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Integrating Socially Conscious Digital Narratives into a Japanese University English for Academic Purposes Course

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Abstract: *Digital storytelling (DST) is an effective pedagogical approach that integrates foundational language skills (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening) with emerging visual and technology-based literacies. Numerous studies have shown that higher education students can gain significant benefits from creating digital narratives in communicative English courses. However, DST remains an underutilized instructional strategy and a relatively under-researched area within the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) field. This qualitative study explores the value of incorporating a socially conscious multimodal video project into a first-year EAP course at a Japanese university. The researcher employed pre- and post-project questionnaires, focus group interviews, and a video analysis rubric to evaluate the effectiveness of a project-based learning DST approach in fostering the participants' (n=64) critical engagement with local and global sociocultural issues in an EAP context. An established and empirically validated model of critical thinking attributes served as the framework that guided the study and informed the data analysis. The results suggest that socially conscious digital narratives cultivated the students' awareness of local and global sociocultural issues and positively influenced each of the three domains (i.e., skills, knowledge, disposition) in this theoretical model. Although most participants found higher-order thinking activities challenging, they still perceived them as an engaging and beneficial way to study academic English. This paper also presents an original and practical framework that educators can use to implement a socially conscious DST initiative in an EAP setting.*

Key words: *critical thinking, digital storytelling, English for academic purposes, Japanese higher education, socially conscious education*

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1. Introduction

Throughout history, people from every corner of the globe have used stories to entertain, educate, and reinforce acceptable social norms. Narratives can also highlight systemic injustices, amplify the voices of marginalized groups, and foster deeper cultural awareness. For example, traditional folktales are taught in many Indigenous communities as a means to resist colonial oppression, bridge the past with the future, and revitalize endangered languages (Babaloa & Onanuga, 2012; Hadaway & Young, 2014). In the field of English as an international language (EIL), generations of teachers (e.g., Kamata, 2023) have leveraged storytelling activities to engage students, cultivate their communicative competencies, and bring authentic language situations into the classroom. In recent years, an increasing number of EIL educators believe that digital storytelling (DST) is an effective way to interweave foundational language skills (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening) with newer visual and technology-based literacies (Yang et al., 2020). The widespread diffusion of Web 2.0 technologies, coupled with the seemingly omnipresent nature of mobile devices and their numerous affordances (Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018), has opened up an exciting array of learning opportunities for foreign language learners, particularly in the realm of DST. Before the mid-1980s, creating a short video was a challenging undertaking for most individuals, as it required a heavy camera, expensive editing equipment, extensive training, and the careful management of variable environmental conditions such as lighting and electricity (Rosenstein, 2002; Siegel, 1990). Nowadays, advances in mobile device technology, video editing software, and emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) have dramatically increased the accessibility and efficiency of the multimodal video composition process (Winter, 2024). In fact, several studies (e.g., Ferdiansyah, 2024) have demonstrated that elementary school English language learners (ELLs) can successfully craft their own digital narratives and derive significant benefits from the DST approach.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

In the higher education context, DST has been increasingly featured in a wide variety of communicative English courses. However, it remains an underutilized pedagogical strategy and a relatively under-researched area within the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) field. Anecdotally speaking, many educators are apprehensive about incorporating a DST project into a busy, content-driven EAP course due to a lack of understanding of what it entails and concerns over potential

logistical and problematic information and communications technologies (ICT) issues (Toland, 2023). This paper examines the value of integrating a socially conscious, collaborative DST project into a first-year EAP course at a Japanese university. In this study, the term 'socially conscious' is defined as being mindful of social injustice (Reimer-Kirkham et al., 2009) and possessing a "conscious awareness of being part of an interrelated community of others" (Schlitz et al., 2010, p. 18). This paper aims to: (a) examine the impact that socioculturally infused digital narratives can have on Japanese university students' higher-order thinking skills; and (b) encourage educators to use a DST approach in their EAP classes. The following research question guided this study:

1. In what ways do socially conscious digital narratives influence Japanese university students' critical engagement with local and global sociocultural issues in an English for academic purposes course?

In the first section, I provide a brief review of the academic literature relevant to this paper. Next, I examine the methodology and theoretical framework that were adopted for this investigation. Attention then shifts to addressing the study's research question, followed by a discussion of several strategies that educators can deploy to successfully launch a DST initiative in a higher education EAP course. The suggestions featured in this section emerged from my experiences utilizing multimodal video projects in a wide range of instructional contexts, as well as from several missteps I made along the way.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Storytelling: Background

As video-mediated technologies continue to evolve, many people mistakenly assume that DST is a relatively recent development. In actuality, DST has been utilized for almost four decades across diverse academic fields (Lambert & Hessler, 2018; Quah & Ng, 2021). Over the years, digital narratives have served a variety of purposes, including the preservation of Indigenous languages and cultural traditions (e.g., Shiri et al., 2021), providing therapeutic benefits for marginalized groups (e.g., de Jager et al., 2017), supporting teacher training (e.g., Cetin, 2021), and enhancing English language learning (e.g., Yang et al., 2020). A typical digital story ranges from three to ten minutes in length and is produced using video editing software or Web 2.0 tools. To create a cohesive digital narrative, storytellers must blend various components such as video clips, images, sound effects, music, narration, written text, and transitions into a unified whole (Hung, 2019; Nishioka, 2016). A

variety of DST definitions can be found throughout the academic literature. For example, Barber (2016) described it as a "collision/collusion between the ancient traditions of orality and the instant information access of mass communication systems" (p. 11). In contrast, Towndrow and Kogut (2020) defined DST as a "social process that represents and offers opportunities for teachers and learners to explore, document and communicate their histories and personal growth in critical and reflective ways" (p. 148). This is the most appropriate definition for the purposes of this study, as it integrates the concepts of collaborative learning and critical reflection, both of which were foundational pillars in my research undertaking.

2.2. Digital Storytelling: Opportunities and Obstacles

Foreign language students can reap significant benefits by creating their own digital narratives. For example, Stanley (2018) argued that the video-making process can develop ELLs' reading, writing, and research skills. Other researchers (e.g., Gedera & Zalipour, 2021; Quah & Ng, 2021; Yang & Wu, 2012) suggested that DST can help students cultivate essential twenty-first century skills, such as communication, collaboration, digital literacy, creativity, and critical thinking (CT). In terms of culture, Kiss and Weninger (2017) posited that visual texts can deepen ELLs' intercultural communicative competence and cultural knowledge. In a similar vein, Hung (2019) contended that multimodal video projects can foster ELLs' critical awareness of sociopolitical issues such as race, class, and gender. A number of scholars (e.g., Towndrow & Kogut, 2020) believe that DST encourages active, self-directed learning while also boosting ELLs' confidence, engagement, and motivation (Kasami, 2021; Ono, 2014). Similarly, Kohnke (2019) reported that the Hong Kong university EAP students in his study developed greater learner autonomy, and CT skills after completing a multimodal video project grounded in a critical pedagogy approach. In another Asian context, Chen (2018) studied 46 Taiwanese university students' responses to a DST initiative aimed at fostering "digital empathy"—the ability to reflect and act responsibly while using digital media (Friesem, 2016, as cited in Chen, 2018). The project enhanced students' awareness of social issues like cyberbullying and deepened their empathy for victims. While the results of the research highlighted in this section are certainly encouraging, it is important to note that several studies were small-scale, and some researchers investigated their own students.

At the opposite end of the technology-enhanced learning spectrum, incorporating a DST project into a foreign language course is not without its challenges. A recurring theme in the

academic literature is that many students often experience a certain amount of discomforting friction when tasked with creating a digital narrative in a foreign language class. Oskoz and Elola (2016) argued that DST can be a time-consuming process for many second language (L2) learners, as it requires the integration of ICT knowledge with traditional language skills. On a similar note, Kasami (2018) reported that several Japanese university ELLs in her study were unable to complete their DST assignments within the allotted timeframe due to difficulties with ICT tools and other technical issues. In a different L2 context, Lee (2014) suggested that the use of unfamiliar lexical items frustrated students in an American university Spanish course, as they struggled to fully understand their classmates' digital stories. Other researchers (e.g., Hwang et al., 2016) discovered that intragroup conflicts and off-task behaviours (e.g., chatting) can negatively impact the social cohesion in collaborative DST projects. Another significant obstacle teachers may encounter is students who focus too heavily on the 'digital' elements (e.g., music, transitions) while neglecting key aspects of the 'story' (Barber, 2016). For example, Kim and Lee (2017) noted that some Korean university ELLs in their study appeared to use the multimedia features in their digital narratives as a strategy to avoid writing. Lastly, Sunderland et al. (2021) described DST as a "pedagogy of discomfort," which means that students can experience a certain amount of "fear and apprehension" as it pushes them outside their comfort zones (p. 22).

2.3. Critical Thinking in the Digital Age

The pervasive use of social media platforms, coupled with the ubiquity of mobile devices, exposes higher education students to a constant stream of digital stimuli on a daily basis (Matthes et al., 2020). Further muddying the waters is the proliferation of fake news stories, AI-generated 'deepfake' images, data privacy concerns, and online sextortion scams (Chan & Swenson, 2024; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2023). Not surprisingly, most educational stakeholders believe that university students must possess CT and AI literacy skills in order to navigate a sea of online misinformation (Orhan, 2023). Furthermore, CT is considered an essential twenty-first century competency that enhances ELLs' employability in the globalized marketplace (Luk & Lin, 2015).

While most educators would agree that CT is more important than ever in today's technology-saturated, generative AI era, it remains a challenging notion to define. Over the years, researchers across various scholarly disciplines have characterized it in diverse ways. For example,

Ennis (1985) described CT as "reflective and reasonable thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 45). In contrast, Terblanche and De Clercq (2021) offered a broader definition after analyzing several well-established CT frameworks:

> Critical thinking involves purposeful and reflective judgement generally aimed at making informed decisions. It involves certain cognitive skills (e.g., the ability to interpret, analyze, evaluate, infer, explain and self-regulate) and also certain dispositions (e.g., being inquisitive, self-confident, open-minded, ethical, orderly and systematic, and having intrinsic motivation and a positive attitude). (p. 349)

This is the most suitable definition for the purposes of this paper, as it better captures the complexities of the concept and aligns well with Freire's (1996) assertion that "reflection—true reflection—leads to action" (p. 66). Educators must continually reflect on their professional practice and create more opportunities for ELLs to develop their higher-order thinking abilities and "critical visual literacy reading skills" (Romero & Bobkina, 2021, p. 10). Incorporating a socially conscious DST project into an EAP course is a valuable pedagogical strategy that harnesses these two competencies, as students are required to research, evaluate, reflect, and discuss important sociocultural issues with their peers.

2.4. Critical Thinking and English Language Learning

Critics of the Japanese education system claim that the heavy emphasis on high-stakes tests and a drill-oriented, teacher-centered approach have undermined students' creativity and CT skills (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2018; Park, 2013). Several empirical studies have shown that Japanese and other Asian ELLs benefit when higher-order thinking activities are integrated into their English classes. For example, Kusumoto (2018) reported that the first-year Japanese university participants (n=134) in her study showed improved CT disposition scores after engaging in a variety of project-based language learning activities over a 30-week period. Similarly, Akatsuka (2019) claimed that a higher-order thinking initiative enhanced Japanese high school ELLs' CT attitudes and communicative skills. Lin's (2018) study likewise revealed that Chinese ELLs found higher-order thinking activities to be a valuable way to learn English, even though these tasks were more linguistically demanding than their usual classroom work. Moving to another context, Chen and Chuang (2021) argued that a DST approach helped the Taiwanese participants (n=46) in their study develop problem-solving abilities, media literacy, and communication skills. Further supporting this,

a systematic review of the educational DST literature found that students can enhance their creativity and CT skills by crafting digital narratives (Wu & Chen, 2020). While the findings of each of these studies are promising, it is important to note that CT remains a challenging concept to teach (Willingham, 2008), assess (Liu et al., 2014), and investigate due to cultural compatibility issues with different research tools and approaches (Sahin et al., 2014; Tan, 2017).

2.5. Project-based Learning

Project-based learning (PBL) is a student-centered, teacher-guided instructional approach that integrates several essential twenty-first century skills (Bell, 2010). The Buck Institute for Education (n.d.) defined PBL as a "teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects" (para. 1). Educators can derive a number of benefits by incorporating this instructional approach into their EAP classes. Numerous studies have demonstrated that PBL provides ELLs with an effective means of enhancing their communicative abilities (Kato et al., 2020), cognitive capacities (Kettanun, 2015), research skills (Yamada, 2021), academic content knowledge (Rugen, 2019), autonomous learning (Farouck, 2016), creativity (Bell, 2010), digital literacy (Thomas, 2017), as well as CT, decision-making, and collaborative work skills (Beckett et al., 2020).

While many ELLs thrive when working on collaborative assignments, the PBL approach and its implementation are not without certain challenges. Students who are accustomed to more traditional learning environments may struggle and experience discomfort during collaborative projects (Petersen & Nassaji, 2016). Although many ELLs enjoy participating in cooperative learning activities, they do not always perceive PBL tasks as an effective way to hone their foreign language skills (Beckett & Slater, 2018). This sentiment can be even more evident in PBL assignments that incorporate technology. Some ELLs may perceive ICT as unnecessary in foreign language classrooms (Beckett et al., 2020) and frustrating, particularly when faced with technical difficulties (Kato et al., 2020). Teamwork is a core component of the PBL method; however, unmotivated students may find it challenging to collaborate effectively with their peers (Laverick, 2019), and an unequal distribution of tasks within groups can lead to resentment and stress (Gibbes & Carson, 2014). Lin et al. (2021) claimed that the two primary difficulties students have with cooperative learning tasks are unfair grading and social loafing. Ferrari and Pychyl (2012) argued that social loafing, defined as a "reduction in effort within collective settings where individual performance is

not identifiable," and procrastination can each undermine the effectiveness of group projects (p. 13). Similarly, Forehand et al. (2016) identified free riding—the expectation that all members will receive the same grade despite an imbalanced workload—and concerns about the peer assessment process as potential thorny issues that can arise in collaborative assignments.

3. Research Design and Methodology

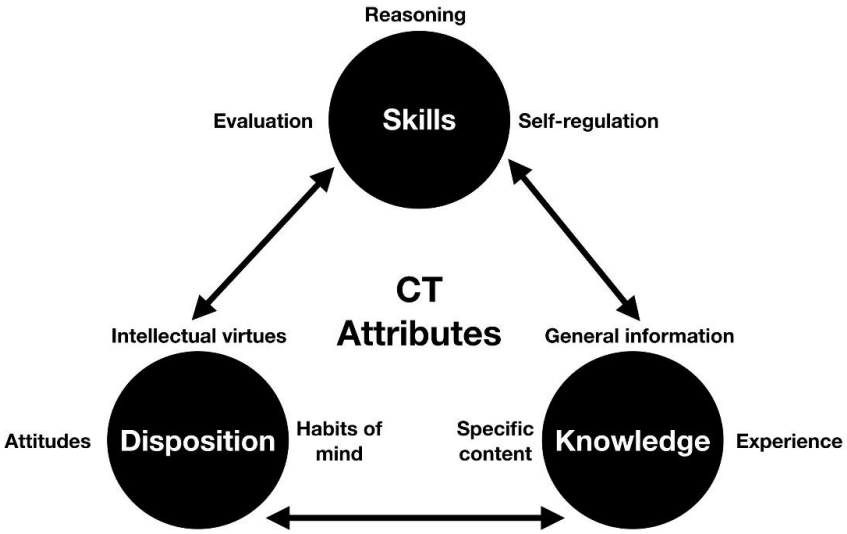
3.1. The Case Study Approach

A single-case descriptive case study methodology (Yin, 2014) was employed for this qualitative investigation, reflecting my critical realist ontological and epistemological perspectives. According to Haig et al. (2019), critical realism-inspired research aims to understand "tendencies in phenomena that have been observed or experienced (e.g., events, effects)" (p. 3). This philosophical orientation is particularly valuable in technology-enhanced learning studies, as it helps to mitigate the negative effects of both technological determinism and socio-cultural determinism (Allen et al., 2013). Case studies are defined in various ways in the academic literature, ranging from the simplistic to more precise and complex interpretations. Simons (2009) described this methodological approach as "an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a 'real life' context" (p. 21). Since my study focuses on a specific project (i.e., DST in an EAP course) and incorporates multiple perspectives, this definition is particularly fitting.

3.2. Theoretical Framework: Critical Thinking Attributes

CT is a multifaceted concept that can be understood and interpreted in various ways (Davies & Barnett, 2015). Aware of this complexity and the need for conceptual clarity, Thomas and Lok (2015) developed a practical CT framework that can be utilized by both researchers and educators. Their theoretical model is grounded in a comprehensive review of 16 respected and established studies on higher-order thinking conducted over the past century. Figure 1 illustrates the following three interconnected components of Thomas and Lok's (2015) CT attributes model: (a) skills, (b) dispositions, and (c) knowledge.

Figure 1: Critical thinking attributes: An operational framework



(Thomas & Lok, 2015, p. 155)

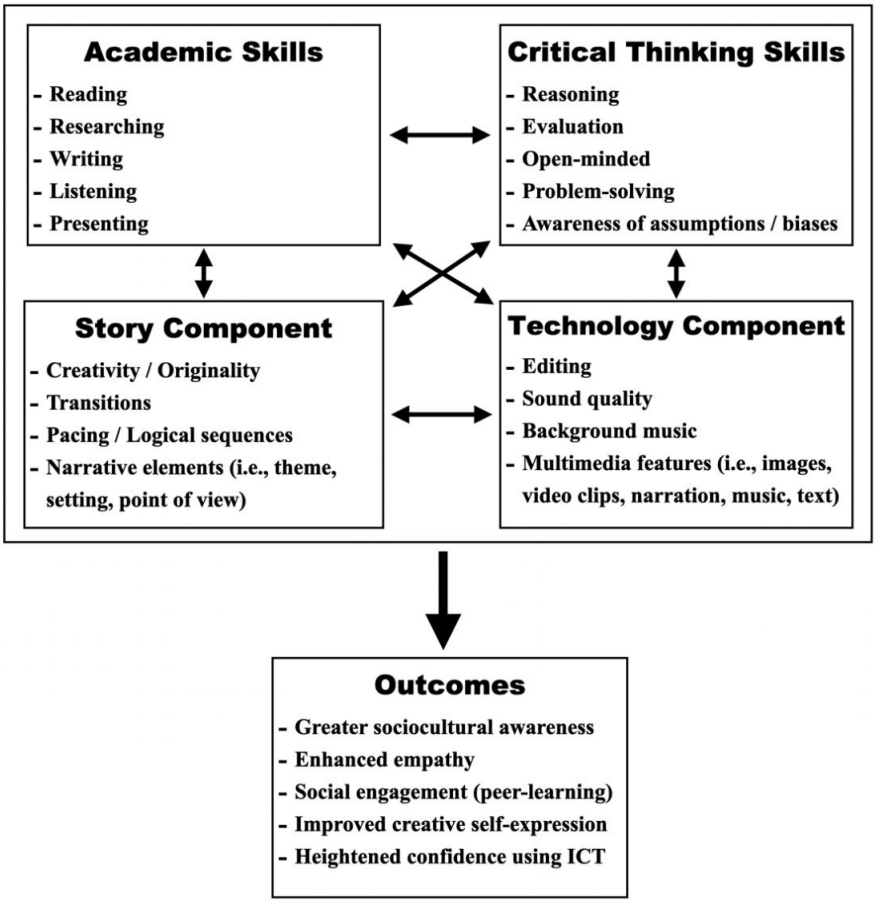
There are several reasons for integrating the CT attributes model into the theoretical foundation of this study. First, the framework is highly adaptable and can be applied across diverse cultural contexts. For example, Muniroh (2021) utilized the model to analyze the Indonesian government's education policies and assess the level of criticality in a public university's English language program. Next, this framework can assist educators in designing effective grading rubrics and self-assessment tools that can help students evaluate their CT dispositions during in-class activities and group projects. Lastly, the research instruments (e.g., questionnaires) developed for my study are grounded in Thomas and Lok's (2015) CT attributes model.

3.3. English for Academic Purposes: Socially Conscious Digital Storytelling Model

EAP courses are typically comprehensive in scope, requiring students to develop a wide range of competencies, including note-taking, research strategies, referencing techniques, and presentation skills (Ruegg & Williams, 2018). The process of creating and examining socially conscious digital narratives in an EAP course can foster students' academic competencies, along with other essential twenty-first century skills such as CT, creativity, communication, collaboration, and digital literacy (Gedera & Zalipour, 2021; Stanley, 2018). Figure 2 presents a DST model that I developed for a Japanese university EAP context. It showcases the four interconnected elements (i.e., academic skills, CT skills, story component, technology component) that are present in a socially conscious multimodal video project. If teachers are aware of the various strands within each

component and employ appropriate pedagogical strategies, this can lead to positive learner outcomes, including: (a) greater sociocultural awareness, (b) enhanced empathy, (c) social engagement [peer learning], (d) improved creative self-expression, and (e) increased confidence using ICT. This practical model helps educators better understand socially conscious DST and feel more at ease interweaving it into EAP courses.

Figure 2: Academic English: Socially conscious digital storytelling model



(Toland, 2023, p. 155)

3.4. Research Site and Participants

This study was conducted at a private university in the central part of Japan during the 2019-2020 academic year. The sample was drawn from first-year students in the Department of British and American Studies—a rigorous, content-based program that includes numerous classes taught in English. Students in this department are generally more motivated and exhibit stronger study habits than typical ELLs enrolled in communicative English courses. The participants in this study

were recruited from three EAP classes I taught. All 73 of my students were invited to participate in the study during class time. Sixty-four students completed the pre-DST project questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 87.7%. The response rate for the post-DST project questionnaire was 86.3% (n=63). The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 20 years (M = 18.42), with most being 18 or 19 years old (96.8%). All participants were first-year undergraduate students, and none were 'repeaters'—students who had previously failed the course. Forty-eight participants (75%) were female, fifteen (23.4%) were male, and one participant (1.6%) preferred not to disclose their gender. Sixty-one participants (95.3%) identified as Japanese, while two (3.1%) considered themselves 'Japanese-American,' and one participant (1.6%) identified as 'Filipino'.

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this investigation were collected over a five-week period during the 2019-2020 academic year. Participation in this study was voluntary, and no incentives were provided. The researcher followed ethical research protocols to minimize potential risks to participants and adhered to the guidelines set by the university's Ethics Screening Committee. The researcher provided students with an information sheet about the study and obtained their informed consent. Participants were able to read study documents (e.g., consent forms) and research instruments in their first language. Japanese responses from focus group interviews and open-ended questionnaires were translated into English by a qualified translator. The study employed the "translation by committee" method (Sperber, 2004), in which two translators worked independently and cross-checked each other's work. Pseudonyms have been used in this paper to protect the participants' identities. Table 1 outlines the four research instruments that were incorporated into this study. The two questionnaires and focus group interviews captured students' perspectives. The 10-item video analysis rubric (see Appendix A) allowed me to conduct a more discerning examination of the participants' multimodal artefacts. Taken together, these four instruments generated a substantial amount of data. This paper focuses on selected items from the pre- and post-project questionnaires and focus group interviews, along with my critical reflections made during the analysis of the multimodal videos.

Table 1: Sources of Data and Details

Research instrument	Details
1. Pre-project questionnaire	- 54 items; 64 participants (87.7% response rate)
2. Post-project questionnaire	- 54 items; 63 participants (86.3% response rate)
3. Focus group interviews	- eight participants in three focus group sessions (10.9% response rate); 2.8 hours in total (M = 55:06 minutes)
4. Video analysis rubric	- 23 videos (M = 5:34 minutes) analyzed with a rubric based on my theoretical framework

3.6. Unpacking the Data: Coding and Thematic Analysis

NVivo 12 for Mac, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to organize and scrutinize the data. The multifaceted dataset was carefully examined using a thematic analysis (TA) approach, as it aligned with the aims of this study. Clarke and Braun (2017) define TA as a "method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (p. 297). I followed the six steps outlined in Braun and Clarke's (2021) TA model:

1. Data familiarization and writing familiarization notes.
2. Systematic data coding.
3. Generating initial themes from coded and collated data.
4. Developing and reviewing themes.
5. Refining, defining, and naming themes.
6. Writing the report (p. 331).

I concur with Xu and Zammit's (2020) assertion that TA is a valuable tool for teacher-researchers, as it provides them with an "accessible and flexible method to analyze qualitative data collected in the natural classroom setting" (p. 2).

4. Research Findings and Discussion

4.1. Research Question: Critical Engagement with Socially Conscious Digital Narratives

This section addresses the study's research question: 'In what ways do socially conscious digital narratives influence Japanese university students' critical engagement with local and global sociocultural issues in an English for academic purposes course?' Guided by Thomas and Lok's (2015) CT attributes model and an analysis of the previously mentioned data sources, I identified the following key themes: (a) awareness of sociocultural issues, (b) development of CT skills, and (c) reactions to classmates' digital stories. The next part of the paper will explore these three themes in greater detail.

4.1.1. Theme One: Awareness of Sociocultural Issues

To understand how participants perceived sociocultural issues in their EAP class, I reviewed selected questions from the pre- and post-project questionnaire. Table 2 presents the numerical data related to the first theme.

Table 2: Awareness of local and global sociocultural issues: Questionnaire data

1. It is important for Japanese university students to think critically about local and global social issues in their EAP class.							
Survey	**Strongly disagree (SD)**	**Disagree (D)**	**Somewhat disagree (SWD)**	**Somewhat agree (SWA)**	**Agree (A)**	**Strongly agree (SA)**	**No answer (NA)**
Pre-project	0%	0%	4.7%	25%	39.1%	31.3%	--------
Post-project	0%	1.6%	1.6%	36.5%	34.9%	25.4%	--------
2. When I see a news report on a sociocultural issue (e.g., homelessness, refugees), I consider it without prejudice.							
Survey	**SD**	**D**	**SWD**	**SWA**	**A**	**SA**	**NA**
Pre-project	3.1%	10.9%	21.9%	37.5%	18.8%	7.8%	--------
Post-project	0%	4.8%	19%	36.5%	33.3%	6.3%	--------
3. Finding the most current information on a social issue will help you have a better understanding of the issue.							
Survey	**SD**	**D**	**SWD**	**SWA**	**A**	**SA**	**NA**

Pre-project	0%	0%	1.6%	25%	31.3%	42.2%	--------
Post-project	0%	1.6%	4.8%	14.3%	36.5%	42.9%	--------

Item one indicates that the majority of the participants (96.8%) believed it is important for Japanese university students to think critically about both local and global sociocultural issues in an EAP course. Item two focuses on the ability to assess a social issue news report without prejudice. In the pre-project questionnaire, 26.6% of participants agreed or strongly agreed, a figure that increased to 39.6% in the post-project survey, suggesting that the DST initiative enhanced some students' critical awareness of social issues. Item three highlights the importance of obtaining current information on social issues. In the pre-project survey, 73.5% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that up-to-date information would help them better understand a social issue. This figure rose to 79.4% by the end of the DST assignment.

The focus group interviews offered additional context to the numerical data presented in Table 2. Chie stated: "*We need to focus on things we humans can do which is critical thinking. Otherwise, we won't be able to keep up with the advances in most workplaces*." Likewise, Yui commented: "*If it's just conversations about family, boyfriends, shopping, movie stars, it's not enough … we need to have our own opinions about social problems so it's important*." In contrast, Jun noted: "*I was tired of making our video and talking about social problems … one member in my group did not do much work*." Chie's views reflect the influence of the twenty-first century skills movement, which promotes CT as essential in today's globalized workforce (Luk & Lin, 2015). Yui's observations emphasize the importance of CT in higher education, aligning with findings from prior research (e.g., Orhan, 2023). Furthermore, her comments echo widespread criticisms of many commercially produced English language teaching materials, which often prioritize 'aspirational content' (Gray, 2012) while overlooking controversial topics such as LGBT issues and poverty (Appleby, 2018). While most students believed that sociocultural issues should be part of an EAP program, signs of cumulative fatigue and frustration were evident. Jun's comments were unsurprising, as CT activities can be linguistically demanding for ELLs (Lin, 2018), and DST is regarded as a "pedagogy of discomfort" (Sunderland et al., 2021) that challenges students to move beyond their comfort zones. Moreover, the presence of a social loafing teammate and intragroup tensions may have contributed to Jun's dissatisfaction with the collaborative assignment, which aligns with the findings from prior research (Ferrari & Pychyl, 2012; Hwang et al., 2016; Lin, 2021).

4.1.2. Theme Two: Development of Critical Thinking Skills

The participants' perspectives on higher-order thinking activities were assessed using seven questionnaire items underpinned by Thomas and Lok's (2015) CT attributes model. Table 3 presents the numerical data related to the second theme.

Table 3: Critical thinking skills: Questionnaire data

4. Creating a DST project in an EAP class will help me to improve my CT skills.							
Survey	**SD**	**D**	**SWD**	**SWA**	**A**	**SA**	**NA**
Pre-project	1.6%	6.3%	32.8%	32.8%	18.8%	7.8%	--------
Post-project	1.6%	7.9%	23.8%	42.9%	14.3%	9.5%	--------
5. I can organize my ideas logically.							
Survey	**SD**	**D**	**SWD**	**SWA**	**A**	**SA**	**NA**
Pre-project	9.4%	15.6%	23.4%	31.3%	12.5%	7.8%	--------
Post-project	0%	7.9%	31.7%	30.2%	22.2%	7.9%	--------
6. I have the ability to compare and contrast ideas.							
Survey	**SD**	**D**	**SWD**	**SWA**	**A**	**SA**	**NA**
Pre-project	1.6%	14.1%	20.3%	37.5%	20.3%	6.3%	--------
Post-project	0%	3.2%	28.6%	31.7%	30.2%	6.3%	--------
7. I'm willing to change my position on a matter when presented with new valid information.							
Survey	**SD**	**D**	**SWD**	**SWA**	**A**	**SA**	**NA**
Pre-project	0%	4.7%	7.8%	35.9%	39.1%	12.5%	--------
Post-project	0%	1.6%	7.9%	38.1%	34.9%	17.9%	--------
8. University students should be able to clearly present their arguments and defend their positions in an EAP course.							

Survey	SD	D	SWD	SWA	A	SA	NA
Pre-project	1.6%	3.1%	7.8%	31.3%	40.6%	15.6%	--------
Post-project	1.6%	3.2%	6.3%	41.3%	31.7%	15.9%	--------
9. I can identify gaps in my knowledge and find information to fill those gaps.							
Survey	**SD**	**D**	**SWD**	**SWA**	**A**	**SA**	**NA**
Pre-project	3.1%	12.5%	31.3%	26.6%	18.8%	7.8%	--------
Post-project	3.2%	1.6%	17.5%	49.2%	20.6%	7.9%	--------

Item four shows that the strong agreement declined slightly from 26.6% to 23.8%. However, the overall percentage of students who at least somewhat agreed that creating a digital story enhanced their CT rose from 59.4% to 66.7%. Item 5 indicates that 20.3% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they could organize their ideas logically at the start of the assignment, with this figure increasing to 30.1% in the post-project questionnaire. Item six addresses the ability to compare and contrast ideas. In the pre-project survey, 26.6% of students felt they had this skill, a figure that grew to 36.5% by the end of the assignment. Item seven explores the willingness to change one's position when presented with valid new information, with agreement rising slightly from 51.6% to 52.8% between the pre- and post-project questionnaires. Item eight explores reasoning and evaluation from the skills sphere in Thomas and Lok's (2015) CT attributes model. In the first questionnaire, 56.2% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that students should be able to present and defend their positions in an EAP course. Despite a drop to 47.6% in the post-project survey, the overall agreement—including the somewhat agreed responses—inched up from 87.5% to 88.9%. Item nine examines content-based knowledge, a key component of Thomas and Lok's (2015) theoretical framework. At the study's outset, 26.6% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they could identify knowledge gaps and find information to fill them. This figure rose modestly to 28.5% by the end of the project. However, when including those who somewhat agreed, the overall percentage jumped from 53.2% to 77.7%. This suggests students became more aware of the need to expand their knowledge base to craft an effective sociocultural digital narrative.

Focus group interview responses provided deeper insight into the numerical findings related to the second theme. The majority of the participants (87.5%) reported that sociocultural issues were not addressed in their high school classes, whether in English or Japanese. Akari commented: "*We had to study for our entrance exams, so we didn't talk about social problems. Most Japanese students don't have enough time to consider these problems*." A substantial proportion of the interviewees (87.5%) found the process of creating a sociocultural-themed digital story to be engaging, albeit quite challenging. Yui stated: "*I haven't thought much about social problems before. Making a video was also interesting, but really difficult*." Data from the focus group interviews suggested that the DST initiative contributed to the development of the participants' CT skills. For example, Kaori stated: "*The DST project was great as least for me because I had to read many things before I could make a video. I think it increased my knowledge and helped my problem-solving skills.*" Chie discussed her ability to compare and contrast information: "*We did a lot of research and some of the websites had opinions that contradicted each other. I had to do even more research to figure out what they were trying to say and come to my own conclusion*." Taiki commented: "*I'm not sure if I got a broader or more clear vision, but I could think more critically about things that I watched or read on a website*." Reina noted: "*I was able to deepen my research skills and knowledge of my topic in a more effective way than writing a report*."

After reviewing the data related to the second theme, I concur with the conclusions of previous studies (e.g., Chen & Chuang, 2021; Hung, 2019; Kohnke, 2019; Wu & Chen, 2020; Yang & Wu, 2012), which suggested that a DST approach can foster students' CT skills and expand their awareness of sociocultural issues. Although many participants found CT activities challenging, they also regarded them as a valuable and engaging way to study EAP. This finding is consistent with Lin's (2018) research on CT with Chinese high school students. Several researchers (e.g., Luk & Lin, 2015; Park, 2013) have challenged the deeply entrenched essentialist assumptions that pigeonhole Asian ELLs as passive learners who are either unable or uninterested in thinking critically. My findings also question these stereotypes, as the participants I investigated were critically engaged and found the process of researching and discussing social issues enjoyable. Previous studies (e.g., Akatsuka, 2019; Kusumoto, 2018) conducted in Japan have shown that higher-order thinking initiatives and active learning methods can strengthen ELLs' CT attitudes. The results of the present study are consistent with this body of research, demonstrating that a socially conscious multimodal project can positively influence all three spheres—skills, knowledge, and disposition—outlined in Thomas and Lok's (2015)

CT attributes model. Furthermore, the findings underscore how a PBL-based DST approach can support the development of CT competencies among Japanese university students in an EAP course.

4.1.3. Theme Three: Reactions to Classmates' Digital Stories

This section explores how the video-viewing process influenced participants' understanding and discussion of sociocultural issues. Table 4 presents the numerical data from the third theme.

Table 4: Opinions on my classmates' DST videos: Questionnaire data

10. Watching my classmates' DST projects will make me more aware of global and local sociocultural issues.							
Survey	**SD**	**D**	**SWD**	**SWA**	**A**	**SA**	**NA**
Pre-project	3.1%	1.6%	12.5%	31.3%	25%	26.6%	--------
Post-project	1.6%	1.6%	11.1%	39.7%	23.8%	22.2%	--------
11. Watching DST projects in my EAP class will help students discuss important local and global sociocultural issues.							
Survey	**SD**	**D**	**SWD**	**SWA**	**A**	**SA**	**NA**
Pre-project	1.6%	3.1%	10.9%	31.3%	31.3%	21.9%	--------
Post-project	4.8%	1.6%	11.1%	38.1%	27%	17.5%	--------

Item 10 shows that just over half of participants (51.6%) agreed or strongly agreed in the pre-project questionnaire that watching classmates' digital narratives would raise their awareness of sociocultural issues. While this figure dipped to 46% in the post-project questionnaire, the overall agreement—including the somewhat agreed responses—increased slightly from 82.9% to 85.7%. Item 11 examines how watching digital stories influenced classroom discussions. Although agreement about their anticipated impact declined from 53.2% to 44.5%, 82.6% of participants ultimately reported that viewing their classmates' digital narratives enriched group discussions.

The focus group interviews, open-ended questionnaire responses, and video analysis offer additional context to the numerical data presented in Table 4. For example, Taiki commented: "*Some of the video scripts were too difficult or they were all over the place.*" Similarly, Mari noted: "*There were some parts of the videos we watched that I couldn't catch the words or meanings. The speakers should use easy English and speak more clearly*." While several students considered paraphrasing to be quite difficult, all focus group participants agreed that it was an essential aspect of the DST project. Both the audience and video editors found poor sound quality to be another major source of frustration. Chie, a tech-savvy student, remarked: "*I think some teams didn't use a microphone … some of the voice recordings didn't work out very well*." Miho touched upon her group's sound quality troubles: "*It was difficult to adjust our voices and music, so some parts of the video were too loud or too soft*." Another theme that emerged during the data analysis process was the use of critical visual texts. Sara shared this reflection: "*I think we were able to share many interesting facts about LGBT issues. The script was done early, and we were able to match it with good images. I think our pictures helped them to understand our script*." Similarly, Yui commented: *I thought the pictures of the animals were pitiful. The* [animal testing] *video made me think about the cosmetics that I buy and my dog*." Shiomi noted: "*Using videos and photos has the effect of deepening our understanding of a topic*." Likewise, Mari commented: "*I think the impact of social issues became stronger for me because of the images and videos.*" Taiki also addressed the usage of visuals: "*I think most of the videos were good and helped us learn about social issues. One of the videos I watched—I can't remember which one—had lots of pictures and music but not a lot of words*."

The issues identified by the participants—difficult language, poor sound quality, and an overemphasis on 'digital' elements over the story—were evident during the video analysis process. For example, the whaling team's video script lacked coherence and contained complex vocabulary. This finding aligns with previous studies (e.g., Lee, 2014) that found unfamiliar lexical items frustrate ELLs and hinder their understanding of digital narratives. The digital artifact analysis revealed that some teams used inappropriate images and poor transitions. This was evident in the 'smoking and vaping' digital story. Specifically, five images of young female models glamorizing or sexualizing vaping appeared while the narrator discussed the health risks of e-cigarettes. Other groups had engaging visuals and smooth transitions but lacked informative content. This finding echoed Barber's (2016) belief that students often prioritize the 'digital' over the 'story', and aligned with Kim and Lee's (2017) claim that some ELLs use multimedia features to avoid writing detailed scripts.

Many participants such as Yui and Mari were emotionally moved by their classmates' digital stories. In Yui's case, the video viewing process seems to have fostered her "digital empathy" (Friesem, 2016, as cited in Chen, 2018). Sara's comments suggest that critical visual texts expanded her cultural knowledge, reinforcing the findings of previous studies (e.g., Kiss & Weninger, 2017). These results, along with the multimodal video analysis, align with prior research (e.g., Chen, 2018; Hung, 2019), which suggests that a DST approach enhances ELLs' awareness of sociocultural issues.

4.1.4. Socially Conscious Digital Storytelling: Key Insights and Implications

Thomas and Lok's (2015) CT attributes model includes three interconnected spheres—skills, knowledge, and disposition—which educators and researchers can deploy to gauge the level of higher-order thinking present in a learning activity. An analysis of the data revealed that creating a socially conscious multimodal video positively impacted all three domains within this theoretical framework. The DST creation process and post-video discussion sessions fostered digital empathy among some participants and prompted critical reflection on aspects of their everyday lives, such as plastic consumption and the use of products tested on animals (e.g., cosmetics). In addition, the DST project had a beneficial impact on many students' CT dispositions, specifically their attitudes, intellectual virtues, and habits of mind (Thomas & Lok, 2015). For example, Akari commented during her focus group interview: "*If we think about social problems in English class, we look at other countries and think differently about our own country*." Similarly, Yui stated: "*When I looked at the world's child-rearing policies, I realized that Japan's child-rearing policies were not good. I became more critical making our video*."

DST within the EAP field remains a relatively underexplored research area, particularly in Japan, where many universities do not offer academic English courses (Ruegg & Williams, 2018). Likewise, it is an underutilized pedagogical approach, as many educators are hesitant to integrate socially conscious DST into EAP contexts due to a limited understanding of what multimodal projects entail and the positive learning outcomes they can yield. The practical model highlighted in Figure 2 provides frontline teachers with much-needed clarity and encourages them to integrate digital narratives into their classes. Table 5 outlines 10 recommendations designed to make the DST experience more fruitful for both educators and students in EAP courses. These suggestions are drawn from over a decade of experience using multimodal video projects across a wide range of instructional settings, as well as from various challenges I have encountered along the way.

Table 5: Digital Storytelling in a Higher Education EAP Course: Recommendations

Recommendations:
1. Don't put the technology before the pedagogy.
2. Embrace the 'controlled chaos' that an active learning DST project can create.
3. Be flexible and adaptable.
4. Provide ongoing feedback.
5. Implement a peer-evaluation component to reduce incidents of social loafing, free riding, and procrastination.
6. Highlight exemplary student work (e.g., videos, scripts) and grading rubrics (e.g., instructor, peer-evaluation) at the beginning of the DST project.
7. Establish mini-workshops or peer tutorials (e.g., video editing software) led by tech savvy students.
8. Allocate time for in-class groups meetings and avoid setting tight deadlines.
9. Advise students that ICT challenges are common in DST projects, and they can learn valuable lessons from both missteps and successes.
10. Host a class 'film festival' to share and celebrate students' multimodal video creations.

5. Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the impact of integrating a socially conscious multimodal video project into a first-year EAP course at a Japanese university. The findings indicate that the participants developed greater awareness of both local and global sociocultural issues. Moreover, the ELLs' CT attributes (i.e., skills, knowledge, disposition), as outlined in Thomas and Lok's (2015) model, were strengthened through both the video-making process and the viewing of their classmates' digital narratives. While many participants found higher-order thinking activities difficult, they still regarded them as an engaging and worthwhile way to study academic English. These days, higher education ELLs need the ability to think critically, along with critical visual literacy skills, to combat the constant influx of online misinformation and adapt to the challenges of the generative AI era (Orhan, 2023; Romero & Bobkina, 2021).

Despite its potential, DST remains a largely overlooked pedagogical strategy in the EAP realm. This study provides higher education instructors with a practical framework (see Figure 2) and 10 recommendations (see Table 5) for integrating a sociocultural-themed multimodal video project into a fast-paced, content-focused academic English course. A typical DST project involves

numerous moving parts, including ICT challenges, digital divide concerns, disengaged students (e.g., social loafers, free riders), intragroup tensions, and demanding curricular objectives. All of these elements require careful consideration from EIL educators. Therefore, it is essential that teachers engage in ongoing critical self-reflection and be attuned to the dynamics of each class, enabling them to make timely adjustments if a DST initiative begins to veer off course. Finally, educators must avoid falling into the trap of technological determinism by remaining realistic, flexible, and patient when integrating new technology-enhanced learning activities into an EAP environment.

5.1. Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this qualitative study. First, the research offers only a snapshot in time, as it took place over a five-week period during the 2019-2020 academic year. A total of eight 90-minute classes were dedicated to the multimodal video project discussed in this paper. Thus, it would be naïve and disingenuous to claim that a short-term, sociocultural-themed DST assignment had a dramatic impact on the lives of the participants. However, I believe the initiative has "transformative potential," a concept described by Jemal (2017) as "levels of consciousness and action that produce potential for change at one or more socio-ecosystem (e.g., individual, institutional) levels" (p. 603). The second limitation pertains to demographics. This single-case descriptive study involved 75% female participants and was conducted at a private university, where students' socioeconomic status may differ significantly from that of their peers at public institutions. Future research on DST in higher education EAP environments should aim for a better gender balance and include participants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Lastly, conducting research with my own students raised concerns about personal bias (Burns, 2005) and power dynamics (Cresswell, 2014). I adhered to established ethical research practices to mitigate these potential pitfalls.

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Video Analysis Rubric: Digital storytelling in a Japanese University Academic English Course

Students' names: _____, _____, _____, & _____

DST Project Title: _____

Sociocultural issue(s): _____ ( ) - Local ( ) - Global ( ) - Both

Length of video: _____ **Script: Number of words** _____

Total number of 'critical' visuals (i.e., images, video clips, graphs, infographics)**:** _____

Item	#1 - Incomplete	#2 - Partially Proficient	#3 - Proficient	#4 - Exemplary
1. Critical analysis and evaluation / Skills-based performance (examines sociocultural issue with a clear awareness; considers multiple elements & diverse perspectives; incorporates personal/relevant examples to draw conclusions; self-questions; manages biases)				
2. Information / Knowledge-based performance (gathers sufficient, relevant, & credible information from reputable sources; includes oppositional information & inferences; avoids assumptions; systematic thinking; ensures validity of conclusion)				
3. Problem Identification / Disposition (clearly identifies and summarizes problem; discusses possible solutions — practical/innovative ways to deal with problem; open-minded; seeks truth; inquisitive)				
4. Implications & Consequences (identifies the most significant implications & consequences; differentiates between probable and improbable outcomes)				
5. Post-viewing discussion questions (critical ideas generated; formulates appropriate questions; level of audience participation & engagement)				

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6. Script / Storyboard - (storyboard highlights each scene; transitions, special effects, images, video clips; narration; thumbnail sketches used to organize DTS project)				
7. Images / Video clips / Graphs / Infographics (visual stimuli - audience engagement; supports position; originality; generates critical ideas)				
8. Digital Video Quality - (DST video had required elements; video was well edited; moves smoothly from scene to scene; appropriate visuals, video clips, & special effects; narration - easy to understand; appropriate volume)				
9. Collaborative Learning - (evidence of teamwork during presentation; all students contributed to the post-video discussion; group members showed respect to one another; evidence that everyone contributed to digital video)				
10. Relevance / Student Learning - (students use critical thinking skills to curate content, meaningful content, demonstrate ability to select, organize, and present content)				
Total Score:				

Comments: