

Finding voice through story: Supporting EFL writers with digital storytelling

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Storytelling has long been a powerful tool for teaching and learning. Across cultures and disciplines, it allows educators and students to connect personal experience with academic content. In language classrooms, storytelling can take many forms, like written narratives, digital stories, reflective journals, or oral accounts. Yet many teachers hesitate to incorporate storytelling into writing instruction. Time constraints, curriculum demands, assessment pressures, and large class sizes can make narrative work seem impractical, as traditional academic writing goals typically conflict with personal expression.

However, when implemented meticulously, storytelling can become more than an engaging activity; it can serve as a powerful catalyst for writing development. By grounding language practice in lived experience, storytelling can increase fluency, deepen engagement, and help learners build both confidence and writing skills (Pomerantz & Kearney, 2012). This article explores how personal storytelling can support writing development in ESL classrooms and offers practical strategies for integrating narrative tasks into academic writing instruction.

Background

Writing is one of the four core language skills and plays a critical role in developing English proficiency (Brown & Lee, 2015). It is also an essential part of everyday communication, ranging from informal messages to formal academic texts or reports. Due to its importance, learners must gradually develop writing proficiency to participate effectively in academic and social contexts. However, teaching and learning writing in a second or foreign language can be challenging for both instructors and students.

Research shows that many learners struggle with writing in English due to difficulties with content development, organization, and vocabulary. For example, Rizal (2021) notes that students in foreign language (FL) contexts often rely heavily on teacher translation or textbook models when producing written texts. Instead of developing their own ideas, learners may wait for explicit guidance from the instructor before even attempting to write independently. This can limit students' opportunities to experiment with language and to develop confidence as writers.

Motivation also plays an important role in writing development. Both Rizal (2021) and Castillo-Cuesta et al. (2021) suggest that students' lack of engagement with writing tasks may stem from limited motivation

or interest in traditional writing activities. When writing tasks feel disconnected from learners' personal experiences or interests, students may view them as mechanical exercises rather than meaningful communicative activities, which can make it difficult to produce longer, more comprehensive texts. In my own language learning, tasks grounded in personal experience led to greater risk-taking and visible development over time, suggesting that relevance plays a key role in engagement.

Exposure to language outside the classroom can also influence learners' motivation and writing development. Fegher and Wandera-Simwa (2025) argue that linguistic landscapes (such as road signs, advertisements or product packaging) can encourage learners to engage more with English in their daily life. This exposure helps students see language as a living system used in real-world contexts rather than as a classroom subject.

Despite the importance of writing instruction, effective writing pedagogy is not always prioritized in FL classrooms. Teaching writing often requires careful planning, extensive feedback, and significant instructional time, which can be difficult to manage in FL contexts with multiple large classes and demanding curricula (Rizal, 2021). Thus, instructors may rely on more controlled writing tasks that prioritize grammatical accuracy over creativity or personal expression (Marshall, 2010).

Storytelling offers one possible way to address such challenges. By allowing students to write about meaningful experiences or imagined narratives, storytelling can create opportunities for learners to engage with language in more authentic and motivating ways. Narrative writing tasks may also reduce the pressure associated with standard writing tasks, allowing students to experiment with vocabulary and sentence structure as they become more confident writers (Rizal, 2021).

Storytelling may also help make writing tasks more meaningful for learners. Rizal (2021) suggests that storytelling allows students to draw on vocabulary and sentence structures they have previously learned while experimenting creatively with language. As learners organize their ideas into narratives, they begin to develop a clearer sense of linguistic structure and how different language forms work together within a text. Over time, these experiences can help students build the foundation needed to engage with more complex forms of writing.

Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling (DS) extends traditional narrative work by integrating images, audio, music, and video with written text. These multimodal affordances can scaffold creativity, enrich organization, and broaden lexical choices, particularly for EFL learners who benefit from visual and auditory cues (Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021). When students draft scripts, select or create visuals, record voice-overs, and edit sequences,

they cycle through planning, composing, revising, and publishing, which are key phases of process writing (Brown & Lee, 2015; Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021).

DS can also lower affective barriers. Images help anchor memories; audio narration invites rehearsal and attention to pronunciation and rhythm; and timelines support coherence. These features can increase engagement and support the “noticing” of form-meaning connections, such as tense consistency or cohesive devices (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). Importantly, DS does not replace writing; rather, it complements it by strengthening fluency, audience awareness, and rhetorical control that can transfer to analytical genres (Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021; Pomerantz & Kearney, 2012). When learners revisit and reshape their experiences into narrative form, they must also reprocess language more deeply through reflection and revision. This kind of engagement, which I have observed both in my own learning and in classroom contexts, supports more durable language development.

Classroom applications

Storytelling can be incorporated into language classrooms through a range of activities that encourage students to experiment with language while connecting writing to personal experience. The following examples illustrate how narrative-based tasks can support writing development in both traditional and digital learning environments. Students should also be encouraged to give one another feedback on their stories so that they can learn from each other.

Personal narrative journals

One way to introduce storytelling in a classroom context is to ask students to write short entries about meaningful experiences related to class topics. For example, discussing travel stories with family or difficulties at work. Students should be encouraged to write as much as they can, listing problems, solutions, funny moments, times they enjoy, etc. This kind of task will help encourage students to engage with the language through their own personal reflective lens, which may help reduce anxiety. As the students’ proficiency increases, they can include more content and advanced sentence structures (i.e., simple past to past perfect tenses, dependent/independent clauses).

An example of a prompt could be: *Write a story about a time you went on a trip with your friends or family. Where did you go? For how long were you gone? Your story should include something funny, a problem, and a solution.*

By level:

- Beginner learners may need sentence starters (e.g., “Last summer, I...,” “We felt... because...”), word banks, and targeted grammar focus.
- Intermediate learners can emphasize paragraphing, transitions (however, meanwhile, finally), and varied sentence structures.
- Advanced learners should be encouraged to add personal reflections on the story.

Language learning stories

Language Learning Stories (LLS) invite students to narrate their own development as English learners by documenting moments of confusion, discovery, and progress. Instead of writing only about external topics, students reflect on their evolving relationship with the language itself. This practice supports metacognitive awareness, encourages meaningful noticing, and provides a motivating record of growth over time.

LLS are especially valuable because many learners rarely pause to reflect on how they are learning. They may complete exercises or memorize vocabulary, but they do not always track the *process* of improvement. Writing about these experiences helps students identify recurring patterns in their mistakes, recognize successful strategies, and take ownership of their progress. This directly aligns with the Noticing Hypothesis, which suggests that learners must consciously attend to linguistic features to acquire them (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). By articulating what changed and why, learners strengthen the mental connections needed for long-term retention.

An example prompt could be: *Choose one grammar or vocabulary area you improved this week. Show your before/after examples and explain the change.*

By level:

- Beginner learners may benefit from sentence prompts such as “*At first, I thought... but then I learned...*” or “*My mistake was... The correct form is...*” Visual aids or teacher-provided examples can also help guide their writing.
- Intermediate learners can write more detailed accounts of the learning, including who they were speaking or working with, and can begin connecting their experiences to grammar.
- Advanced learners can reflect on broader themes such as identity, confidence, and strategy. They may also analyze patterns across multiple weeks of entries, discussing what their mistakes reveal about their interlanguage development.

LLS also integrate naturally with digital storytelling. After several weeks of written reflections, students can select two or three important moments to transform into a short digital narrative. This requires learners to revisit past writing, revising it for clarity, and condensing it into a script. Choosing images to represent their experiences promotes clarity of meaning, while recording narration encourages rehearsal and improved autonomy.

Digital storytelling formative assessment

The bulk of what makes DS so appealing as a pedagogy is the final formative assessment. In this assessment, the student is tasked with revisiting all the other reflections and stories made throughout the semester, compiling them, editing them (with provided feedback), and developing a narrative of everything they have learned throughout the course. This can be written or orally recorded. This final reflective culmination acts as a catalyst for reflection and learning.

An example prompt could be: Create a two to three-minute digital story titled ‘My English Learning Journey This Semester.’ The story should combine written text, images, and recorded narration to present key moments from their language learning experience.

Select three important moments from your earlier writing, such as:

- a challenge you faced when writing in English
- a grammar or vocabulary concept you improved on
- a meaningful classroom activity
- a moment when you felt more confident using English

Teaching implications

Alignment with SLA principles

Storytelling supports process writing (planning, drafting, revising) and encourages meaningful output, feedback, and reflection (Brown & Lee, 2015). Metacognitive components in Language Learning Stories and DS final formative assessments exemplify the Noticing Hypothesis by explicitly attending to form–meaning relationships (Lightbown & Spada, 2021), thereby enabling students to see their mistakes and revise them. Beyond noticing, these activities also promote what Leow (2023) describes as deep processing, as learners engage with language meaningfully through reflection, revision, and personal connection, which supports stronger retention and learning. Peer interactions further this by emphasizing feedback to help with comprehensible input and provide opportunities for pushed output.

Feedback & affordances

A two-phase feedback model is effective: respond first to the message and organization, then target a small set of high-impact language features (e.g., tense control, article use). This preserves fluency gains while supporting accuracy (Brown & Lee, 2015). There should also be a balance between DS and traditional storytelling, possibly by assigning the former one week and the latter another. Use minimalist rubrics and selective marking and encourage students to give feedback on each other's work. Allow students a choice between low-tech DS (photo slides + voice-over) and a traditional essay, or an audio essay, for the same learning goals (Castillo-Cuesta et al., 2021). Provide institutionally available tools or no-cost options to limit the students' needs. Encourage the use of multilingual resources for planning (L1 brainstorming) while keeping final products in the target language, as appropriate to course outcomes (Brown & Lee, 2015). Incorporate local linguistic landscapes (photos of signs, menus, ads) as prompts for stories and vocabulary building, helping students connect English to daily life and community (Fegher & Wandera-Simwa, 2025).

Conclusion

Personal and digital storytelling are not distractions from writing; they are powerful pathways toward it. By centring lived experience, narrative tasks lower affective barriers, increase engagement, and scaffold key dimensions of writing development, creativity, organization, and controlled experimentation with language. Digital storytelling adds multimodal supports that make noticing and revision more concrete and motivating. Over time, as students see themselves as authors with something to say, they gain the confidence and control necessary for more formal genres.

I saw this trajectory in my own learning and later in the classroom, stories made risk-taking feel safe, and practice felt purposeful. For EFL writers, storytelling (both traditional and digital) helps transform *correct sentences* into meaningful communication, and *language practice* into voice. When we design writing instruction that invites students to speak from experience and shape narratives for real audiences, we give them more than assignments; we give them authorship.

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