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EXPLORING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH PLOTAGON IN EFL DIGITAL STORYTELLING

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Abstract

This research explores the experience of ten fifth-semester EFL pre-service teachers from Universitas Mulawarman who employed Plotagon to create digital storytelling projects in a Digital Literacy course. Adopting a qualitative research design, data were collected from participants' written reflections and examined thematically. The findings emphasize five broad themes: integration of local culture, in this case folklore from East Kalimantan, into EFL courseware; technological challenges and creative coping with additional tools; creativity and collaboration through cooperative production; attitudes towards usefulness and usability that impacted technology appropriation; and redefinition of learner and teacher roles as learners took on teller and media producer roles. These findings tell us that in spite of extensive use of culture as objects, greater digital literacy levels, and greater practice on the part of learners, the subjects were affected by the presence of limited functionality of Plotagon, faulty hardware, and inconsistent group participation, thereby requiring the necessity of having institutional backing as well as training. This study contributes to fresh understanding regarding the enabling of technology flexibility, cultural awareness, and learning autonomy through the use of digital storytelling tools like Plotagon in pre-service teacher education and illustrates not only their ability to produce language and digital literacy but also their ability to improve the competence of pre-service teachers in teaching innovative, forward thinking, and culture-sensitive.

Keywords: *Digital storytelling, Plotagon, TPACK, TAM, SAMR*

INTRODUCTION

In the new EFL setting, technological media are no longer an incentive added on; they are becoming fundamental elements in a well-educated pedagogy. Pre-service teacher education programs must respond to the 21st-century demands of learning, where the

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prospective teacher needs more than content and pedagogical knowledge. Digital literacy, for instance, is increasingly becoming an inescapable entry requirement for novice teachers. An exemplary practice that illustrates this shift is digital storytelling: the activity that enables students to compose stories with the assistance of computer-based multimedia technologies such as video, images, text, and voice (Robin, 2008). From among many digital storytelling programs, Plotagon surfaced due to its simplicity and since it can potentially expand EFL through dramatizations of scripted dialogue. However, not much is reported on how future teachers engage with such technology in their pre-service training, hence the current study is timely and necessary (Hafizhah et al., 2024).

Digital storytelling is educationally powerful because it enhances the tenets of constructivist learning theory, whereby students' learning is understood to be constructed through meaningful engagement with content, context, and social interaction (Robin, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). When students create and produce their own such stories, they become not just recipients of information but active meaning generators. This is most applicable to language learning since it provides room for real communication, personal use of language, and use of one's identity and culture as reference (Sulistianingsih & Taufiqulloh, 2025). Besides, digital storytelling strengthens higher-order abilities such as analysis, evaluation, and creation, leading to an increased level of cognitive engagement (Sapan, 2024) In EFL classes where motivation and confidence are the barriers, this approach is utilized as a motivator whereby animation and visual presentation make students work on their learning with greater intensity (Fu et al., 2022)

Employing digital storytelling successfully, however, is not simply enthusiasm; it is systematic understanding of how pedagogy, content, and technology connect. This intersection is the basic cornerstone of the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) model proposed by Mishra & Koehler (2006). In this model, effective teaching with technology is only possible if educators can effortlessly combine their pedagogy, subject knowledge, and proper technological tools. The very finest example of this combination is digital storytelling because teachers need to design activities that are not only pedagogically sound and linguistically appropriate but also make the most appropriate use of the advantage of digital tools (Salma et al., 2022; Warr & Mishra, 2021). Plotagon, with its animated narrative format, challenges pre-service teachers especially to meaningfully combine these areas while maintaining high degrees of learner involvement.

Plotagon combines animation and storytelling in a potent digital tool with multiple language teaching applications, including vocabulary learning, pronunciation, listening, and conversation construction. Alivi (2024) points ouvt how Plotagon makes students engaged through interesting and interactive English language learning activities that connect diverse language skills. To this, Intan et al., n.d. propose that technology, when complemented with literacy-based teacher education, can facilitate the digital literacy and disposition of pre-service teachers to prepare media-rich language lessons. These are results pointing to the importance of Plotagon as both a content-delivery platform and learning tool that empowers students and teachers to engage in effective communication. Moreover, Plotagon allows speaking apprehension, a common occurrence in EFL classrooms, as it allows learners to

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perform using cartoon characters rather than real faces. Such sites facilitate learner autonomy and reduce performance pressure by providing a secure environment for innovative experimentation, as postulated by Quoc Tran & Duong (2021). Through the act of writing and inscribing richly textured stories, language learning becomes more situated and located within learners' local sense of identity. The access to such affordances by pre-service teachers relies significantly, however, on their preparation, digital literacies, and school support access, concerns still inequitably dealt with by teacher education programs (Limbong et al., 2019; Limbong & Wadham, 2024).

It calls for comprehension of the technology adoption process by borrowing from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) developed by Davis (1989) It applies perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU) as core variables influencing users' adoption willingness. It applies the concept of perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU) as main variables influencing users' intention to adopt. In EFL, Sulistianingsih & Taufiqulloh (2025) in their study find pre-service teachers will most probably use digital storytelling software like Plotagon if they find the software useful and easy to handle. Adoption is further constrained by structural conditions such as ineffective training, usability of devices, and unfamiliarity with functions. Al-Abdullatif (2022) agrees that unless institutional infrastructure and pedagogical support is made available, even the most revolutionary technology will end up idle or underutilized. As a result, teacher preparation should involve more than just tool exposure; it should also include meaningful integration practice.

According to Izza et al. (2020) and Setiyawati et al. (2023) the SAMR model provides insight into the level of technology integration in education. Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, and Redefinition are the four stages into which this framework divides down the application of technology.

The majority of inexperienced pre-service teachers begin with substitution in electronic storytelling, i.e., converting their writing from paper to typing scripts. They progress to modification and then redefine or develop animated stories impossible with traditional approaches (Undheim & Hoel, 2023). Plotagon provides all of the features necessary to build personalized characters, sync voiceovers, and produce visual scenes related to regional or worldwide issues, making these transitions a breeze. It ultimately leads students to a point where narration is an inclusive change process that combines narrative, language, culture, and technology.

Despite the diversity of potential using digital narrative, little research has examined pre-service teachers' experiences using these tools within teacher education. Most of the literature available discusses outcomes for students or the pedagogy of practicing teachers without much consideration of those in their formative years of becoming teachers. This research fills such gaps in studies by investigating how Plotagon is accepted and used by pre-service teachers in an EFL setting. To provide more insight into the relationship of pedagogical creativity, technological adoption, and pedagogical readiness, it uses a mixed theoretical model that combines TPACK, TAM, and SAMR. Recognizing the multiple realities of integrating technology for real classroom practice is its most important contribution.

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Furthermore, digital storytelling is seen as a comprehensive, multimodal learning experience that has been proven to improve language proficiency, creativity, teamwork, and cultural competency. This study contributes to the growing conversation on the necessity of redesigning teacher education to prepare educators for the digital age by mapping how pre-service teachers interact with Plotagon. Plotagon can help pre-service teachers create successful, contextually and culturally appropriate teaching strategies when used in the context of a strong theory framework and approach.

To guide this research, the following research questions are presented:

1. How do pre-service teachers experience the use of Plotagon in EFL digital storytelling?
2. What difficulties do pre-service teachers face when using Plotagon for digital storytelling in English class?

By answering these questions, this study will provide teacher educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers with insights for how to better prepare pre-service teachers to employ imaginative and accessible digital technologies in their future English classrooms.

METHOD

The researchers used a qualitative design in this study to explore the experiences of EFL pre-service teachers creating digital storytelling projects with Plotagon for their Digital Literacy course. According to Merriam (2009), "the qualitative, interpretive or naturalistic research paradigm defines the method and technique most suitable for collecting and analyzing data" (p. 2). She explains that "qualitative researcherss are interested in knowing how people make sense of their experiences, how people make sense of their worlds, and what people do mean by their experiences" (p. 5). From this perspective, the qualitative method was the best fit since the study aimed to investigate the personal reactions of pre-service teachers after they engaged in a collaborative digital project.

The research was carried out at Mulawarman University, in the English Education Study Program of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP). Ten fifth-semester pre-service EFL teachers from batch 2022 took part in the study, who were all following the Digital Literacy course. The researchers, being in the same classroom, facilitated close observation and situational awareness throughout the duration of the project. In order to develop digital storytelling, the instructor researched and put the class into smaller groups and provided guidance on the usage of Plotagon, an application used to produce animated films. After completing their group assignment, all the students needed to give a reflection that responded to certain questions established by the instructor. Questions were about challenges encountered using the English language, learning and how they managed, dynamics of collaboration, and general utilization of digital tools. The interviews were the prime source of data and a single representative student per ten groups was chosen to gather a variety of experiences.

Ethical considerations were highly significant in this study. The researchers obtained ethical clearance before conducting the research and asked for informed consent from all the respondents to ensure voluntary participation and confidentiality. Thematic analysis was the method used in analyzing the data, wherein networks of meaning within the data set are

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uncovered, explored, and interpreted. There were six steps that the researchers followed in thematic analysis: generating codes, searching for potential themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and writing reports. Specific examples of how themes were inferred from the reflections will be given in the results chapter to illustrate the focus and richness of the data that were collected. By addressing these elements, the research aims to improve its research quality and provide an improved understanding of the participants' experience in the digital storytelling project.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents findings of thematic analysis of pre-service teachers' reflection on using Plotagon in digital storytelling. Three theoretical lenses, TPACK (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), TAM (Davis, 1989), and SAMR (Puentedura, 2013) guide the analysis. Each of the three models are briefly introduced here and applied straight into discussion: TPACK explains how teachers integrate content, pedagogy, and technology; TAM highlights perceived ease of use and usefulness in technology adoption; and SAMR classifies technology use levels, from enhancement to redefinition. Together, the models allow us to study the potential as well as the challenges of Plotagon in pre-service teacher education.

Integration of Content and Local Culture Knowledge (TPACK - CK, PCK)

The students were all eager to adopt local culture as learning materials, particularly East Kalimantan folklore. They collected, reshaped, and framed stories such as the Legend of Kerbau River.

> *"The Legend of Kerbau River was familiar to me because I pass that river almost every day. I also remember learning about it during school. So I suggested this story to my group."*

While researching for the content, participants also verified the authenticity of the versions. Some groups found differences in details of the folk tales and went for further research by going to local libraries and interviewing native speakers. Their engagement reveals how the participants understood Content Knowledge (CK) the ability to apply it pedagogically (PCK) as they had to ensure the narrative stayed faithful to its origin while making it suitable for storytelling in an EFL setting.

Participant RG explained:

> *"We found that most of the stories online were narrative, but we needed more dialogue-based texts, so we had to rework the format. We also discovered connections between Dayak and Kutai tribes during our research."*

This is in agreement with Sulistianingsih & Taufiqulloh (2025) who believe that learning is improved if students emotionally engage with content. That being said, an argument can be made that perhaps some of the participants were too enthusiastic based on the unfamiliarity factor of taking up new technologies, rather than deeper pedagogical thought. One group acknowledged being "less connected" to some Dayak stories, implying that not all folklore was equally familiar, even though the majority of participants indicated cultural familiarity.

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Thus, while online storytelling clearly promoted cultural identity and intercultural awareness, these reflections may not necessarily represent deeper pedagogical awareness due to the lack of triangulated classroom observations.

Technological Challenges and Adaptation Strategies (TPACK - TK, TPK)

While students were enthusiastic, there were technological limitations for most of them. Plotagon lacked Indonesian settings and limited character actions, so the participants needed to combine it with tools such as Canva or CapCut. RJAS described:

"Plotagon didn't have Indonesian palaces as a background or bamboo or chickens as props, so we had to bring in images from other tools."

Hardware limitations presented an additional challenge. SA admitted:

"My computer was not powerful enough, and it would hang a lot. Editing the scenes was consuming too much time, and the battery would drain fast."

The significance of technological knowledge (TK) and technological pedagogical knowledge (TPK) is emphasised in these studies. While participants in general improvised in creative ways, this reliance on personal initiative indicates a design failure: lack of institutional training with digital tools. Gorospe (2022) similarly concluded that pre-service teachers feel more anxious when introduced to new technologies with not enough instruction.

However, not all adaptations were successful. While some groups found it easy to overcome limitations, others found it difficult and expressed frustration. This takes into consideration differences in digital competency as well as the fact that some pre-service teachers may find themselves only using technology at a basic level if no formal training is provided. Institutional support and support are therefore still needed for tools like Plotagon to reach their full instructional potential.

Collaboration and Creativity in Storytelling Production (TPACK - PK, PCK; SAMR - M)

Collaboration was a common thread. All groups divided work such as scriptwriting, character development, and sound design, working together in tools such as Google Docs. Participant S described:

"We first wrote the story on Google Docs so everyone could contribute. It helped us work together even when we were not meeting in person."

Storyboards also aided in project organization, although improvisation was often required due to program limitations. SA described:

"Creating the storyboard helped guide the process. Even if the final visuals were different, we had a plan."

This is in line with Robin's (2008) view of digital storytelling as a medium that offers ownership, identity, and collective sense-making. In the SAMR model, the process fits at the Modification level, where storytelling changed from lower-level writing activities to multimedia production involving critical thinking and coordination (Setiyawati et al., 2023)

But working in groups wasn't always easy. A participant unintentionally suggested that their collaborative efforts had been prevented by group differences, since *"some members contributed much less."* This suggests that while teamwork encouraged creativity, it also

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introduced challenges regarding group dynamics, problems even less widely debated in overly idealised narratives.

Perceived Usefulness and Ease of Use of Plotagon (TAM - PU & PEOU)

Most participants liked Plotagon and considered it to be helpful, due to its simplicity and ready-made elements. SNA replied with positive remarks:

"Plotagon is great. It lets you make animations quickly, with many ready-made backgrounds, characters, and music. It's very helpful for English teachers to create conversation examples."

There was not everyone's opinion, though. RG pointed out technical constraints:

"We needed more than two characters in a scene, but the app didn't support that. And camera angles were tricky to adjust."

These results are consistent with Davis's (1989) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which is based on adoption that depends on Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU). Even though Plotagon was preferred by the majority for the ease of lesson planning, technical errors dismantled ease of use. Quoc Tran & Duong (2021) discovered the same, where teachers did not want to apply even advanced tools if they appear frustrating and inefficient.

Surprisingly, the participants may have exaggerated how useful Plotagon would be because of the freshness of the project, rather than its use in actual classrooms in the long run. Some participants even confessed that without training and infrastructure, they would not be implementing it in real classrooms once again. This raises the question about the sustainability of adoption beyond the controlled project environment.

Redefining the Learner and Teacher Roles through Digital Storytelling (SAMR - R; TPK)

The change in the roles of teachers and learners was possibly the most significant. The participants explained that, in line with SAMR's Redefinition level, they became storytellers, filmmakers, and cultural scholars ((Setiyawati et al., 2023) SA had this to say:

"We learned how to make learning media that is both engaging and culturally relevant. I explored Plotagon and Ideogram and found many features that can support English teaching."

RJAS went on:

"With Plotagon, we can tell stories in a new way. Reading doesn't always have to be reading. We can make it visual and fun."

These remarks reflect empowerment and identity formation, consistent with Al-Abdullatif (2022) who connects digital storytelling with teacher agency and self-efficacy. Fu et al. (2022) also highlight how digital storytelling is encouraging and questioning.

However, consideration must be taken when interpreting the character framing, which is often favourable to everyone. Participants may have confused pedagogical depth with excitement. For example, even though students felt more confident, their reflections did not always show a critical understanding of how the story ties into the larger curriculum goals. This could point to a potential differences between instructional command and experiential enjoyment.

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CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the impact of applying Plotagon in digital storytelling on the learning experience of pre-service teachers in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The findings indicate that the integration of Plotagon facilitated creativity, collaboration, and cultural appropriateness in English teaching, allowing participants to engage profoundly with local myths and enhance their digital literacy competence. The results showed that the participants effectively utilized their Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) and Content Knowledge (CK) in order to transfer local stories into EFL materials that are beneficial. This aligns with the TPACK model, which emphasizes the importance of marrying pedagogy and content knowledge with technology. The students demonstrated Technological Knowledge (TK) and Technological Pedagogical Knowledge (TPK) as they manipulated within technological limitations, e.g., the lack of appropriate settings within Plotagon, by using other tools. This indicates the importance of equipping pre-service teachers with robust digital skills in order to navigate and interact with teaching technologies proficiently.

Moreover, the findings confirm the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) since the respondents gave a general positive impression of Plotagon's utility and ease of use. However, some constraints were felt, such as the two-character-per-scene limitation, which affected their overall use. This implies that while the tool is beneficial, more enhancement and training are required to utilize itself to its maximum potential in academic application. The SAMR model was also evident in the participants' experience, as they transitioned from passive narration to a more interactive and engaging digital form. This transformation of their identity as narrators and creators is an advancement towards more progressive pedagogical approaches, but it should be pointed out that this finding is with a small sample size of ten pre-service teachers from one institution, and this could restrict the generalizability of the findings.The limitations of the study involve the absence of triangulated observations and the risk of confirmation bias, as all but one response was positive. Future studies could target a larger and more diverse participant group in order to confirm these results and examine the long-term impact of digital storytelling on language learning and cultural participation.

In conclusion, the current study offers empirical evidence to support the utilization of Plotagon as an effective aid to enhance the EFL teaching and learning process. With creativity and cultural authenticity, digital storytelling can play a significant role in training pre-service teachers in the most complex issues of today's education. However, there remains a consistent requirement for training and support to ensure teachers can adequately exploit the maximum potential of such technology in classrooms.

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