

Article

## Digital Storytelling in English-Medium Undergraduate History Teaching: A Case Study from China

Felix Goodbody  
Shanghai International Studies University, China  
(Email: felix.goodbody@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

Digital storytelling (DST) has been widely used in second language (L2) education, but its application in English Medium Instruction (EMI) courses taught at the university level remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative case study of a DST task in an EMI undergraduate history course at a Chinese university. The dataset consists of 51 student-produced short-form videos, supported by instructor observations and student feedback. The analysis shows that genre familiarity, scaffolded guidance, and collaborative production helped students engage with historical content and develop multimodal and linguistic skills. At the same time, students faced challenges in balancing linguistic accuracy with narrative pacing, sourcing appropriate materials, and maintaining academic rigour within the short-video format. The study contributes to the literature on DST in EMI settings by illustrating how video-based assignments can support the integration of disciplinary learning, L2 expression, and digital literacy, and by identifying considerations for effective task design.

### Keywords

EMI, digital storytelling, video assessment, China, higher education

### Introduction

In the era of pervasive digital media, short-form video has become a dominant mode of expression and communication, particularly among university students in China. Online video platforms such as Bilibili (a popular Chinese site analogous to YouTube), Douyin (the domestic Chinese version of TikTok), and Xiaohongshu (a Chinese image and video sharing social network comparable to Instagram) have not only shaped how university students access and engage with information but also how they construct their social and intellectual identity, present their daily life, and build communities (Su, 2023). Across higher education, video resources are now commonplace in lectures and seminars, and a growing body of scholarship has explored the pedagogical value of student-created video tasks for learners working in their second language (L2) (Bahrani et al., 2014; Bobkina & Dom ínguez Romero, 2020; Bobkina et al., 2020; Robin, 2008). For many Chinese undergraduates, digital storytelling (DST) is not an unfamiliar skill but a socially embedded practice that offers a meaningful creative outlet connected with their everyday communicative practices. Against this backdrop, conventional learning tasks such as written assignments, presentations, and class projects in L2 can appear disconnected from students' most commonly used modes of accessing information and communicating ideas.

This paper presents a case study of a digital storytelling task implemented in an English Medium Instruction (EMI) undergraduate history course at an international department of a Chinese university. Working in small groups, students created short video biographies of notable figures from European history, modelled on the “MiniBIO” video series popular on Bilibili (Angel, 2025). The task was introduced in recognition of students’ stated enthusiasm for video content used in lectures and shared on message boards, which included excerpts from documentaries, historical films, and television. Alongside reinforcing historical content knowledge, the task aimed to encourage English-language production, digital literacy, and boost students’ confidence by working in a culturally familiar video format (Kuppens, 2010; Robin, 2008; Yu & Zadorozhnyy, 2021).

The context for this study enables the exploration of several important dimensions of EMI teaching and learning in international higher education. First, the student cohort consisted of accounting and finance majors whose prior academic training was oriented towards quantitative disciplines, with limited exposure to the social sciences; the history course therefore represented a markedly new area of academic engagement. Second, the cohort had minimal experience studying subject-specific content (rather than language-focused modules) in English, making the dual challenge of content learning and L2 production especially salient. Finally, EMI humanities courses within this programme are intended to introduce students to international higher education pedagogies and prepare them for future study overseas, creating an institutional emphasis on transferable academic skills. These conditions make the cohort a productive and analytically meaningful case through which to examine how DST can support disciplinary engagement, language use, and academic competence.

This study examines the decisions students made around subject choice, the style of digital storytelling they developed, and the pedagogical implications of those choices as they relate to EMI higher education pedagogy. The analysis draws primarily on the corpus of student-produced videos, supplemented by the instructor’s observations, and informal feedback and reflections after the completion of the task. This case study seeks to expand upon the existing DST literature rooted in language learning contexts, with less attention currently paid to its application in EMI disciplinary courses, particularly in the humanities. Disciplinary courses delivered in L2 present a dual challenge for learners, who must develop specific subject knowledge while managing the demands of attending classes and lectures, participating in activities, and completing assignments in their L2. By analysing how students engaged with and adapted to a DST task in a history course, this study offers insights into how multimodal, genre-based assignments can support both disciplinary learning and L2 production in the EMI higher education setting.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **DST and video use in EMI**

EMI refers to the delivery of academic content across a range of subjects and disciplines in English to students who are not native speakers (Schmidt-Unterbeger, 2018). EMI is widespread in higher education worldwide, including in China, and presents both pedagogical opportunities and challenges (Hu & Lei, 2014; Hu, 2019). Students enrolled in EMI university courses must navigate the demands of complex disciplinary content while also engaging with the linguistic and stylistic expectations of academic English, often without explicit language support (Bobkina et al., 2020; Engin, 2014). Students are generally required to have achieved a predetermined level of English proficiency in order to be admitted to such courses and programmes. Prior exposure to both disciplinary content and extended teaching sessions in English, especially delivered by native speakers, can nonetheless vary substantially among

student cohorts. These demands encourage the integration of tasks that support language development alongside purely disciplinary instruction through pedagogies that make allowances for linguistic obstacles and a lack of student confidence in L2 (Akdeniz, 2017; Hafour, 2022).

DST describes the creation of short, multimodal narratives combining audio, visual, and textual elements in order to meet the requirements of a task or as part of an assessment. DST has been widely used in L2 teaching, but there is comparatively little scholarship on its use in EMI disciplinary courses, particularly in the humanities (Robin, 2008; Yang & Wu, 2012). In EMI contexts, DST has the potential to address several intersecting goals: reinforcing subject knowledge, promoting English language production, and fostering digital and media literacy (Tukan, 2024; Yu & Zadorozhnyy, 2021). This approach aligns with constructivist learning principles that seek to provide students with the opportunity to work in a familiar medium and apply learning concepts through authentic creative tasks (Beetham, 2013; Kearney & Schuck, 2006).

Student-created video tasks allow for self-paced rehearsal, scripting, and editing, which can support students with varying levels of linguistic proficiency within a class (Bobkina et al., 2025; Cox et al., 2010). This aligns with flipped classroom principles, where content delivery or preparatory work occurs outside scheduled contact periods to free in-class time for higher-order tasks and the introduction and discussion of course content (Engin, 2014). In addition, their multimodality means DST tasks may be less susceptible to certain forms of academic misconduct linked to generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly when spontaneity, personalisation, and live performance are embedded in their design and delivery (Evangelista, 2025; Zimotti et al., 2024). Nevertheless, ethical boundaries can be unclear, with students uncertain about the acceptability of AI support during scriptwriting and editing (Lund et al., 2025; Tukan, 2024).

### **Student-created video and DST in L2 higher education**

The wider body of research on DST and student-created video in L2 contexts offers valuable insights into how these tasks can be implemented in EMI disciplinary courses. Video production shifts students from passive consumers to active producers of media, increasing personal investment and ownership over their learning (Alpay & Gulati, 2010; Argudo-Serrano et al., 2024; Beetham, 2013). Kearney and Schuck (2006) note that such tasks situate learners in authentic communicative modes, while Davies et al. (2017) and Hawley and Allen (2018) highlight their potential to enhance collaboration, creativity, and multimodal competence. In the context of L2 education, DST can also lead to measurable gains in language proficiency, with Yang and Wu (2012) finding statistically significant improvements in speaking fluency, critical thinking, and motivation. Video tasks have been found to encourage the development of multimodal, cognitive, and technical skills, while supporting synthesis of complex content knowledge and its repackaging in a form that can boost student engagement compared to traditional written assignments (Greene and Crespi, 2012; Robin, 2008; Walters et al., 2015). Studies also emphasise DST's motivational and affective benefits, with increased confidence and agency when students are free to choose topics and formats for their work (Alpay & Gulati, 2010; Ryan, 2013; Tukan, 2024).

Successful implementation of DST tasks depends on robust scaffolding. Without clear guidance, students can struggle with genre expectations or feel overwhelmed by workload and technical demands (Davies, 2010; Reeves et al., 2017). Multimedia learning principles caution against positioning students solely as passive viewers, instead encouraging active engagement

through production or critical response (Martin, 2008; Mayer, 2024). In L2 contexts, tools such as subtitles, glossed captions, and carefully designed visual supports can boost vocabulary acquisition and comprehension when viewing video, and students are encouraged to redeploy these aids in their own creative work (Bahrani et al., 2014; Chen, 2023; Karami, 2019; Yawiloeng, 2020). Studies show that DST can also enhance cultural competence and intercultural awareness, key aims in many EMI programmes (Green, 2013; Guenier, 2023; Hafner & Miller, 2011).

The impact of AI on DST is an important emerging theme in academic discussions, Zimotti et al. (2024) and Evangelista (2025) suggest that creative multimodal tasks may be more resistant to wholesale AI substitution, however Lund et al. (2025) and Tukan (2024) point to blurred authorship boundaries when AI is used for planning or editing. As with other forms of assessment, transparent rubrics present opportunities for peer feedback, and flexibility to accommodate different creative approaches are critical to maintaining both academic integrity and student engagement (Kay, 2012; Orús et al., 2016; Stanley & Zhang, 2018).

### **Digital storytelling for history education**

Research on the use of video in history education emphasises its ability to merge affective engagement with disciplinary thinking. Undergraduate-level historical study requires students to identify and criticise historical sources, analyse and interpret conflicting perspectives, and develop new interpretations supported by robust evidence— skills that can be refined and demonstrated through the use of multimedia materials (Cutajar, 2018; Donnelly, 2013; Jones, 2012). Jones (2012) found that students' cognitive and motivational engagement peaked when they were emotionally invested in historical subjects, while Donnelly (2013) and Cutajar (2018) noted that multimodal learning materials enhance students' ability to recall key information.

In spite of these purported benefits, student-created video tasks do not necessarily guarantee critical engagement. Barsch (2020) found that students who had created DST videos often evaluated historical content on aesthetic rather than evidentiary grounds, underscoring the need for guided reflection, peer critique, and explicit criteria for judging scholarly merit. Without this scaffolding, there is a risk that visually polished projects remain academically superficial. The creation of academically rigorous but creative video outputs in L2 requires students to simultaneously manage disciplinary content, linguistic demands, and technical production in their work. Chetty and Pallitt (2013) note that well-planned video projects can blur the boundaries between academic and creative work, making them powerful tools for learner expression, but only when rigorously aligned with intended learning outcomes.

The existing academic literature demonstrates that digital storytelling tasks can enhance students' linguistic output, motivation, multimodal competence, and learner autonomy (Davies et al., 2017; Hawley & Allen, 2018). In international and L2 learning contexts, DST has also been shown to support vocabulary development, speaking fluency, and learners' confidence in production-based tasks (Kuppens, 2010; Robin, 2008; Yu & Zadorozhnyy, 2021). However, the implementation of DST within English-taught international higher education programmes, particularly in settings where students must also engage with new disciplinary content, remains underexplored. Analysis of this area provides important insights into how university students, either enrolled in domestic courses taught in L2 or studying abroad, respond to multimodal tasks that require the deployment of both linguistic and disciplinary skills. International student mobility, technological literacy and the growing use of AI in higher education pedagogy further emphasise the need to understand how students engage with digital tools to support intellectual expression. To address this gap, the present study examines how Chinese undergraduates in an

EMI history course approached the design and production of short-form historical biography videos. The study seeks to identify both the pedagogical opportunities and the challenges that emerge when DST is used as a multimodal, production-focused assignment in an L2 humanities context.

The research was guided by the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do students interpret and respond to a digital storytelling task in an EMI history course, and what narrative, linguistic, and multimodal strategies do they employ?

RQ 2: What pedagogical opportunities and challenges emerge in relation to disciplinary learning, L2 production, and transferable academic skills when students create short-form videos?

## **Methodology**

### **Research context and participants**

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the design, implementation, and pedagogical outcomes of a DST task completed on an EMI history course. The case study centres on an international department of a Chinese university offering degree programmes taught in English, and investigates how students approached and executed a short-form historical biography video project. This task was conducted as part of a compulsory second-year undergraduate course on European history, delivered over a 16-week semester to Chinese undergraduates majoring in accounting and finance. All students in the programme were required to take this course as part of a wider interdisciplinary curriculum taught entirely in English and aimed at equipping them with foundational skills to support their learning if they chose to continue their studies in an English-speaking country. Most students entered the programme with an IELTS-equivalent proficiency of between 5.5 and 6.0, and had received extremely limited, if any, formal history education in English prior to enrolment. The assignment was implemented in two consecutive iterations of the course across two 16-week academic semesters, with a cohort totalling 186 students. The DST task was introduced early in the semester (Weeks 4–5) to allow time for research, planning, and production, and the final outputs were submitted in Week 13.

The central dataset comprises 51 student-created historical biography videos. Each 5–7-minute video profiled a notable figure from European history, combining English narration with sourced, adapted, or original visual and audio materials. These videos serve as the primary evidence for analysing how students interpreted the task brief, applied narrative and stylistic conventions, balanced historical accuracy with creative presentation, and navigated the linguistic demands of spoken English presentation. Because the assignment was implemented in two consecutive cohorts, the case study also includes a comparative dimension, noting where changes in scaffolding or instructions between the first and second iterations influenced student approaches and outputs.

### **Task design**

The DST task was modelled on short-form historical biography videos popular on Bilibili, a Chinese video-sharing platform analogous to YouTube. Many students in the programme were already familiar with such content as viewers, and the genre was chosen precisely for its stylistic familiarity and accessibility. Videos from the “MiniBIO” series had been used in lectures and circulated with students to provide background information on key figures encountered in the course, chosen primarily for their brevity, the availability of English subtitles, and the large content library available. Students were tasked with creating a 5–7-minute video in English profiling a figure from European history. The design of the task

combined clear thematic parameters with a high degree of autonomy in various areas. The design of the task drew on established research highlighting the benefits of DST for language development, motivation, and multimodal literacy (Robin, 2008; Yang & Wu, 2012; Yu & Zadorozhnyy, 2021). At the same time, the brief aimed to enable flexibility in creative choices, enabling students to draw on their individual and collective strengths, whether in research, writing, design, or technical editing.

The task brief (see Appendix) provided a scaffolded structure for content development, prompting students to address three core areas: the background of the figure, the key events of their life, and their historical legacy and impact. These three elements mapped loosely onto the course's own historiographical emphasis on the social, political, and cultural dimensions of European history. A set of exemplar videos was shared to give students a sense of genre conventions and stylistic possibilities. The structure and delivery of the assignment evolved slightly across two cohorts, informed by reflective observations during and after the first semester. While the initial iteration left more room for interpretation, the second included slightly more detailed scaffolding in response to student uncertainty, particularly around group logistics and narrative structuring (delivered in the form of an information-sharing and question and answer period during a scheduled lecture). The DST task was positioned as a distillation of the course's broader pedagogical aims of nurturing students' interest in the subject, taking ownership of their own historical interpretations, and practising L2 expression through an up to date and culturally relevant medium.

### **Data collection and analysis**

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive case study design to examine a contemporary pedagogical practice within its authentic instructional context. This approach enables a situated understanding of how a specific cohort of students responded to a multimodal assignment embedded within their EMI curriculum. The sampling strategy was necessarily bounded by the institutional setting: the 51 student-created videos constitute the complete dataset produced across two iterations of the course and therefore represent a full population sample. Treating these videos as the primary dataset allowed for an in-depth examination of how students navigated disciplinary, linguistic, and multimodal demands.

Analysis of students' submissions followed a structured process. The student-produced videos were viewed multiple times to gain an overall sense of students' narrative and stylistic approaches. A preliminary coding frame was then developed inductively, drawing on recurrent features observed across the dataset (including presentation style, visual composition, subtitling practices, linguistic features, and multimodal integration). This coding frame was refined as the entire corpus of student videos became available after the conclusion of the course. These codes were then applied systematically across the corpus to identify patterns within and across cohorts. Instructor notes taken during the project and informal student comments gathered after presentations were reviewed alongside the video data to support interpretation, though they were not analysed as a separate data source.

### **Dataset robustness and ethical considerations**

The study draws on 51 submissions from 186 students, a nonprobability convenience sample that enables a level of analysis and inferences to be made with regard to the specific context of Chinese university students enrolled on international programs (Davis, 2015). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the dataset and repeated viewings of all videos, while dependability was supported by refining coding design and allocation during the review process. Confirmability was addressed by explicitly acknowledging the dual role of the

researcher as instructor and analyst and grounding all interpretations in observable, verifiable features of the videos (rather than subjective criteria). While triangulation was necessarily limited, the use of instructor observational notes and provided contextual insight that supported the interpretation of the primary dataset gathered over a period of one academic year. These measures were implemented to avoid coding based on purely aesthetic judgements of students' work and to mitigate potential bias arising from instructor proximity.

The study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethics guidelines governing pedagogical evaluation and analysis of student work. The corpus of student-created videos was generated as part of assessed coursework and contained no personal or identifying information. In line with the university's research ethics policy, this form of analysis was classified as exempt from formal institutional ethical review, and individual student consent was not required.

## Results

### Findings related to RQ1: How students interpreted and implemented the DST task

This task resulted in a corpus of 51 student-produced video biographies submitted as midterm assessments in two iterations of the undergraduate history course by a total of 186 students. Table 1 lists the chosen historical subjects for the videos and their frequency across both cohorts.

Table 1  
*Students' Video Biography Subjects (Both Cohorts)*

Subject	Frequency
Napoleon	15
Leonardo Da Vinci	6
Galileo Galilei	4
Louis XVI	4
Otto von Bismarck	3
Catherine the Great	3
Elizabeth I	2
Louis XIV	2
Martin Luther	2
Karl Marx	2
Caesar Augustus	1
Henry VIII	1
Isaac Newton	1
Joan of Arc	1
Mary Tudor	1
Oliver Cromwell	1
Vincent Van Gogh	1
Queen Victoria	1

Subject selection reveals a significant clustering around certain figures from European history, particularly Napoleon. This dominance likely reflects his visibility in textbook narratives and online educational media, as well as his recognisable visual and cultural presence. Other high-frequency subjects, including Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo Galilei and Louis XIV, likewise

suggest a preference for figures who are clearly recognisable, narratively dramatic, and easily researched online. Groups chose other figures introduced in less depth as part of various lecture topics during the course, including Martin Luther and Catherine the Great, suggesting individual or group-driven curiosity about these characters. The life and work of Karl Marx is widely studied in Chinese schools and universities, with this familiarity potentially informing students' choice of this subject. Notably, all of the eight videos that focused on female subjects (Catherine the Great, Elizabeth I, Joan of Arc, Mary Tudor and Queen Victoria) were submitted by all-female student groups. While the sample size is limited, this pattern suggests a degree of gendered identification in the selection of subjects. Female students may have been drawn to figures they found easier to identify with or had a deeper interest in, despite the often male-dominated historiography and focus of an undergraduate history survey course (Allardyce, 1982).

In terms of video format and presentation, submissions fell into two broad stylistic categories (see Table 2). The first resembled PowerPoint-style presentations, combining narrated slides with static images and figures. These videos typically followed a chronological biographical structure and a clear delineation of speaker turns, with each group member covering one thematic focus or life phase of the subject under discussion. Although straightforward and easy to produce, this style sometimes led to overly scripted or monotonous delivery, especially where students read from the *slides* on screen. The second style can be described as *video collage*, accompanied by a student-voiced voiceover track and incorporating background music, stock footage, historical imagery, or hand-drawn elements. These videos displayed a higher level of aesthetic attention and multimodal layering. However, in some cases these stylistic choices actually obscured clear presentation or even the intelligibility of spoken content.

Table 2  
*Student-created Videos by Type*

	PPT-style	Video Collage-style	Total
Cohort 1	13 (38%)	21 (62%)	34
Cohort 2	3 (18%)	14 (82%)	17
Cumulative	16 (31%)	35 (69%)	51

### **Findings related to RQ2: Pedagogical benefits and challenges**

Analysis of video production styles across the two cohorts reveals a notable evolution in students response to the task, particularly in terms of format and multimodal complexity. As shown in Table 2, PowerPoint-style presentations were much more common in Cohort 1 (13 out of 34 submissions, or 38%), and declined substantially in Cohort 2, where only 3 of 17 groups (18%) chose this video style. Consequently the *video collage* format, incorporating more complex production with edited footage, music, transitions, or intercut narration, was much more popular for Cohort 2. This shift suggests that students in Cohort 2 were both more confident in their use of video editing tools and more responsive to the creative affordances of the task. The increased prevalence of collage-style videos may also reflect improvements in task framing, especially as exemplar videos from Cohort 1 were shown and discussed during a lecture period. While some students may have had prior video-editing experience, the popularity of the *video collage* format across both cohorts points to a degree of confidence with genre conventions and a clear understanding of the performative and interpretive potential of the task.

Extensive use of English subtitles (see Table 3) was reflective of the ubiquity of subtitles in Chinese videos. Native-language video content in China commonly features subtitles (in Chinese) to support clarity and understanding for viewers across such a large population with diverse accents and dialects (Lu, 2007). In Cohort 1, 62% of groups added subtitles to their videos, often in English and occasionally in both English and Chinese. In Cohort 2, this figure rose to 71%. The increased use of subtitles appears to reflect an emerging awareness of the importance of accessibility and multimodal communication, especially for the DST output framed around an audience of Chinese users of Bilibili or a similar online video platform. Subtitling also served as a form of language support: students used captions to bolster clarity, compensate for pronunciation issues, and demonstrate written accuracy in ways that complemented spoken delivery.

Table 3  
*Use of Subtitles in Student-created Videos*

	Subtitles	No Subtitles	Total
Cohort 1	21 (62%)	13 (38%)	34
Cohort 2	12 (71%)	5 (29%)	17
Cumulative	33 (65%)	18 (35%)	51

### Discussion

Analysis of the 51 student-produced videos reveals how students employed a range of narrative, linguistic, and multimodal strategies to respond to the digital storytelling task. Several recurrent challenges also emerged from the exercise that indicate areas where the task was not adequately scaffolded, or students misinterpreted the objectives of the activity. While the outputs are the central data source, interpretation of these patterns is informed by contextual observations during classroom sessions and informal student feedback gathered during and after the project.

A notable success was the high level of creative investment students demonstrated in developing their short videos. Many groups made deliberate choices in pacing, tone, and visual style that mirrored the source genre while aligning with the course's pedagogical aims. Familiarity with the short-video format appeared to offset any initial apprehensions about a non-written task and encouraged experimentation with humour, dramatic narration, and thematic framing. Informal student comments suggested that this alignment with their frequent viewing of short-video content boosted both enjoyment and confidence in L2, an outcome consistent with earlier studies linking DST to learner motivation and ownership of outputs (Robin, 2008; Yu & Zadorozhnyy, 2021).

The videos also highlighted the variation in how groups balanced academic rigour with engaging delivery. Stronger videos integrated well-researched historical detail with coherent creative choices, while weaker ones sometimes prioritised visual effects or entertainment value at the expense of analytical depth. This pattern was particularly evident in the first cohort, where the lack of examples from peers potentially led some groups to misdirect their efforts in a purely descriptive biographical mode without engaging more critically with the content they presented. Adjustments in the second cohort, particularly clearer guidance and examples from other students, appeared to mitigate this issue, illustrating the value of iterative design, scaffolding and the provision of clear examples at the briefing stage (Reeves et al., 2017).

As expected, given the range in students' English proficiency, the videos reflected a spectrum of L2 competency. Some groups employed complex rhetorical techniques and precise historical

terminology, while others relied on simpler syntax or direct translation from Chinese sources. Subtitles, required in all projects, were a key example of varying linguistic confidence between groups: in stronger projects, they provided accurate, polished support for spoken narration; in weaker ones, they contained errors or inconsistencies that sometimes undermined clarity. Observational notes indicate that students frequently used subtitles as a linguistic safety net, enabling more ambitious spoken delivery while ensuring comprehensibility for peers.

From the instructor's perspective, the DST task demanded sustained guidance around the need to balance creative freedom with academic standards. Ambiguities in the task brief, especially regarding narrative structure and the importance of students' perspectives and interpretations, was addressed in the second iteration through the sharing of exemplary work from peers. This mirrors broader findings in the literature that DST in higher education benefits from clear scaffolding and relatable examples that do not intrude upon student agency (Cox et al., 2010; Davies, 2010).

Several challenges emerged that are particular to the EMI setting. First, limited prior exposure to academic history in English meant that many students approached research primarily through Chinese-language sources, translating content into English for their videos. While this strategy allowed them to access a broader base of information, it also introduced translation inaccuracies or stylistic inconsistencies. Second, despite the ubiquity of Chinese students engaging with short videos as viewers, several students were less confident as producers of such content. Technical obstacles, ranging from unfamiliarity with editing software to difficulty matching video, spoken audio tracks, and audiovisual clips imposed limits on some students. Although most groups overcame these through peer support or instructor guidance, they underscore the potential need for pre-task training in both research and production skills.

Perhaps the most unexpected challenge arose from the use of AI-generated scripts, which became increasingly evident in submissions from Cohort 2 (submitted in spring 2025, following the release and popularisation of Chinese generative AI platform DeepSeek in January 2025). Given the rise of accessible generative tools such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek, and the increasing sophistication of AI-produced text, it is likely that some student groups relied on such tools to draft or refine their scripts. While the use of generative AI was not explicitly prohibited in the assignment brief, its exploitative use to avoid genuine engagement with the task raises questions around originality, attribution, and the limitations of such assessments.

The findings respond directly to the two research questions posed in this study. In relation to RQ1, the analysis shows that students interpreted the digital storytelling task through a combination of familiar digital practices and emergent genre awareness. Their choices of narrative structure, multimodal layering, and linguistic strategies reflected both their prior exposure to short-form online video and their developing understanding of historical representation in an academic context. Addressing RQ2, the results demonstrate that DST afforded several pedagogical benefits, including student engagement, opportunities for L2 production, and the chance to practise multimodal composition. The task also revealed challenges around content accuracy, collaboration, and use of digital resources. These findings underscore the specific complexities that arise when students must acquire disciplinary knowledge and produce academic work in L2.

### **Pedagogical implications**

Three recommendations emerge from this case study. First, task expectations should be made explicit and collaboratively explored at the introduction phase. In this study, some students equated visual polish with historical or analytical quality, while others prioritised factual accuracy at the expense of narrative coherence. Clearly communicating expectations and grading criteria, presenting and analysing exemplar videos, and encouraging peer review all help clarify students' understanding of the disciplinary and creative aims of such tasks (Reeves et al., 2017; Walters et al., 2015). Second, the growing influence of generative AI in scripting, narration, and subtitling warrants proactive discussion with students. While such tools undoubtedly boost students' confidence, they also risk obscuring authorship and narrowing the scope for authentic demonstration of linguistic and academic progress (Lund et al., 2025; Tukan, 2024). Clear guidelines for AI usage, combined with strategies such as reflective annotations or oral defences, can promote both transparency and ethical engagement. Third, task design in EMI settings should make the distinction between disciplinary and language learning outcomes explicit. In this case, historical interpretation and clarity of English presentation were weighted equally, yet some students felt uncertain about how their performance in each area would contribute to their overall grade. Future designs could embed more explicit targets for both disciplinary content and language, enabling more specific feedback (Hafner & Miller, 2011; Kay, 2012).

### **Limitations**

As with all single-site case studies, there are limitations to this analysis. The evidence derives from two cohorts in the same programme, restricting the generalisability of the findings to other disciplinary, institutional, or cultural contexts. However, the broader design principles underpinning the task are adaptable to a variety of settings. Educators in different contexts may need to modify exemplars, scaffolding, or platform choices, but the pedagogical rationale for DST remains widely applicable. While instructor observations and informal student feedback informed interpretation, the study did not draw on systematically collected interview or survey data, insights that further studies might benefit from. Moreover, the dual role of the researcher as both task designer and evaluator necessarily shaped the implementation and interpretation of the project. While positionality was explicitly acknowledged, this overlap brings a risk of interpretive bias. Finally, because the institutional and ethical frameworks for AI use were still developing at the time, student engagement with these tools was neither systematically documented nor tightly regulated. This is likely to evolve into an area of increasing importance for future research.

Despite these constraints, the study makes two contributions to the literature. First, it extends discussion of DST into EMI higher-education contexts beyond language-focused courses, illustrating how video projects can bridge disciplinary learning with multimodal communicative practice. Second, it offers a situated account of design and implementation choices that can inform colleagues seeking to embed similar projects in their courses. The emphasis on analysing student-produced videos as primary data provides a concrete basis for understanding how learners interpret and complete multimodal tasks under specific institutional and linguistic conditions. Future research might adopt a mixed-methods design to pair analysis of a student-generated corpus of work with systematically gathered student perspectives, enabling a richer account of perceived learning gains, challenges, and the role of AI tools. Comparative studies across disciplines, institutions, and levels of English proficiency could also illuminate how DST functions under different EMI configurations.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to ongoing debates around digital storytelling, multimodal assignments, and EMI pedagogy in two main ways. First, it builds upon contributions by Robin (2008), Yang and Wu (2012), Yu and Zadorozhnyy (2021), and others by examining students' approaches to such tasks within an EMI university course. While existing research has highlighted DST's motivational and linguistic benefits, empirical evidence of how students negotiate disciplinary content, L2 production, and multimodal design remains limited (Yang & Wu, 2012). Second, the study responds to issues raised by Donnelly (2013), Cutajar (2018), and Barsch (2020) regarding students' critical engagement with multimodal historical sources, with student-created video tasks emerging as a promising pedagogical tool.

This case study has examined the design, implementation, and outcomes of a digital storytelling task embedded in an EMI history course delivered to Chinese undergraduates. The findings affirm existing research showing that student-created video projects can foster engagement, agency, and motivation when situated within a constructivist, authentic learning framework (Green, 2013; Kearney & Schuck, 2006; Yang & Wu, 2012). At the same time, they highlight the design, delivery, and evaluation challenges that arise when such tasks are introduced into multilingual, subject-specific contexts. This contributes to the underexplored area of DST in international higher education by providing empirical evidence of how students with limited disciplinary background and intermediate English proficiency engaged with a multimodal, production-focused assignment. By addressing the identified research gap, the findings show that DST can promote disciplinary engagement, support L2 output, and foster digital literacy, while also revealing the scaffolding and design considerations necessary for its successful implementation.

## Statement on use of generative AI


A generative AI model (ChatGPT) was used to edit the manuscript for language refinement and to improve readability.

## Appendix

### Assessment Instructions

Midterm Assessment: Presentation



#### Instructions

- In **groups of 4 (four, 四)** students
- Choose a **person** from the period discussed in the course so far (e.g. Queen Elizabeth I)
- **Check with**  that you chose a suitable person
- Prepare and record a short presentation (**no more than five minutes**) about this person



#### Your Presentation

- The title of your presentation will be...
- The **historical significance** of... [name, e.g. Queen Elizabeth I]*
- Your presentation should include the following areas
  - The **background of the person** (when and where were they born, what was society like at this time in this country?)
  - The **main events in their life** (did they rule a country, publish a book, make a discovery, paint a picture etc.)
  - What is their **legacy on the world?** (Did they change the map, the economy, knowledge, art etc.)

## Rules

- Each member of the group must **speak for at least one minute**
- Please use your video editing skills to include pictures, video (you can do a 'voice over' etc.)
- If you have any questions, you can ask  
- When you have recorded your presentation, **send it to the class monitor**

## Advice

- Choose a historical person that you are **interested in!**
- You are being judged on your ability to discuss this person's **historical significance**
- You are **not** being judged on your video editing skills
- If you have any questions, just ask  
- Good luck!

## FAQs

Does everyone have to speak? **Yes**

Can I choose a Chinese subject? **No – it must be from our course**

How long should the presentation be? **Between 4 and 5 minutes**

Are we graded individually or as a group? **Individually**

Can I speak in Chinese? **No – English please**

What can I do if I don't understand something? Ask  

## Inspiration

Elizabeth 1 [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1S64y1F7zR/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.337.search-card.all.click](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1S64y1F7zR/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click)

Galileo [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Tx411f78W/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.999.0.0](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Tx411f78W/?spm_id_from=333.999.0.0)

## Da Vinci

[https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ma4y1E7zy/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.788.recommend\\_more\\_video.3](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ma4y1E7zy/?spm_id_from=333.788.recommend_more_video.3)

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**Felix Goodbody** teaches Western culture and EAP at Shanghai International Studies University. He received his doctorate in history from the University of Liverpool, UK (2020) and his master's degree in history from the University of Manchester, UK (2016). His current research interests include the history of Sino-foreign cooperation in medicine and education, the sociology and practice of international higher education in China.