

Digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool for intercultural competence in EMI contexts: a case study from Southeast Asia

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Abstract

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has become widespread globally, but most studies examining its use have centered around classroom-based activities, neglecting the less explored area of how EMI works out in informal settings facilitated by peers and technology. This study investigates the involvement of Indonesian and Philippine students in intercultural collaboration through a digital storytelling project named Stories Across Borders, which lasted for one month. Six students from the secondary and tertiary levels in both countries participated in this activity involving WhatsApp chats, post-project surveys, and creation of an 18-page e-book complete with voiceovers as part of the collective book. The thematic analysis that was used to examine the intercultural learning, communication and collaboration in this data set included transcripts of WhatsApp chats, post-project reflection surveys as well as the final story. The analysis showed three themes: digital storytelling promoted the sharing and learning of each other's backgrounds with a great sense of cultural pride and empathy; online collaboration needed natural communication skills, role negotiation, and facilitation; also, EMI provided authentic stakes for confidence building but at times strategies including rephrasing and clarifying were required as dialogic meets. These findings show that digital storytelling goes beyond a mere creative practice and serves as an effective pedagogical tool for intercultural learning in EMI settings. This research extends EMI inquiries to the international level within Southeast Asian collaborations, contributing important findings for teacher education partnerships based on project-based learning and intercultural capacities with implications for educators developing global digital initiatives.

Keywords: digital storytelling, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), intercultural learning, online collaboration, Southeast Asia

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Introduction

English as Medium Instruction (EMI) spread globally and transformed the teaching and language culture of education globally. It initially became very prominent in European and North American universities but now increasingly so in non-Anglophone nations, particularly in Asia, as universities and schools attempt to internationalize studies and equip students for international communication (Dearden, 2014; Macaro, 2018). EMI is typically defined as the instruction of academic content in English in non-English-speaking countries. The intention behind using English, besides language development, is for learners to gain access to global knowledge, learn about different cultures, and develop intercultural competence. However, with English as a medium of instruction becoming

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widespread, there arise numerous queries regarding its teaching process, language policy considerations, and sociocultural implications. Some scholars criticize the use of EMI because although it increases the competitiveness of students in the international arena, it aggravates linguistic disparity and marginalizes indigenous languages and cultures (Leyi, 2020).

Earlier works on EMI have been focused primarily on formal learning settings such as teacher classrooms, understanding lectures, policy enforcement, and assessment systems (Briggs et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2014). The research discussed above provides some interesting insights into how good teaching affects learning and learner confidence using English in EMI contexts. Nevertheless, comparatively few studies have examined how EMI operates in informal or student-led spaces that occur outside the traditional classroom, especially those which are technology-enabled and project-based. In EMI environments, there is greater emphasis on negotiation, cooperation, and genuine communication, thus providing opportunities for interaction through which English is used to talk about things, discuss ideas, and develop intercultural competence. Moreover, new research also suggests that such classrooms can help develop global citizenship through dialogue among peers (Tange, 2010). Unfortunately, however, very few systematic studies have been conducted in Southeast Asia.

Teachers' and scholars' interest in digital storytelling (DST) as a teaching method for combining language acquisition, creativity, and intercultural communication has developed along with EMI. In order to tell cultural or personal experiences, DST combines narrative with digital media such as narration, image, video, and audio (Lambert, 2018; Robin, 2016). During their actual activities, DST can help students understand how thought, emotion, and culture affect language. Research has shown that DST contributes to the development of various literacies, autonomy, and collaboration, along with providing actual contexts for practicing the target language (Tiba et al., 2015; Yang & Wu, 2012). Moreover, DST has been implemented in intercultural education to encourage empathy and intercultural understanding (Hafner et al., 2015; Kahanurak et al., 2023). Empirical research on DST in EMI settings, nonetheless, has largely been conducted in Western or East Asian settings, generating a void with respect to how DST supports intercultural learning in multilingual Southeast Asian settings.

This latest set of literature reveals that engaging in conversation is an integral component of successful EMI pedagogy. Dialogic pedagogy imagines learning as a social and joint process in which learners co-construct meaning through responding, questioning, and negotiating meaning (Alexander, 2020). In the classroom, dialogic interaction can serve as a means to mediate mastery of content and language acquisition because students are encouraged to think, express, and reason in English. However, it is difficult to keep dialogic talk running in situations where students have variable language abilities, where teacher discourse prevails, or where cultural expectations discourage free debate (Ataş, 2023; Choi et al., 2014; Paulsrud et al., 2021). There are very few scholarly works on dialogic interaction processes that focus on how students, rather than teachers, facilitate communication processes in peer-facilitated and online activities. Such an approach appears to be particularly relevant for transnational collaboration, in which students are obliged to use English to complete assigned tasks, clarify meaning, and overcome comprehension problems.

In addition, intercultural learning research in EMI has shown that students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds with group projects can achieve cross-cultural competence, awareness of identity, and respect for one another (Baker, 2015; Byram, 1997). Studies on European study abroad and international virtual collaboration indicate that peer-to-peer interactions in English enhance the

comprehension of cultural differences and suitable communication methods for global environments (Helm, 2016; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2018). Such studies typically examine university students at well-endowed schools in the West or East Asia. Considering the differences in culture, language, and resources, there are not many studies concerning the collaboration practices of Global South students in EMI. In order to improve worldwide EMI research and show how local teaching innovations may make a substantial contribution to global conversations on language and intercultural education, this imbalance must be corrected.

In order to close these gaps, this study explores the use of digital storytelling as a medium for intercultural education in Southeast Asian EMI settings. This involves the Stories Across Borders Project, a one-month long international community service project that involved six teenagers from the Philippines and Indonesia. Junior, senior and college students created digital stories on tourist destinations of their countries such as Mount Bromo, Keraton Sumenep, Banaue Rice Terraces, and Mount Apo. These were combined with group-writing (and voice-recording, using WhatsApp as communication medium), and graphic-design (using Canva – a digital production tool). During hands-on activities, DST allows learners to observe the influence of cognition, emotions, and culture on language learning. Studies have shown that DST contributes to the development of multiliteracies, autonomy, collaboration, and authentic situations to use the target language.

This research analyzes the perceptions of participants towards English as a lingua franca during this international digital storytelling collaboration. Three phases have been identified: (1) the effect of EMI on the process of collaboration and communication between the students; (2) digital storytelling as an intercultural learning process and exchange; and (3) collaboration via technology-supported interactions. In order to capture the whole process from all sides, three data sources have been chosen: WhatsApp chat logs, a reflective post-collaboration survey, and the digital storytelling product. It realizes that one can achieve EMI not only through structured, teacher-led classes but also through project-oriented, group initiatives run by students in their communities with the support of popular applications such as *WhatsApp* and *Canva*. This research reveals how engaging with a diversity of languages and cultures could trigger interaction and communication with members of different cultures. The inclusion of this Southeast Asian example in a larger discussion would increase awareness of EMI and DST and explain how such practices could give a voice to students.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) as a tool for intercultural learning in Indonesian-Philippine student researcher collaborative digital storytelling project. The case study design was employed since it allows the interpretation of participants' experience of everyday life, social interaction, and meaning-making in an observable, real-life setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). Learners' interpretation skills, language use, and intercultural interaction were analyzed during one month of collaboration, which was named Stories Across Borders.

Context and Participants

This project was completed within the framework of an international community service activity conducted by Indonesian and Philippine facilitators. Six students were involved, along with two

facilitators which four Indonesian students (two from junior high school, one from senior high school, and one from university) and two Filipino students (one from senior high school and one from university). Although participants had diverse academic backgrounds, they all had one common goal to exchange cultures and create. All communication was in lingua franca, English.

In this project, the responsibility of the Philippine facilitator was to oversee interactions within the group and enhance communication processes, while the Indonesian facilitator took care of organization and coordination. As an international team, everybody helped out; they worked together on creating a story using Canva and contacted each other via WhatsApp. “Two Cultures, Countless Wonders” is the name of the created storybook, which consists of 18 pages where pictures, folk-tales-like stories, and edited audio files are present.

Table 1 shows that the number of students engaged in storytelling amounted to six, with two facilitators conducting the process. In light of the fact that the team had representatives of various nationalities and different linguistic proficiency levels, providing information regarding every member of the group will shed light on the results.

Table 1
Profile of Research Subjects

Pseudonym	Nationality	Educational Level	Role in Project	Language Background
Rina	Indonesian	Junior high school	Writer	Bahasa Indonesia, basic English
Dika	Indonesian	Junior high school	Designer	Bahasa Indonesia, basic English
Sari	Indonesian	Senior high school	Voiceover contributor	Bahasa Indonesia, intermediate English
Ayu	Indonesian	University	Lead writer & coordinator	Bahasa Indonesia, Madurese, upper-intermediate English
Marco	Filipino	Senior high school	Writer & narrator	Filipino, English (near-proficient)
Lena	Filipino	University	Designer & voiceover	Filipino, English (near-proficient)
Facilitator A	Indonesian	Postgraduate (facilitator)	Primary coordinator	Bahasa Indonesia, Madurese, English

Table 1 shows that the six students who took part were from three different levels of education: junior high school, senior high school, and university. They were also from two different countries, with four students from Indonesia and two from the Philippines. The huge variations in language proficiency and educational attainment levels demonstrate the impact of humans on their communication style in the process. Significantly, it was observed that the Filipinos were comparatively more adept at speaking English.

Instruments and Data Collection

All participants provided their complete consent before data collection. Following the rules for transnational academic collaboration with minors, the Indonesian host institution gave ethical permission. Regarding the aspect of confidentiality, the participants were assured that their responses, extracts of the stories, and WhatsApp chat texts would remain confidential within the report, only being utilized for academic purposes. This article used pseudonyms all the time, and the records of communication were kept safe. The data were sourced from three major sources: the final product of the digital story, surveys related to the project filled by the participants, and transcriptions of the WhatsApp chats. The aforementioned sources provided numerous details about the processes involved in the inclusion of students in the project, their feelings concerning EMI, and cultural awareness gained throughout the project.

In the process of working for one month, WhatsApp became an important channel for communicating between the members. Through the analysis of the data, the use of English by the students in negotiation and planning was captured. Following the completion of the task, the participants were required to fill in a reflective questionnaire using the Google Forms tool. In the questionnaire, both open-ended questions and Likert scale questions were asked, focusing on students' perceptions on the use of English, the culture of collaboration, and effectiveness of the digital storytelling method in the teaching process.

The last digital storybook was the third source of data, and it was made together using Canva. The final e-book was an 18-page publication called *Two Cultures, Countless Wonders*, which depicted visual, textual, and auditory representations of the collaborative processes and cultural representation by the students as authors. This multimodal artifact showed how the participants were creative, how they used English to communicate, and how they showed that they understood other cultures.

These three sources combined to create a triangulated data set, which covered not only the outcome but also the process, such as the exchanges among the participants in their collaborative effort, the reflections included in the story, and the actual product of the storytelling exercise.

Procedures

A partnership was formed after four virtual meetings conducted within a month. During the first online meeting, the facilitators presented their selected topic and interesting places to visit, requesting the students to provide their initial opinions on the project. The planning of the story and division of roles among writers, narrators, designers, and voiceover speakers became the primary focus of the second meeting. The third meeting involved story creation using Canva and feedback received instantly on WhatsApp. The 18-page e-book was edited, voiceovers were added, and it was finalized during the last session. Later, it was included in an 80-page anthology that included the work of other teams.

Facilitators monitored participants' communication during the whole course of the project, but allowed them to make their own creative decisions about how to express themselves communally and in terms of the language they used. Participants provided their consent prior to completing any data collection and all the identifiers used for reporting purposes were anonymous.

Data Analysis

Researchers used Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework for a thematic analysis of three different data sources – WhatsApp chat transcripts, post-project reflections, and the final digital story. Theme analysis allows us to uncover and interpret themes in qualitative data. Theme analysis enables

researchers to examine not only the surface level but also the implicit level of communication and reflection. In this study, theme analysis was used to analyze the influence of English as medium of instruction (EMI) on the students' interaction and collaboration on their digital storybook.

Once the researcher became familiar with the content of the communications and the overall style of those communications, the researcher began to review the WhatsApp chat transcripts and the reflection responses through many readings of those sources. Sections of text were identified as significant as they included evidence of a student-to-student interaction, such as questioning, clarifying, achieving consensus, and resolving a problem together. In particular, the researcher examined the linguistic strategies employed by students in sharing ideas, in conveying their meanings, and in regulating interactional dynamics within groups. Instances of rewording or rephrasing, reducing complexity, or using multimodal forms of communication (such as emoji and very brief translations) were all seen as examples of students adapting their language to participate in a dialogic exchange.

The analysis of data collected from Google Forms into the three data sources of the reflections focused on identifying patterns that emerged from using English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), developing intercultural communication competencies, collaboratively learning and using self-assessment as learning strategies. Reflections provided insight into the participants' views on the language development, level of confidence, and intercultural competence gained via the process of collaborating around creation of digital storybooks. It served as proof of collaboration in terms of artifacts created as well as reflections on the collaboration process. For each theme related to collaboration, the analysis included examination of intercultural learning and collaboration from the perspectives of thematic focus, images selected, narrative construction, and utilization of the voice-over technique.

Three sources of data were triangulated to verify the reliability of the newly identified patterns by comparing them with an additional two data sources. Identified patterns that were observed repeatedly across the three datasets were grouped into higher order themes. Finally, each theme was re-analyzed in multiple ways until important elements of EMI practices in technology-mediated collaboration were revealed. Thus, it can be argued that the methodology was essentially interpretive and inductive in nature, as it allowed gaining new insight from which patterns within the larger construct of constructive dialogue, online instruction, and intercultural learning could be identified.

Results and Discussion

Through analysis of the WhatsApp chats, surveys, and digital stories, three themes emerged that highlighted the role of English-medium instruction in promoting intercultural learning and communication through the Stories Across Borders initiative. The themes are: (1) Using English as a Shared Language for Communication and Confidence Building, (2) Intercultural Learning Through Collaborative Storytelling, and (3) Online Collaboration and Facilitation in Sustaining Engagement.

Results using English as a lingua franca for communication and confidence building

The first theme describes how English speakers from the Philippines and Indonesia could collaborate and communicate effectively despite varying proficiency in the language since English would act as a neutral language. Firstly, an analysis of WhatsApp chat reveals that participants utilized English extensively in planning and narrating their experience. In particular, English was important in understanding the whole process of participation, and the use of English did not entail evaluating the grammatical proficiency of any participant.

Secondly, the section below provides evidence on how English facilitated intra-project communication among the participants in their respective geographical locations. This is demonstrated using samples of WhatsApp chat from Christine with the Indonesian facilitator.

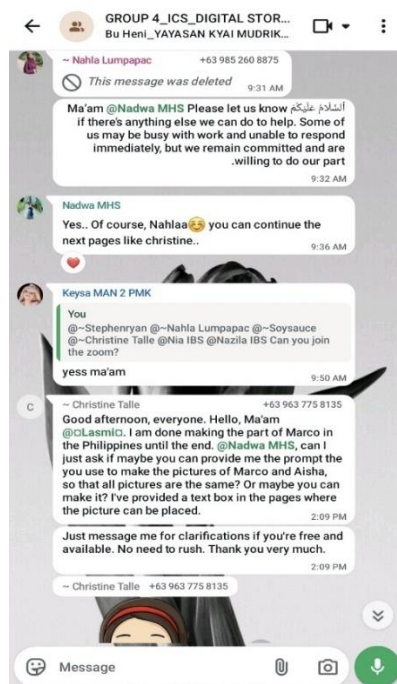


Figure 1. WhatsApp excerpt showing confident English use in progress reporting (Christine Talle, Filipino participant)

From the excerpt you can see that Christine created a simple, tidy message in English about what she worked on, asked for a very specific image prompt in order to get her models to look somewhat consistent and even gave her interlocutor room. The statement "There's no hurry." Not only does the language of "thank you very much" indicate a mastery of usage, it also reveals cultural competency. Well and awareness of relationships! Using the English language in authentic tasks without the guidance of a teacher is an indication of the ability to communicate confidently acquired through EMI as learners collaborate in authentic tasks.

Another example of how participants could refer to one aspect about their identities was when we saw them code-switching from English few words, emojis, and then a pattern of speaking/typing in many languages. To understand a particular design decision, an Indonesian Student did not clearly articulate his intentions so that another participant reformulated his ideas in better language to help retain the understanding of the original meaning. This transition from striving for truth to understanding the meanings of others resulted in alterations in how people cooperated and communicated.

The initiative also had an effect on students' perceptions of their abilities with English as determined by the student surveys. One of the students said, "This was my first time cooperating with international students, and I was afraid I would not be able to convey myself properly due to language differences. However, I eventually understood that despite certain imperfections, I am able to convey my thoughts as I planned." Another student mentioned, "Using English daily in written and spoken form improved my English proficiency."

The atmosphere among students was generally positive; however, many of the students experienced problems with completing their work owing to a limited vocabulary and occasional miscommunication. However, most participants engaged in problem-solving behaviours because of challenges by either seeking clarification through asking questions, using paraphrasing to reiterate important points or utilizing group paraphrasing for assurance of understanding.

The findings demonstrate that informal online use of EMI may develop confidence in using English as a common language, rather than as a way to test learners. Therefore, the informal nature of the WhatsApp to communicate with others lower students' anxiety of using English while fostering informal and spontaneous communication, allowing students to use English within their own experience while respecting other people's proficiency levels.

Intercultural learning through collaborative storytelling

The second theme of the project was to provide opportunities for intercultural learning, and the appreciation of the diversity of culture, through the development of a digital story entitled *Two Cultures, Countless Wonders*. During the project, the participants had to introduce their cultures by describing aspects that have cultural significance in their opinion. These include the Mount Bromo Volcano of Indonesia, Keraton Sumenep Palace of Indonesia, Banaue Rice Terraces farming technique of Ifugao in the Philippines, and the Mount Apo Mountain in the Philippines.

The discussion sessions inspired the delegates to interact, share ideas, and learn from each other. This led to intercultural dialogue opportunities via communication. The results of these exchanges were that students engaged in conversation to compare and discuss their respective cultures and to gain insight into the cultural heritage of their fellow participants.

At the time of developing the project, cross-cultural consideration is demonstrated in the example of the digital storybook. The artist used a background image of the Sakura flower — which is associated with Japan — rather than using an image representing one of the collaborating countries. To remedy this problem, the facilitator asked the artist to change the emblem in the background to something indigenous to both Indonesia and the Philippines. To sum up, digital storytelling allowed participants to reflect upon their personal beliefs regarding representations of cultures and ownership of stories.

The example ([Figure 2](#)) shows how students who previously only discussed learning across cultures began to incorporate that learning into their creative expression through the visual representation of their cultural identity when creating a project. The facilitator discovered that the Sakura flower symbol does not represent either country, and quickly arrived at a mutual decision to use culturally accurate symbols instead. The reaction "Nice Idea 🥰" posted by Nahla proves the pride and satisfaction that the group felt because of their illustrations used in the book. Thus, participation in digital storytelling activities may be beneficial for developing the intercultural awareness skills of the learners as they can gain practical experience in doing so.

In reflections after this digital storytelling session, the participants described their impressions. They named the activity as eye-opening and a new approach to learning about one's culture through the eyes of other people. As one participant stated, he found it really exciting to introduce his community to new friends, while listening to other peoples' stories is equally exciting: "We were one group despite belonging to two countries." The following passages illustrate the positive impact of collaboration within multicultural teams on students' attitude towards diversity.



Figure 2. WhatsApp excerpt showing intercultural identity negotiation in story design

The completed digital storybook evidences this intercultural exchange by means of bilingual captions along with visual images (i.e., images of both cultures) and voiceovers for each page; thus, both cultures are represented through each aspect. The landmarks present in both countries symbolize the complex history that binds them together, as well as the natural beauty that they share.

It is clear that English-language tales have paved the way for people to communicate using EMI. The digital storytelling project turned EMI from simply being another technique in English language teaching into something more tangible. The participants learned about the culture of the people they interacted with all over the world. It supports earlier research which has reported that digital storytelling enhances empathy, global citizenship, and language and cultural integration in EMI settings.

Online collaboration and facilitation in sustaining engagement

The third point is the idea that collaborative work on the Internet would make the workplace dynamic and foster the formation of good habits of participation and cooperation. Collaborating with people who are geographically separated, in particularly different countries using different time zones, creates significant challenges for the organization due to differences in work practices and the need to adapt to and cooperate with others. However, the participants provided evidence of establishing deadlines, assigning task responsibilities and solving IT issues through the communication of their WhatsApp conversations during the creation of the Canva storybook.

An example of how the collaboration in using WhatsApp at the same time for instant messaging enabled the participants to negotiate in real-time how to structure the story of the Canva storybook. The conversation included a Filipino participant (Christine) who provided an example of suggesting a different structure to the arrangement of some sections of the manuscript, whilst the Indonesian participant (Nadwa) provided a counter-answer with a practical response.

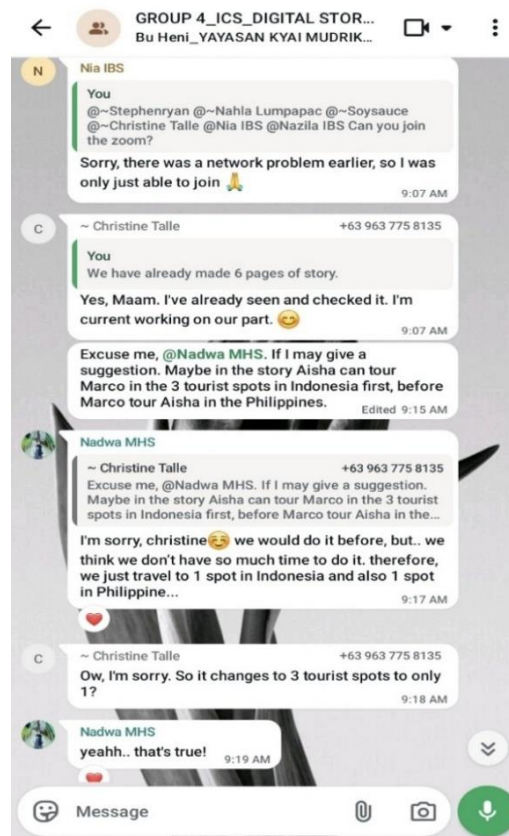


Figure 3. WhatsApp chat excerpt showing story negotiation between participants



Figure 4. WhatsApp excerpt showing group consensus-building on design revision.

From the above examples of the group's work during the project, it is evident that two components exist within the context of online cooperation. Firstly, in example one, we see that participants resolved disagreements in a courteous manner. For example, Christine presents her proposal of "Excuse me, if I may give a suggestion" to the facilitator, and Nadwa responded with "Ok, Christine" maintaining mutual respect to resolve the conflicting perspectives and maintain the balance of relational ability and continue to work within the context of the project. Secondly, by the facilitator requesting input from all group members prior to finalizing the design change and identifying each participant by name as well as pausing for a response before proceeding with an answer to maintain participation from all members in the decision-making process has demonstrated the facilitator's use of a participatory leadership style to ensure every group member was informed regarding the importance of their input during the design change decision process. Furthermore, each of Nadwa, Keysa, Christine, and Nia's responses indicates their positive opinion regarding the design improvement, thus forming a common accountability system in which everyone assumes responsibility for the outcome. The conversation patterns can be correlated to the principles of dialogic pedagogy, implying that the collaborative and social/shared learning process, including the decision-making process, is deemed collaborative and created through shared responsibility, not simply the result of direction from authority.

In this case, we can see that Christine offered a very thoughtful suggestion "Excuse me, if I may give a suggestion". This indicated that she understood "face-saving tactics" while participating in cross-cultural communication, and in making this request, Christine was attempting to help make the collaborative story better through her suggestions of how to show the Indonesian character helping or guiding the Philippine character to travel around Indonesia before they use their time for the trip in completing the story. When Nadwa responded to Christine's proposal, although she was turning down or refusing the proposal, she was still acting politely towards Christine because she first recognized Christine's suggestion before sharing her reasoning for why the ultimate decision was made based on the time limitations on each of their work. This conversation is an example of how the participants negotiated through complex dialogic negotiations that involve proposing initial suggestions, counter suggestions, and coming to an agreement acceptable to all despite different degrees of competence in the English language. The conversation also demonstrates a cooperative effort among a group of people where decision-making was decentralized so that the facilitator was not solely responsible for exercising creative control over the discussion. To sum up, the conversation ended with an agreement between Christine ("Ow, I'm sorry, so it changes to 3 tourist spots to only 1?") and Nadwa ("yeah, that's true!") which concluded their group activity.

The group's leadership developed naturally. The senior writer and designer at the university was an Indonesian student who mentored younger coworkers and informed them of deadlines. As a result, facilitators of each country gave limited scaffolding and only intervened when students had problems with voiceover integration or uploading files. This was achieved while maintaining accountability. Distributed leadership helped provide autonomy.

According to the students' opinions, working online needed mutual assistance, understanding, and clear communication. Flexibility provided by online tools like WhatsApp and Canva allowed the preservation of communication channels. They allowed participants to make their contributions asynchronously regardless of their access to communication channels and time constraints. However, it also posed a demand for communication and activity to maintain continuous development of the project.

To sum up, the above findings indicate that positive interaction among diverse cultures within an EMI context requires both connections and technologies. Proper communications, shared responsibilities, and adequate facilitations will enable the development of a learning environment fostering positive interactions and success. Indeed, successful cooperation among the learners can be evidenced from their collaboration to produce an 18-page e-story.

According to the evidence gathered from the three themes, EMI has the potential to support language learning and intercultural awareness when it is implemented in student-led and unofficial online projects. According to this research, online collaboration highlights facilitation, flexibility, and dialogic interaction; collaborative storytelling facilitates mutual respect, empathy, and cultural pride; and employing English as the medium of communication makes students more confident communicators. Therefore, these results suggest that English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) can transcend the limitations of the traditional classroom and become an embodiment of intercultural communication and digital creativity.

Discussion

This paper presents EMI as a classroom environment facilitating intercultural communication and being an instrument of communication itself. The contribution of the paper to the discussion is in pointing out the informal use of EMI practices led by students in the region of Southeast Asia. In fact, informal EMI acts as a venue for intercultural dialogue and global citizenship rather than only for transferring academic information. While most studies on EMI concentrate on classroom practices (Briggs et al., [2018](#); Macaro & Akincioglu, [2018](#)), the paper illustrates the potential for creative use of EMI in digital storytelling.

EMI as a shared space for communication and confidence building

Theme 1 concerns the application of the English language as a lingua franca, allowing the students to be able to communicate effectively despite the difference in level of proficiency. English was used in this project as lingua franca, a practical, real-time tool for meaning-making rather than a sign of linguistic dominance, in line with the research of Jenkins ([2018](#)) and (Baker, [2015](#)). In terms of a pragmatic perspective on communication, people tended to favor clarity and mutual comprehension when communicating via WhatsApp. These findings support previous studies that indicate the use of informal English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) can remove emotional barriers and foster risk-taking (Kim, [2020](#); Tange, [2010](#)). As a result, the students could freely share their thoughts through English communication in the non-threatening context of WhatsApp. This notion is consistent with Alexander's ([2020](#)) concept of dialogue space, wherein contexts enable individuals to speak tentatively and jointly construct meaning. As such, EMI is regarded not only as a conduit for content transmission but also as a socially interactive process, through which individuals develop their communication competencies.

Problems experienced by the students in selecting proper vocabulary and expressions reflect the contradictory nature of EMI. They highlight the lack of language competencies at the same time as providing means for effective communication. Results coincide with those of Choi et al. ([2014](#)), who argue that the desire to communicate in spite of language difficulties tends to initiate dialogic interaction in EMI contexts. The evidence of such issues turning into learning platforms in and of themselves, however, is where this project varies. Self-correction, reformulation, and seeking

clarification by students reveal how dialogic approaches enable them to direct attention toward their linguistic knowledge, both grammatically and semantically.

Digital storytelling and intercultural learning

One further method used to support intercultural learning is digital storytelling/sharing; this method supports intercultural learning by providing a forum whereby participants can tell their stories about culturally significant tourism sites, such as Mount Bromo, Keraton Sumenep, Banaue Rice Terraces, and Mount Apo, in English. The sharing of these stories also serves as a pathway for intercultural communication. Kahanurak et al. (2023) and Hafner et al. (2015) have suggested that digital storytelling provides a way of completing linguistic and cultural learning by combining multimodal storytelling with reflection.

Through the co-authors' work in this project, students not only became aware of their own cultures but also of the cultures of the other party with whom they worked. The students' writing and their conversations with each other demonstrate Byram's (1997) framework for intercultural communicative competence, helping to develop a sense of curiosity, openness, and empathy towards different cultural subjects. Thus, the students promoted their own culture but also recognized how well the other party had done, which was an expression of mutual respect, not a comparison of cultures.

The aesthetic features of digital storytelling enhanced these intercultural interactions. Digital storybooks, by combining images, voice, and bilingual captions, have opened up new possibilities for multimodal literacy and, ultimately, for greater student engagement (Robin, 2016; Yang & Wu, 2012). As students created meaning in English as a second language through a variety of means (e.g., text picture narration), they produced an example of a multimedia product that represents an aspect of multicultural diversity through a common storytelling medium, as in their product, *Two Cultures, Countless Wonders*.

This finding reinforces a previous study that identified intercultural learning as taking place in the Global South. Whereas past research primarily on digital storytelling has typically focused on either Western or East Asian EMI contexts (Helm, 2016; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2018), the examples from Southeastern Asia highlight the availability of similar educational experiences, despite the resource constraints in which they occur. Digital storytelling processes can be enhanced through lower-cost and more widely used tools, such as WhatsApp and Canva; therefore, EMI can support participation, facilitate cross-cultural initiatives and provide access to resources where institutional support is lacking.

Online collaboration and facilitation as catalysts for engagement

The importance of facilitation and communication strategies used in EMI to enable the development of dialogic engagement (partnership) in EMI collaborations via the internet is the third theme. Evidence from both a WhatsApp group discussion with students, as well as students' own reflection, provides evidence of a blended model of leadership where students were responsible not only for organizing tasks and designing creatively, but also for providing minimal yet required support to facilitators (e.g., by remaining goal-directed and motivated). The findings of this case study corroborate the studies of Helm (2016; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2018) that successful online intercultural partnerships rely upon task-related performance and individual tasks leading to learner engagement.

The facilitator interventions, in this case study, illustrate how the complementary relationship exist between autonomy and scaffolding in dialogic pedagogy models of teaching and learning (Alexander, 2020). Their primary role was to mediate for the students, using supportive facilitation and intervening essentially when either the collaboration started to go off track, or a misunderstanding occurred, thereby providing opportunities for the students to try and solve problems by themselves first before the facilitators were able to assist. With this approach, the facilitator helped create a sense of ownership on the part of the students, creating an environment conducive for collaboration via spoken conversation.

It is through this collaboration process that we discovered that language proficiency is not the only determinant of efficient teamwork within EMI-oriented environments. Quality relationships and digital competencies also contribute significantly to the effectiveness of collaboration among individuals within an EMI environment. For instance, students who collaborate, pose questions asynchronously, and assist each other confirm that team building fosters 21st-century skills such as communication, collaboration, and creativity (Hafner et al., 2015). However, there are challenges to the process; these include restricted participation and technological issues that limit the involvement of the facilitator and flexible utilization of time.

The findings have revealed that EMI goes beyond language activities, becoming a community of users interacting socially, technologically, and emotionally, which demands mutual trust, communication, and cross-cultural competency for effective collaboration to prevail.

Theoretical and pedagogical implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the existing literature on EMI in its illustration of how dialogic engagements can emerge through practical experiences, social interactions among peers, and through technology usage. The study expands what is currently understood about EMI by placing it outside the confines of formal education and confirming that the social dimension of language learning is valid (Alexander, 2020). From an empirical perspective, this study further strengthens the view that EMI is not only a channel for knowledge transmission, but can actually be a platform where individuals may work together, exchange ideas, share opinions and foster intercultural learning.

The results obtained in this study will be important guidelines for teachers and curriculum developers who are considering adopting EMI in their practice. Digital storytelling projects such as Stories Across Borders show that limited or little-cost, directly connecting children across borders via digital media can lead to the highest level of EMI. The very same methods employed in this study can also serve as a means for intercultural awareness and enhancing confidence in the language ability. The researcher identified several ways to provide the participants in this study with tools that they were already familiar with, such as WhatsApp, to assist them in participating in dialogue.

Additionally, the difficulties that arise due to both national and technological gaps for students participating together affect their ability to stay involved. Facilitators must also provide continuous support through the establishment of effective communication protocols and by ensuring that the workload of the group's member is reasonably distributed. These factors are important in fostering effective collaboration among participants. These results will prove useful in future programs for English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in regards to developing linguistic proficiency, intercultural proficiency and digital literacy.

Positioning the study in a broader context

Researchers active in researching English Medium Instruction (EMI) have called for research to extend EMI research's geographic and contextual boundaries (Dearden, 2014; Leyi, 2020). In Southeast Asia, there exist Indonesia and the Philippines which stand for unique cultures with regard to the characteristics of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in the region because of having many languages in common; thus, in the two countries, English is spoken as an additional language (L2). While this paper contains information on the dynamics of EMI in Southeast Asia, there are also many examples of similar dynamics found in locations throughout the West and Eastern Asia (Ataş, 2023; Helm, 2016; Paulsrud et al., 2021). The follow-up to this research illustrates how EMI is practiced similarly in dissimilar settings, but that the context in each example provides unique cultures of practice related to digital access, culturally different communication styles, and different modes of support for EMI.

Using the results from this study, the researchers provide an expanded view of EMI as the integration of all the various individuals and modes of English as a medium of collaboration that combines the cultures of different countries involved in using English as a medium of instruction. Furthermore, the research indicates that small-scale digital EMI projects also achieve the goal of EMI by creating opportunities for collaboration and the global use of English, as well as supporting intercultural understanding.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to investigate whether or not using English as a second language (ESL) could facilitate cross-cultural education and dialogic interactions between Indonesian and Philippine students engaged in a digital narrative project (the Stories Across Borders Project). Through analyzing how the students engage in chatting through WhatsApp, completing reflective surveys, and creating stories digitally, it becomes evident that spontaneous, collaborative, and technology-driven English Medium Instruction (EMI) can be used to learn. The research shows that EMI may foster collaborative communication and creative performance along with further cross-cultural communication among peers studying in informal educational settings.

Three general findings were gleaned. English was an enabling language for confidence and communication. English was employed by non-native language learners in a variable manner to negotiate meaning, make sense of concepts, and support one another to create a mutual social activity out of language learning. Thus, it is clear that EMI, applied in the context of casual peer-to-peer communication, allows creating the actual opportunities for practicing language and expressing oneself, feeling empowered collectively.

Students were enabled to equally participate in telling their own stories and learning about different cultures as well as discovering their commonalities and shared values through the creation of a digital story together, which created an appreciation for each other's cultures, by creating a digital narrative together which resulted in the possibility for students to have conversations with each other by creating an empathetic, inquisitive, and prideful connection with each other through shared experiences.

Digital storytelling provided the students with the opportunity not only to tell their stories but also to learn to work together using digital technology. WhatsApp was used as the primary collaboration tool to communicate with all students, while Canva was used to produce the digital narratives. In this way, when teachers implement digital technology in order to foster collaboration, communication will be open and further opportunities for interaction despite the distance and technological barriers will

emerge. The teachers balanced the situation by giving the students autonomy but at the same time motivating and fostering responsibility for their activities.

Thus, the findings of the study prove that digital storytelling is an appropriate and effective method of implementing EMI and intercultural communication. Additionally, when planning small, resource-intensive collaborative projects based on authentic, creative and dialogic tasks, meaningful cultural and linguistic impacts can occur.

In addition to its utility for this research and educational purposes, this study is relevant to understanding English Medium Instruction (EMI). It reveals that EMI is capable of doing more than teaching and assessing students' command of English. It also provides an opportunity to foster partnerships and cross-cultural experience across countries. Thus, the SAB project demonstrates that the essence of EMI consists not in high command of English language but in human relations and ability to unite in order to experience something valuable as a team.

This case study in Southeast Asia serves as a basis for the re-invention of EMI based on opportunities to engage in dialogue, rather than a focus on the accuracy of the language used, creativity rather than designing in accordance with a traditional sense of conformity, and intercultural experiences rather than competition between cultures. In the era of ever-growing global connectivity of people via the Internet, collaborative storytelling may serve as a foundation for the future development of EMI as a tipping-point, inclusive, and meaningful practice.

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