

BUSINESS ENGLISH STUDENTS' COMPETENCE OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE XU-ARGUMENT

GuiTing She

College of Foreign Languages, Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering, Guangzhou 510225, Guangdong, China.

Abstract: This paper aims to explore business English students' competence of digital storytelling in the digital era via the continuation task of multimodal production based on the *xu*-argument. A framework of four dimensions is summarized as the competence of business discourse, business content construction, multimodal presentation and intercultural communication. Four teaching examples designed based on the *xu*-argument are presented and students' outputs are analyzed to figure out the alignment effects among language, contents, multimodal forms and intercultural elements accordingly. It is proved that digital storytelling is an effective way for consolidating business English students' language application and their understanding of business knowledge. It also facilitates students' improvement on multimodal literacy and authentic intercultural communication ability.

Keywords: Digital storytelling competence; Business English; The *xu*-argument; The alignment effects

1 INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is, in essence, a transformative process in which students reinterpret, analyze, reconstruct and apply knowledge, information and experience before presenting it. It is an effective way for language practice to consolidate what students learn and gain. It is also important for cultivating students' ability and literacy of international dissemination. In the digital era, digital storytelling refers to "telling a story by using different multimedia elements such as images, music, and narrated voice, hence leading to the creation of more powerful, authentic and effective stories" [1]. Digital storytelling has seven important elements, which include "point of view, a dramatic question, emotional content, gift of voice, the power of soundtrack, economy, and pacing" [1]. Some scholars claim that digital storytelling is a form related to multimodal outputs presented on media [2]. Media, as a medium, guarantees an authentic communicative environment.

Students in business English major can fully leverage the business knowledge and case studies learned in their specialized courses to select business-related topics, themes, perspectives, viewpoints, characters, anecdotes, etc. for multimodal storytelling and disseminate them in the media. Through digital storytelling, business English students can not only carry out business language practice, but also internalize and reinforce their business cognition and professional expertise which indicate the business communicative significance. Furthermore, the multimodal ways students present the stories in the media also reflect their digital literacy and storytelling effectiveness.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Alignment Effects of Continuation Tasks

Alignment refers to "the development of aligned representations via an automatic psycholinguistic priming mechanism that acts on every level of linguistic representation" [3]. The alignment effect is the core mechanism of the *xu*-argument [4]. It is well-accepted that a learner's comprehension ability exceeds his or her production ability, hence a gap between comprehension and production. Sometimes they cannot produce what they can recognize or understand. Alignment arising from the continuation tasks is able to bridge such a gap, because learners need to align to input text both in content and language use when expressing their new thought [5]. Previous studies have mainly focused on the alignment effects at the linguistic level, examining various aspects such as morphology, semantics, lexical diversity, rhetoric, syntactic structures, stylistic features and textual features, etc. Furthermore, the *xu*-argument conceptualizes creative imitation. Students can couple their comprehension with production through language imitation and content creation. Now more studies have more focus on the content creation and the process of creative imitation. Wu said that the factor of content features was closely related to enjoyment to enhance task motivation since interesting content could stimulate learners' curiosity and increase natural enjoyment of learning [6]. The effect of content features could be demonstrated through its interplay with practicability. Content that contained practical knowledge could enable learners to achieve intercultural understanding.

2.2 The *Xu*-Competence

Yang held the view that the learning effect of *xu* can be promoted if language learners have fully developed competence in *xu*, hence she raised the term *xu*-competence and proved that teaching and learning can benefit from *xu*-competence. It points out that *xu*-competence is a dynamically composed cluster of cognitive abilities and interactional skills. The goal of extension should transfer from language proficiency to core competencies by providing new explanations for learning [7]. But now there are few studies that focus on the alignment of *xu*-competence. There are still gaps in understanding how collaboration is achieved, how learners process information during writing, what key factors are involved in this process, and how their cognition, emotions, and behavior change or interact for comprehensive competence [8].

2.3 Cultivating Students' Digital Storytelling Competence

“Digital storytelling pedagogy within digital humanities education is a crucial method to enhance students' critical thinking, digital skills and teamwork” [9]. Yang constructed a competence framework of digital storytelling which mainly consists of narrative structure, narrative discourse and cross-cultural awareness, and discussed how values and cultural awareness can be fostered during students' engagement in the practice of digital storytelling in English [10]. Li and Yang explored students' intercultural audience awareness within the context of digital storytelling and figured out the expansive cycles of identifying, analyzing, and resolving conflicts. It highlighted the complexity of developing students' intercultural audience awareness, involving changes in attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors [11]. The impact of a digital storytelling integrated methodology has its superiority on EFL learners' narrative writing skills [1]. Peng and Lowie tracked nine college-level students' digital storytelling development and found out students' use of complex construction of linguistic levels are increased combined with the development of students' cognitive, affective and behavioral attributes [12]. “Digital storytelling (DST) presented with multimodal content has been extensively applied in second language instruction”. It is proved that a robot-based DST facilitates the interaction in the DST process and reduced “students' communication apprehension, as well as enhance their English speaking ability, storytelling ability, narrative engagement, and communication tendency” [13].

2.4 Brand Storytelling

From the business perspective, the role of brand storytelling is related to brand orientation, brand identify, brand communication and brand performance. First, brand orientation may cover “entrepreneur's vision, strategic intent and tactical actions”. Second, brand identity encompasses “brand positioning, brand values, and brand vision”. Third, brand communication ensure that stakeholders perceive and internalize a brand's identity. Fourth, brand performance represents the success of a brand within the market and can be measured in different ways [14]. Wang's research emphasized the business content of interpretation of values, plots, characters, corporate events, corporate actions, brand values, and promotional stories. He also summarized the four factors of brand storytelling. That is, authenticity, affectivity, commonality and commitment [15].

In summary, although *xu*-based studies are fruitful, there are still some aspects overlooked. First, traditional writing is the most common task, while multimodal forms have a long way to go, especially in the digital era. Second, most of the alignment effects refer to language alignment and content creativity, other dimensions can be further explored. Third, the *xu*-competence factors can be further specified.

Furthermore, although there have been studies on the construction of digital storytelling competence and its effects on students' comprehensive literacy, many of them still lack pedagogical theoretical framework. Yang's [10] research highlighted digital narrative ability and emphasized students' digital media literacy, but it has not been discussed in details, so there is still space for the exploration to combine with the digital factors in the AI era and environments. And there are few studies that focus on the teaching of brand storytelling.

Accordingly, based on the research gaps above, this study aims to narrow down the scope of digital storytelling within a business context, together with considering narrative and multimodal factors under the theoretical guidance of the *xu*-argument for teaching design and to figure out the alignment effects.

3 THE DESIGN RATIONALE

The feasibilities of adopting the *xu*-argument to serve as the guidance for the teaching design to cultivate business English students' digital storytelling competence are as followed.

3.1 The Interaction Mechanism

From the theoretical perspective, storytelling, as one of the oldest and most powerful forms of communication, effectively fosters interpersonal connection and interaction [16]. The *xu*-argument, as a second language acquisition theory, offers a robust theoretical framework for exploring the cognitive and interactive mechanisms of language acquisition [17]. The *xu*-argument is grounded in the core principle of continuation-facilitated interaction, interaction-facilitated learning. Using the *xu*-argument as theoretical basis has its compatibility and feasibility because of its interaction mechanism for solving real communicative issues.

3.2 The Contextualized Setting

Wang [18] clarified the relationship between static language drilling and dynamic expression of ideas and suggested ways out of their mapping difficulty by emphasizing the importance of context for language application and necessitating a combination of contextualized input and content creation. Context concretizes the scenario in which a continuation task is assigned, highlighting a task's communicative nature rather than treating it as a classroom exercise while Business English students naturally have a business communicative purpose in authentic environment.

3.3 The Cognitive Load

The *xu*-argument highlights the integration of language imitation with idea and content creation [4]. It contends that through *xu*, which means continuation via completion, extension, and creation of content, language can be learned with high-efficiency [4], so it fully meets the dual-track requirements of language and content acquisition in business English learning. Students' competence of digital storytelling in business context includes various dimensions that may increase students' cognitive load. The input for continuation and different types of continuation tasks can provide abundant contextual and structural scaffolding that effectively reduces students' cognitive load and enhances comprehension efficiency. For students with weaker competence, they can just focus on imitation without innovation. Students with higher levels can attempt to integrate their creative content and thinking, innovate the ways in which they present stories.

3.4 The Autonomy Learning

The *xu*-based design can increase students' autonomy by restructuring the focus in the learning process. Instead of passively receiving knowledge, students can actively engage in meaning extension and narrative construction within a given context. The inherent information gap in continuation tasks stimulates students' exploratory behaviors and self-regulation for independent study with the support from the input. From an affective perspective, such scaffolded nature of continuation tasks can alleviate students' apprehension, thereby increasing students' self-efficacy. Moreover, in digital environment, students' outputs can be shared online. All developed outputs can be used for self-directed learning outside class.

Therefore, based on the *xu*-argument, this study aims to design and adopt storytelling continuation tasks as the core instructional intervention to illustrate how to cultivate students' storytelling competence and explore their learning alignment effects.

4 THE CONSTRUCTION OF BUSINESS STUDENTS' DIGITAL COMPETENCE

Business English students' digital storytelling competence can be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, which includes competences of business discourse, business content, multimodal presentation, and intercultural communicative effectiveness. The effectiveness of continuation depends not on the task format but rather on the depth of alignment effects achieved.

4.1 Digital Storytelling Competence of Business Discourse

Discourse construction remains the foundational layer upon which multimodal meaning-making is built. Therefore, business discourse competence should be regarded as a core dimension of digital storytelling ability. This dimension entails not only linguistic accuracy, conciseness and business profession, but also the ability to deploy business genre's and narrative genre's specific features, structures and logics, and the adoption of rhetorical devices for communicative effects. In digital context, students can fully make good use of AI tools for language polishing that goes beyond grammar correction. It also involves focusing on the improvement of linguistic appropriateness.

4.1.1 The continuation tasks for imitative alignment in business discourse

Within the *xu*-argument, alignment can be initiated through students' exposure to and interaction with the input materials' language features. The continuation tasks at language level can emphasize the imitation effect. For example, business English is concise that the use of nominalization widely exists. For storytelling, it is good to present a specific experience instead of presenting an abstract concept. Therefore, students can construct their conceptual understanding of nominalization by narrating a specific case or experience. The use of congruent forms of specific verbs, adjectives and modal verbs for expression can present the process to visualize or concretize an abstract noun or concept in more details.

Example one: How can we visualize abstract nouns into specific verbs by narrating a vivid process for understanding?

The input for continuation:

Mass customization and digitalization are BMW's car production features. We can use verbs to present the car production process for understanding these two nouns.

"Robots do most of the work in the body shop, welding, riveting and bonding hundreds of components together. Robots also apply the four layers of water-based paint to each car. To be able to customize each car requires highly sophisticated logistics. Workers stationed at regular intervals on the line reach back for components in wire baskets that have been rigorously sorted into the right sequence. Halfway along the line, just past the section where car bodies are bolted onto the drivetrain and chassis, a gray three-door one series sticks out amid a convoy of silver three-series cars." (Quoted from the textbook of *An Integrated Course of Advanced Business English 1*)

The continuation task:

Tell a business story to explain the concept of socialization, which is one attribute of new retails, using verbs to specify a process and visualize how to socialize for retails.

A sample of students' output:

The founder of the comic App "KuaiKan" makes the App to be a big sharing community of comics. She first creates and presents a series of comic work to tell her own startup story online to arouse public attention. Professional cartoonists or amateurs are attracted to create their comic works and pose them on the App. Comic hobbyists and ordinary users log in the App, scan, watch and recommend comic works, share and discuss comic knowledge.

4.2 Digital Storytelling Competence of Business Content Construction

Digital storytelling facilitates the transformation of abstract business concepts into applied knowledge through narrative structures. This underscores the role of cognitively grounded content construction in business storytelling. Therefore, the second essential component of Business English students' digital storytelling competence lies in the construction and representation of business content, which directly reflects students' business cognition. The content dimension of digital storytelling ability may refer to "distinct theme, vivid and interesting characters, reasonable plot, thought-provoking story" [13]. Therefore, business content requires students to interpret complex commercial scenarios, identify key plot and characters, present decision or behaviors and construct coherent narratives that align with authentic business practices.

In digital context, when referring to the facts, students need to select ample digital resources, including AI generated materials for content and verify their authenticity and relevance. Students must critically evaluate and strategically employ AI-generated content. When referring to the viewpoints, the originality of students' thinking should be highlighted. When perspective is considered, a macro one to focus on commonality or a micro one to choose personal or small stories should be balanced.

4.2.1 The continuation tasks for deepening alignment in business content

The *xu*-argument emphasizes that effective continuation is contingent upon comprehension, where students actively construct meaning rather than passively decode or imitate it. Within the *xu*-argument, alignment can be deepened through students' cognition to interact with the input's content. The deepening effects can be reflected by *xu*-argument's content creation of a gradual process of completion, extension, and creation [7]. Students can supplement more details to complete the same story. Students can extend the same story by offering more original and critical views and perspectives. Student can also create a new story inspired by the input's content framework and views.

Example two: How can we tell a story about the implementation of a clean-energy project with a clear content dimension?

The input for continuation:

"Many of the difficulties of clean-the adoption can be traced to the fundamental error of focusing on parts rather than on the whole. New systems consist of four interdependent and mutually reinforcing components: an enabling technology, an innovative business model, a careful market-adoption strategy, and a favorable government policy." (*Quoted from the textbook of An Integrated Course of Advanced Business English 2*)

The continuation tasks:

Adopt the above content dimension framework for the success of a clean-energy project and tell a new story of a company's development of clean-energy.

A sample of students' output:

A group of students told a story of the company GCL Group's new energy project by adopting the four content dimensions as the narrative structure. For the technology part, how the company turns garbage into electricity and transforms sludge into cement for industrial use are illustrated. For the business model, how the company signs BOT agreement for plant or industrial park construction and how they carry out photovoltaic projects for agricultural farming for profits are covered. For the market adoption, both the domestic cooperation and foreign technology empowerment cooperation are analyzed. For the government support, specific policy supports are explained, see Figure 1.



Figure 1 Content Dimensions from Students' Output

4.3 Digital Storytelling Competence of Multimodal Presentation

The third essential component of Business English students' digital storytelling competence lies in multimodal presentation, which increasingly reflects students' digital and AI literacy. Multimodal presentation views communication as the orchestration of multiple semiotic resources to make meaning. In digital contexts, students adjust textual, visual, and auditory elements, engaging in processes that distribute meaning across different modes with or without AI tools' help. Factors like layouts, colors, patterns, pictures, dynamic graphics can be cited as multimodal elements. Students select appropriate modes to highlight key business messages, visualize data and processes, and enhance the persuasive impact of their storytelling. Multimodality with AI affordances can help to expand narrative interactivity, perceptibility, shareability and creativity. For business setting, multimodal narratives can be summarized into two types: practical and symbolic. Practical type is more about specific event and individual roles while symbolic type is more about brand value and company as a whole [19]. Therefore, the forms of modes should consider the types of business narrative for better effects.

4.3.1 The continuation tasks for iterative alignment in multimodal level

Within the *xu*-argument, students make good use of audial and visual effects that can facilitate and strengthen the expression of language and content. Different modes to express meanings can be imitated or created. Multimodal ability can indicate students' *xu*-competence of imitation and creation. For example, a short video can present a concrete procedural process of a sophisticated technology. A certain color can strengthen a brand's identity. A background music can create an empathic atmosphere for a company founder's hard journey of starting up the business. A picture or image can create connection and association for information acquisition. The effects of integrating different modes can continue to enhance the effects of language and content iteratively.

Example three: How can we make good use of multimodal modes to anchor a memorable part of a story?

The input for continuation:

The story about lychee' high-quality development is constructed by creating IP of people to create vivid images for memorable hints and clear storytelling structure. That is, Lixiaoji for Wanllaoji's soft drink of lychee flavor; Lychee students for the technology-empowered support for lychee production; Li'er Princess for the online digital transaction platform of lychee; And Lychee Huadan for lychee story's international dissemination, see Figure 2.

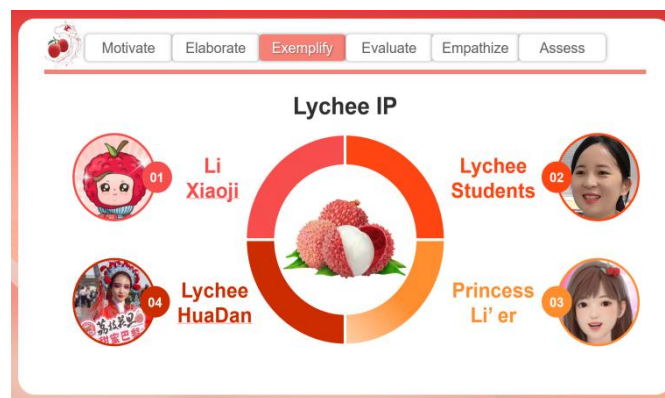


Figure 2 The Multimodal Forms of Character IP from Teachers' Design

The Continuation task: visualize a story by adopting IP of people or other items to express multimodal meaning.

A sample of students' output:

When a group of students tell a story about the cultural tourism development, students adopt a movie about overseas Chinese returning back to hometown for development, highlighting two main characters of the movie and stressed their names Huangge and Qiaomei in the movie, which symbolize the motherland and the young overseas Chinese's emotional relationship. Such visual and audial selection becomes vivid IP and brings the effects of meaning association, see Figure 3.



Figure 3 The Multimodal Forms of Character IP from Students' Output

4.4 Digital Storytelling Competence of Intercultural Communication

The fourth essential component of Business English students' digital storytelling competence lies in intercultural communicative competence, which foregrounds audience awareness, audience expectation and audience engagement to improve the effectiveness of business communication. Both generative and pre-existing intercultural audience awareness can be cultivated at three levels: attitude, knowledge, and behavior. At the attitude level, producers should be cultivated to have an audience in mind. At the knowledge level, producers should be cultivated to recognize the differences between their own culture and the culture of others. At the behavior level, producers should master the ability and strategies to meet audience needs and achieve goals [11].

Business English students must be able to anticipate audience expectations, interpret cultural cues, and tailor their storytelling to align with different cultural preferences in terms of tone, persuasion strategies, and rhetorical conventions.

For audience engagement, "multimodal literacy refers to the ability to read, watch, understand, respond to, and generate multimodal texts" [13]. Therefore, feedbacks for multimodal outputs are no longer just from teachers and peers. Digital storytelling focuses on the dissemination on the media. Feedback is now dynamic, personalized, open and available both instantly and longitudinally online, accommodating individual differences and team collaboration, evoking more interactive alignment effects. It is good to provide interactive and immersive experience for understanding. In this way, both the student narrators and audience may have the possibilities of real communication and bring positive emotional influence and identity construction.

4.4.1 The continuation tasks for interactive alignment in intercultural communication

Within the *xu*-argument, student bear in mind the importance of audience and activate students' *xu*-competence of comparison. For example, the use of rhetorical devices like analogy and conceptual metaphor for easier understanding, the use of personal pronouns for indicating relationship, the use of question raising to leave some space for audience thinking and imagination, the use of the commonality of semiotic resources, and the use of common feelings for empathy all facilitate better mutual understanding. Comments, discussion or evaluation from the audience after disseminating the multimodal output in the media may also become a living extension of a new type of "continuation."

Example four: How can we make good use of language and emotional factors to be audience-oriented?

The input for continuation:

"In 2015, Kasing Lung created a fairy world in three picture books inspired by Nordic mythology, and populated it with magical characters both good and evil, calling them The Monsters. Among them, the most prominent one was Labubu, a small monster with high, pointed ears and serrated teeth. Despite a mischievous look, Labubu is kind-hearted and always wants to help, but often accidentally achieves the opposite. (Quoted from the official website, <https://www.popmart.com/nz/collection/27>)

The continuation task: tell a story considering the emotional communication that goes beyond cultural difference.

A sample of students' output:

When I was a kid, my grandma told me the stories about how our ancestors went abroad for a living and returning to build Diaolou as our home and defend us from floods and bandits. Diaolou's development will be a road to bring every overseas Chinese home. Love of family and motherland is forever from heart.

5 CONCLUSION

This study develops business students' digital storytelling competence by constructing a discourse (language) - content (cognition) - multimodality (digital literacy) - intercultural communication (emotion) framework. It fully combines the factors of business, narration and digital environment. Through the alignment effect of the *xu*-based continuation tasks, it is proved that students are able to be equipped with such competence. Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although students' samples are presented, this study is primarily conceptual in nature and relies on theoretical integration rather than empirical data. Thus, the proposed competence framework has not yet been empirically validated. Future research can extend this study in several directions. In addition, with the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and digital technologies, future research could explore more closely about how intelligent tools can support continuation-based digital storytelling pedagogy.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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