggest that digital storytelling, by incorporating both heritage language and English, may support heritage language maintenance among immigrant students.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The data also reveal several challenges students faced while creating their digital stories, including time constraints, lack of technical support, procrastination, and language barriers. Lambert (2013) and Sadik (2008) also identified these barriers, suggesting that targeted interventions, such as technical training and language support, are essential. Peer support and collaboration were crucial, particularly for students with lower English proficiency, underscoring the importance of a supportive learning environment. Recent studies (Ferguson-Sams et al., 2024; Rish & Caton, 2020) emphasize the need for structured support mechanisms, such as scaffolding and teacher guidance, in digital storytelling projects.

CONCLUSION:

LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital storytelling by illustrating how Bhutanese-Nepali CLD students utilize this medium to navigate, construct, and express their cultural identities. Through the creation of digital stories, students were able to deeply connect with their cultural roots while simultaneously negotiating their

identities within a new cultural context. The findings underscore the transformative power of digital storytelling in fostering cultural awareness, identity development, and language acquisition among immigrant students.

However, this study's findings are limited by the small sample size and the specific focus on a single immigrant population. With only eight participants, the generalizability of the results is constrained, and the data may not capture the full range of experiences within the Bhutanese-Nepali community or other immigrant groups. Additionally, the limited scope of data—primarily drawn from a seven-week after-school program—means that the long-term impacts of digital storytelling on cultural identity and language development remain uncertain.

Future research may aim to address these limitations by including a larger and more diverse sample of immigrant populations. Expanding the scope to include students from different cultural backgrounds will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how digital storytelling influences identity construction across various contexts. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are needed to explore the sustained effects of digital storytelling on students' cultural identity, language skills, and overall academic development over time.

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