Co-creating stories with generative AI

Reflections from undergraduate students of a storytelling service-learning subject in Hong Kong

Lok Ming Eric Cheung and Huiwen Shi
College of Professional and Continuing Education, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Publicly available Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools are said to liberate students from the instrumental use of English and empower them to write creative texts to communicate with different communities. This paper reports on an undergraduate language-related service-learning subject in a Hong Kong tertiary institution. In the subject, students co-created digital stories with asylum-seeking children, in written and podcast formats, with the help of GenAI. The qualitative content analysis of semi-structured interviews with the students found that this experience expanded the students' creative potential. Meanwhile, GenAI played a peripheral role in the story creation processes, in that the students exercised agency to use the tools and remained critical of the AI-generated content. This study argues that digital storytelling with GenAI, when used critically, promotes linguistic, digital and cultural awareness among ESL learners, offering them a third space to interact with culturally diverse communities in Hong Kong and giving them genuine ownership of English for creative and communicative purposes.

Keywords: experiential learning, service-learning, story creation, English language learning, writing with GenAI

1. Introduction

The present study investigates undergraduate students' views on the role of English in a service-learning (SL) setting, in which they use English for story creation and intercultural communication. It also seeks to explore how they use Generative AI (GenAI) tools for personal narratives, and why they sometimes choose (not)

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to adopt such tools. The study argues that the SL subject offers a safe space for students to use English for communicative, creative and cultural purposes, in that it goes beyond conventional English as a Second/ Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) instruction, which emphasises grammatical accuracy and pragmaticism. In particular, the use of GenAI tools catalyses the story creation processes, allowing the students to focus on their ideas instead of only pursuing linguistic accuracy. The findings of the study have pedagogical implications for fostering multiple literacies through digital storytelling in experiential learning.

1.1 Context of the study

This study was situated in an elective undergraduate SL subject titled 'Storytelling for Understanding' in Academic Year 2023/24, offered by the languages and communication division of a Hong Kong self-financed tertiary college. This 13-week subject comprises an academic and a service focus, with the main objective being creating personal narratives both for the students themselves and with the service recipients, i.e., the asylum-seeking children (aged 8–15). In the first half (Week 1–6), the students engage classroom learning about storytelling skills. Podcasting skills, such as basic audio recording and editing with their mobile phones, are taught. In addition, the subject also covers basic GenAI prompting skills for generating texts and images through Poe, a platform providing a range of GenAI tools, some of which require paid access. In the second half (Week 7–13), the students meet with the service recipients in a refugee centre. They conduct storytelling activities, encouraging the children to share ideas for the co-created stories. These stories were then recorded into audio podcasts, the main deliverable of the subject. In the process, the students discuss the story themes with the children, and draft the stories in English from the children's perspectives (i.e., 1st person narrative). After the children approve the stories, the students guide them to audio record their finalised stories into podcasts shared in the 'finale' exhibition in Week 13. During the exhibition, the children's parents, NGO staff and academic staff of the college are invited to appreciate the stories together.

The service and cultural components of the subject aim to connect and enhance the understanding between the local and asylum-seeking/ refugee communities. The target service recipients of the subject are asylum-seeking and refugee children, mainly from South and Southeast Asia (Refugee Ministry in Hong Kong, 2023). In Hong Kong, asylum seekers and their children often face a long waiting period for their refugee status, with a final success rate of only 1.2% (Hung, 2023). While waiting for the non-refoulement and refugee status, the asylum-seeking children are eligible for education from elementary to secondary level. When they are not using their native languages (e.g., in the home environ-

ment), these children growing up in Hong Kong usually communicate in English in both casual and school settings,. The majority of SL students, however, are ethnically Chinese, apart from a few students from an ethnic minority background (See Section 5.1 for the student profile). This suggests that their English proficiencies vary, in that they learn and use English predominantly in academic or workplace settings. This subject, therefore, provides them with opportunities to use English for creative purposes and develop their intercultural communication capabilities.

This SL context is considered highly relevant to English learning and application, and intercultural communication. It is relevant because the SL students interact with the service recipients from different cultural backgrounds for creating the stories. This corroborates the broad definition of 'intercultural communication', involving "communicative practices of individuals during their interaction with different cultures" (Bennett, 2013, as cited in Mosed et al., 2021, p. 994). Therefore, the focus of this study is on the SL students, in that learning and using English for story creation accompanied by digital technologies, specifically GenAI, may have an impact on them to varying degrees.

1.2 Organisation of the paper

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 provides a discussion on digital storytelling as a language teaching approach; an introduction to the role of GenAI in language learning; and an account of the literature regarding service-learning and language education in relation to both postcolonialism and instrumentalism. After presenting the research questions in Section 3, Section 4 details the research design. Section 5 then presents the findings from the interviews, focusing on what roles English and GenAI played in the SL subject, and how the students embraced or resisted GenAI in the story creation process with the service recipients. After discussing the findings in Section 6, Section 7 concludes the present paper with future research directions.

2. Literature review

The SL subject described in this study involves a combination of digital storytelling (DST) and GenAI to support undergraduate students' English use for creative purposes. Therefore, the following explores the recent literature on how the digital evolution of storytelling influences language learners; how GenAI impacts language learning; and how the intersection of service-learning and digital storytelling may affect English language learning.

2.1 Digital storytelling and GenAI: Issues of language learner development, 'voice,' and 'identity'

Since the SL subject described in the present study involves language learning through digital storytelling (DST), the following review briefly defines DST and discusses its pedagogical goals and recent integration with GenAI. DST refers to an activity in which individuals use technological tools to tell meaningful narratives (Karabatak & Şengür, 2019). According to Lambert (2013), the main components of digital stories include verbal and visual texts, often accompanied by soundtracks. Written in a personal voice, these stories of the author's lived experiences emphasise brevity, self-revelation, and intention of self-expression. Digital stories vary in forms, such as image slideshows (Lambert, 2013), videos (Pera & Viglia, 2016), and podcasts (Hur & Suh, 2012). From an educational perspective, each of these story forms may achieve different learning aims and outcomes. Podcasting, for example, focuses on scriptwriting and speaking for language learning (Mutua et al., 2024), which is also the main academic focus of our SL subject.

DST fosters multiple literacies not confined to academic and linguistic literacy, but also including technological and media literacy (e.g., Hava, 2021). More importantly, DST encourages outcomes involving motivation and confidence (Hung et al., 2012; Sadik, 2008), critical and creative thinking (Yang & Wu, 2012), self and cultural awareness (Shi & Cheung, 2024; Kortegast & Davis, 2017), and social skills (Schmoelz, 2018). DST as a task-based language learning initiative may not primarily emphasise language accuracy or uphold a particular linguistic standard for conveying meaning (Skehan, 2009). While language is only one of the many story artefacts, students can focus more on expressing their ideas and communication with others. In other words, DST can be a 'third space' for the students to share their stories, identities and cultures (Darvin & Norton, 2014).

The discussion on human-machine interaction in language learning expands from writing products to writing processes (e.g., Barrett & Pack, 2023; Kohnke, 2024). As Lambert (2013) asserted, "authorship creates agency in life and social interactions" (p. 2). The emergence of GenAI can serve to expand the potential for storytellers to be more effective in expressing themselves in English (Fisher, 2023). Given that language use for creative purposes is often described as an "ideologically privileged" activity (Webster, 2010, p. 84) that advantages more proficient individuals, GenAI may be seen as a leveller in that it allows 'low-risk' human-computer interactions, making it possible even for students with lower English proficiency to express themselves creatively. In other words, GenAI can close the divide between binaries such as 'high/low proficiency' or 'more/less educated.'

However, the rise of GenAI raises concerns not only over authorship, but also over which aspects of the writing process can be delegated to AI and which

should be undertaken by humans. In discussing narrative creation with AI, Fisher (2023) reminded storytellers to appreciate organic creativity; augment human effort instead of replacing it; and remain transparent in the process. This indicates an important caveat regarding storytelling with GenAI, including concerns about displaying the storytellers' voices and identities through self-expression of their lived experiences. In Higgs and Stornaiuolo (2024), students from high school English language arts classes were asked about their views on AI-mediated writing. Although they made deliberate decisions on choosing or refusing to use GenAI for writing, they also expressed concerns about "representation and ownership of ideas and voices" (Higgs & Stornaiuolo, 2024, p. 14). While the university students in Tsao and Nogues (2024) recognised GenAI as a co-creator in the creative process, Fisher (2023) warned against delegating decisions to AI, and advocated that "[it] is essential to center the human in this authoring process" (p. 81). From these studies, the issues surrounding authenticity in the authoring process and product become pertinent, especially when ESL/EFL students may be less capable of judging the quality of GenAI outputs, which tend to be "biased, clichéd and stereotypical" (Tsao & Nogues, 2024, p. 6), but are often misunderstood as accurate and 'native-like.'

This study aims to investigate the role of GenAI in the SL students' story creation processes, and their reasons for deciding for or against the use of GenAI. Therefore, there is also a need to briefly discuss the role of GenAI for language learning, including its potential merits and drawbacks.

2.2 GenAI for language learning: Benefits and challenges

GenAI has presented itself as a major disruptive factor of education (McMinn, 2023), in both beneficial and detrimental ways. As virtual language-learning assistants, GenAI chatbots can help writers produce various genres, from technical writing to creative texts (Kohnke et al., 2023). Aside from fostering learners' creativity, literacy development, self-efficacy and a sense of belonging (Han & Cai, 2023; Han et al., 2024; Pellas, 2023), GenAI is considered beneficial for its democratization of language learning, as it "allow[s] almost anyone… to participate in a wide range of discourse communities" (Modern Language Association, 2023, p. 8).

However, the use of GenAI raises concerns over the authenticity of text products by human writers. One such controversy surrounds the linguistic representativeness of GenAI models (Rettberg, 2022), which scrape data from webpages and digital books predominantly in English (Brown et al., 2020). This means that, while GenAI is multilingual, there are languages that remain under-represented. Another concern involves whether GenAI is overrepresenting or reinforcing a particular form of language. In particular, the written and spoken data for training

GenAI may be skewed towards those of the standards of higher social classes, and devoid of or deficient in dialectal forms (Hofmann et al., 2024). Unless the GenAI user edits the AI-generated text significantly, the output can hardly feature the writer's own 'voice.' There is thus a need for writers to establish boundaries to avoid overreliance on the more predictable structures or scripts provided by GenAI, and to ensure originality and autonomy (Hwang et al., 2024).

2.3 Integration of digital storytelling for English learning in service-learning

This section briefly explains the role of service-learning as a 'carrier' for multiliteracies education, i.e., English learning and digital storytelling. Service-learning (SL) as an experiential learning pedagogy has become increasingly recognised as a vital force in promoting educational change (Chen, 2023) and social change (Camus et al., 2022). Kolb (2015) argued that experiential learning allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-life situations, enhancing their learning and personal development, and promoting social responsibility and justice. Among many SL initiatives, teaching ESL/EFL has also been associated with the promotion of civic engagement (e.g., Chen, 2023; Shi & Cheung, 2024; Rauschert & Mustroph, 2022). Rauschert and Mustroph (2022) argued that intercultural service-learning can connect intercultural learning and foreign language education through meaningful service, linking the curriculum goals with diversity. Chen's (2023) study found that the SL subject involving teaching EFL (TEFL) to four Taiwanese remote elementary schools fostered students' social responsibility, as well as professional and academic knowledge about TEFL and children's language learning behaviours. Through interacting in English with community partners and service recipients in a multicultural service setting, Shi and Cheung (2024) proposed that the DST SL subject can enhance students' cultural understanding in addition to learning English for writing and recording stories. In other words, SL with ESL/EFL components can raise students' awareness about the communities surrounding them.

The above discussion has suggested the transformative effects of integrating ESL/EFL teaching and learning into SL. However, it is important to briefly discuss the roles of English in former colonies such as Hong Kong, where English is used officially for administration and education, and in regions promoting English at school and in the workplace to gain global competitiveness (Lin & Motha, 2020; Pennycook, 2020). The 'desire' for social justice and inclusion of teaching English to marginalised communities may be questionable, as it may place the subject in a patronising position (Lo, 2022). Specifically, this may assume only one 'desirable' way to use English for "development, enlightenment, modernity, power, progress, wealth, whiteness and civilisation" (Lin & Motha, 2020, p. 15). Such ide-

ology has since been internalised in educational paradigms which embrace Anglo-Western perspectives, especially in the way knowledge is transmitted, negotiated, and produced predominantly through English in the academic context (Kubota, 2022). Such an elitist perspective may create an illusion that 'native speakers' from a 'Western culture' are ideal speakers of the English language and hence also ideal for language teaching (Holliday, 2006). This in turn implies there is only one "elusive standard… benchmarked to the native speaker" (Loo & Sairattanain, 2024, p. 24).

To address this issue, it is necessary for linguistic instrumentalism to be reevaluated, focusing on the functionality of English as a lingua franca, as well as communication-based competencies, to promote global citizenship (Canh, 2022). However, unless the discriminatory impact of native-speakerism is minimised, and the English curriculum carefully balanced, students may be self-deprecative and find English, despite being important, still "a little more than a difficult and boring school subject" (Lin & Motha, 2020, p. 22). In our previous discussion on the transformational experience of SL combining language, content, and technology (Shi & Cheung, 2024), we argued that undergraduate SL students should not 'teach' English to fulfill their service requirements or acquire English knowledge. Instead, the institution, the students, and the served community may build a reciprocal relationship to maximise both academic and service outcomes (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Specifically, in our SL subject, the storytelling component allows for intercultural dialogues in English, the common language between the students and the children. In this way, the children have a channel to share their life stories, and the students learn communication and linguistic knowledge.

The above discussion has identified one main gap that could be filled with our study. Specifically, there are few studies examining undergraduate ESL/EFL undergraduates' experience of and perspectives on language use for creative purposes with GenAI in the SL setting. Understanding how students co-create stories in English with service recipients and GenAI to achieve academic learning, experiential learning, and service outcomes has important implications not only for promoting multiliteracies, but also for highlighting the importance of remaining critical of the roles of English and GenAI in the educational setting.

3. Research questions

The present study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What role does English play for the undergraduate students from a digital storytelling service-learning subject in Hong Kong?

RQ2: What role does GenAI play for the undergraduate students in the SL subject, who construct personal stories and audio podcasts?
RQ3: What are the students' considerations when choosing to use or not to use GenAI for their stories?

4. Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research method to gather insights from a small sample size with semi-structured interviews. Through narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2022), this paper explores the students' reflections, which are also the personal narratives of their learning experience in the subject. In other words, this dataset represents their "learning history" (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 37). This approach enables us to focus on individual experiences, in that their narratives are considered natural, complex and rich, and thus worthy of investigation (Bell, 2002; Clandinin, 2022). The following details the research participants, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations.

4.1 Research participants

The data of the present study was collected from nine undergraduate students from the SL subject in Academic Year 2023/24. The nine students, who formed the entire subject cohort, came from various ESL/EFL backgrounds, with six Chinese, one Indian, one Pakistani and one Pakistani-Filipino students, ranging from 18–40 years old. Their profiles, with their pseudonyms, are summarised in Table 1.

Different from the first cohort (2022–23), in which all the students were ethnically Chinese, the present cohort (2023–24) was characterised by a mix of demographics. Three students (Eshaal, Maryam and Shreya) were Southeast Asians born and raised in Hong Kong. They used English in most contexts outside of their family, including daily communicative and academic contexts. Meanwhile, two students (Jingxuan and Malong) were from Mainland China and spoke mostly Mandarin and minimal Cantonese. The remaining four students (King-hin, Ka-hong, Hiu-tung and Kwok-hing) were Cantonese-speaking Hong Kongers, whose English was mostly used in academic settings or during travels. This demographic mix suggests potentially differing views on the use of English and GenAI during the story creation processes.

Table 1. Profiles of the students taking the service-learning subject 'Storytelling for Understanding' in September-December 2023

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnic background	Native language	Academic background
King-hin	M	Chinese	Cantonese	Language Studies & Information Analytics
Ka-hong	M	Chinese	Cantonese	Electrical Engineering
Hiu-tung	F	Chinese	Cantonese	Psychology
Kwok-hing	M	Chinese	Cantonese	Electrical Engineering
Jingxuan	M	Chinese	Mandarin	Language and Professional Communication (Digital Media)
Malong	M	Chinese	Mandarin	Language and Professional Communication (Digital Media)
Eshaal	F	Pakistani & Filipino	English	Psychology
Maryam	F	Pakistani	English	Psychology
Shreya	F	Indian	English	Psychology

4.2 Data collection

The main source of data was collected from the students with individual semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted online during April and May 2024, four to five months after the subject was completed. This means that all assessment grades had been confirmed to minimize the possibility that the students' responses were skewed in favour of the subject or themselves for better grades. The individual interviews adopted the interview protocol (Appendix 1) developed based on the research questions of this study.

In the interviews, the students were allowed to express themselves in the language with which they felt comfortable (refer to the end of this section for the considerations regarding the interview translation process). That is, while Eshaal, Maryam, and Shreya chose to speak English, the Chinese students were interviewed in either Cantonese or Mandarin. Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility, as themes aligning with the research questions and other interesting themes might emerge for further exploration (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Based on the students' responses, the researchers also asked follow-up questions to elicit more in-depth sharing. As a result, the interviews ranged from 50 to 90 minutes, recorded and automatically transcribed by Microsoft Teams. They were subsequently proofread and analysed by the two authors and a research assistant, who were highly proficient in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English.

Before the data analysis process, one important consideration involved the translation process of interview transcripts from Cantonese and Mandarin into English. The translation process was largely interpretive and subjective (Abfalter et al., 2020). However, the authors' translation decisions were primarily made to "provid[e] rich original descriptions of the phenomenon to ensure validity" rather than adapting the translation to the technical concepts involved in this study (Abfalter et al., 2020, p.14). To ensure accuracy of the observations captured and translated into English, the interviewees were asked to verify the translated verbatim through member checking (Candela, 2019). The above measures serve to address issues about the faithfulness of the translated interview data, and to capture the subtleties of the interviewee's verbatim (Felderman & Hiebl, 2019).

4.3 Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was adopted to examine the collected data (Selvi, 2019; Vears & Gillam, 2022), in order to answer the research questions with rich, in-depth reflections by the students (White & Marsh, 2006). Familiarising ourselves with the interview transcripts, the collected data underwent manual coding based on the research questions. Following two rounds of coding by the two authors, the codes covered topics related to (1) the students' views on the roles of English in their daily lives and education, as well as in the SL subject; (2) their perceptions of the roles of GenAI in the subject, including in the process of story creation; and (3) the decisions on using GenAI in the process or otherwise (see Appendix 2 for the coding schema with examples from the transcripts).

The present study does not aim to make a sweeping claim about the benefits of GenAI in language education, nor does it aim to capture only the students' positive experience of using GenAI in creating their story materials. Indeed, we acknowledge the potential biases about the students and the subject matter and enhanced the trustworthiness of the analysis in the following ways. First, we conducted member checking (Candela, 2019) by asking the students to read the translated transcripts and findings and provide additional details to improve the accuracy of our observations. Second, we recognised that GenAI tools might not be useful to some students; therefore, to obtain a more balanced view, this paper also presents negative perceptions of the students on GenAI and indicates potential weaknesses of the stories that the students drafted with ChatGPT.

4.4 Ethical considerations

The present study observes the following measures to address potential ethical concerns. First, ethical clearance was obtained from the College's ethics commit-

tee. Prior to the study, the committee acknowledged the study's nature and any potential risks handling students' data. Recognising all the measures stated below, and understanding that no data from the children were required, the committee approved of the implementation of this study (Reference number: RC/ETH/H/0152). Second, to avoid conflicts of interest, the study was conducted after all assessment scores had been confirmed by the College examination board. Third, informed consent from all nine students had been obtained before data collection. Fourth, all the interviewed students were given pseudonyms, and identity-revealing information, such as their real names and student numbers, were removed from their stories. Finally, the present study ensured the students' rights to express their views and withdraw from the study freely, as well as their privacy and data confidentiality.

5. Findings

5.1 Pivotal role of English for creative and communicative purposes

During the interviews, most of the Chinese students expressed the feeling of inadequacy or ennui as English learners or thought of English as a 'cosmopolitan' language linked to the Western world (Appiah, 2007) or socio-economic advancement (Wee, 2003). This was reflected in the self-perception of their English proficiency for communication and creativity.

Despite being different from other undergraduate English subjects focusing on academic or professional purposes, the language demands for this SL course were still considered daunting among the students. This was because they, especially the Chinese students, seldom used English for creative or communicative purposes within or outside of the school setting. Their frequency of English use also reflected their self-perception of their proficiency in the four generic English skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Unlike the Chinese students, who rarely used English in daily communications, Eshaal, Maryam and Shreya rated themselves highly (8 to 10 across the four skills). Even so, the ethnic minority students still reflected confidence issues about interacting with the service recipients, i.e., the asylum-seeking children. For example, Maryam found it difficult to communicate with the children during the first encounter, but she gradually overcame the problem. For the Chinese students, more fundamental issues arose as they interacted with the children. For instance, Jingxuan, Ka-hong, and Hiu-tung could not understand fully what the children meant as they were trying to develop the stories together in Week 12, which was the second last week of the subject. However, all the students and the service recipients successfully created personal

stories that cover a wide range of topics such as the children's challenges at school, future goals, and relationships between siblings.

After the semester, the students' perceptions towards English became more positive. During the service period, aside from leading the storytelling activities and co-creating stories with the children entirely in English, the students wrote and recorded their own personal stories. In other words, they were given more opportunities to express themselves, create, and socialise in English. Rating his proficiency higher, Ka-hong found the subject interesting, as he "did not have to only listen to the teacher half the semester." Hiu-tung figured out that the teacher's correcting her grammar resulted in her not daring to speak in English in the past. Conversing with the children helped her find out that "it's not that people understand only when one speaks accurately or with professional diction". Malong appreciated that podcasting and interacting with children significantly improved his spoken English. Overall, they found their immersive experience in the service environment satisfying because of the increased ability to communicate and create in English.

5.2 Peripheral Roles of GenAI in the Story Creation Processes

On the use of GenAI for creating their stories, three students were the 'adopters', who used AI in three different ways, namely 'translator,' 'organiser,' and 'expression generator.' Ka-hong translated his story from Chinese into English using ChatGPT, although sometimes he would be "confident enough to write in English before asking ChatGPT to correct his writing." Jingxuan "put [his] fragmented thoughts into [ChatGPT and] asked it to organise [his] thoughts… [or] expanded and enhanced his writing into something more sophisticated." Kwok-hing gave a more detailed account on how he used ChatGPT to polish his story:

> I didn't draft with it at the beginning, but later on I found [my draft] didn't look satisfactory to me. So I asked ChatGPT how to… find another way to write it… with prompts such as 'give me phrases to describe scenes at night', and then there were a few examples for me to choose from.

Even though these three students used GenAI in the story creation processes, they remained critical of the AI-generated outputs. For example, after having their Chinese story drafts translated, Jingxuan and Ka-hong would edit the texts wherever they did not find them satisfactory, or wherever the meaning deviated from their own ideas. Instead of totally embracing the expressions offered by ChatGPT, Kwok-hing would "change them by extracting the ideas and paraphrase them."

Additionally, GenAI briefly played an interactive role at a later stage of story creation. To illustrate, all nine students used Stable Diffusion, an image generation

tool coming with Poe, to generate illustrations accompanying the children's stories. The students expressed positive attitudes towards the AI-generated illustrations, which "resembled the looks of the children so well" (Ka-hong and Maryam). Malong agreed that, using the image generation function with GenAI "allowed the children to take part in the process, and express how they wanted the story illustrations to be." Hiu-tung shared a similar experience, telling us that she "generated six images for the child to choose from… and he was happy with the first one."

From the students' reflections, we discovered that GenAI did not play an essential role in the service part of the subject. This was because the GenAI tools did not facilitate the communication with the service recipients. Students had to adapt to a dynamic environment that required real-time communication with young children. For instance, the students provided games and activities to elicit story ideas from the children, and instant responses were necessary to engage the children effectively. In addition, during the SL period, high-performance GenAI such as GPT-4o (supporting real-time voice input and output) was not available. Even if it were, communication might not be effective with back-and-forth interpretations with GenAI tools. Therefore, such tools were not considered effective for the students for real-time interactions with the children.

5.3 Students' agency of non-GenAI use

The previous section described how students generated images with GenAI for illustrating the stories and engaging the children in the story creation process, alongside drafting and crafting their stories with it. Surprisingly, despite the availability of the AI tools and the permission from their teachers to use them, six students did not use any GenAI tools for text production when crafting their own and the children's stories. They explained three main reasons for not using AI. First, the students were resistant to delegate the 'thinking' and 'feeling' processes to AI when writing their stories. This sentiment was the strongest among Eshaal and Maryam, who asserted that "AI does not feel… but I know my feelings" (Eshaal). She stressed that AI "could not have told my story better than I did… as it is my own story." Similarly, with an original idea and inspiration already in place, King-hin preferred not to use GenAI or other AI tools to help him write, but instead "concentrated on writing what [he] was able to express in [his] own words." For students of higher proficiency level English, they were concerned about the ownership of their stories. They regarded their thinking process and their crafting of the children's stories as a form of intellectual property that should not be 'contaminated' by AI. Second, students also reflected their distrust of the

AI outputs. Malong "[preferred his] 'bad writing' to be genuine… as GenAI might use very big… official words" that did not match his writing style. He added:

> For [the child's co-written] story, I did not use AI, as I know how to do storytelling, so I need to practise it with the child. I want to tell his story by myself.

His reflection on 'authenticity' also echoed with other students' comments. Maryam argued that AI "has lower credibility… there's no creativity in your own work." Similarly, Eshaal asserted that if "the whole thing is in AI, obviously it's [that] you're being dishonest… so you yourself didn't write it as personal storytelling." Even Ka-hong, who had his piece translated by ChatGPT, would rather "keep his feet on the ground and finish it by [himself]".

The third reason for not using GenAI was straightforward: two students admitted that they lacked the knowledge about GenAI tools to achieve their purposes. Shreya reflected that she was not aware of the existence of ChatGPT until "[her] friend told [her] about it". Eventually, she only word-processed the story after writing it "on a paper… with a physical paper and pen… just like… writing a diary entry." On the other hand, Hiu-tung admitted that she did not use ChatGPT because she did not know some techniques in how to use it, such as how to operate it on the platform (i.e., Poe). She added that, as she wrote the story with the children, she picked "easier words… as [her] story wasn't a very complicated one after all."

6. Discussion

6.1 English learning through storytelling vs instrumentalist approaches

The students' reflections in the interviews provided snapshots of their perspectives on the role of English in their daily lives, as well as on their English proficiency. In general, the students did not consider English a colonial language but a 'global language.' None of them would strive for an accent that concealed their 'non-native' identities. The students also suggested that the storytelling SL subject had even 'liberated' them from a traditional English classroom setting, which emphasised either grammatical 'accuracy' or promised better career prospects.

The SL subject was considered different from traditional undergraduate language subjects, which aim to enhance academic literacy and career readiness (De Costa et al., 2021; Muhalim, 2023). Admittedly, the students were critically aware that the instrumentalist view on English, which is closely related to academic success, confidence and social status, was still necessary. However, students did not position themselves as 'better' or 'superior' or attempt to 'teach' service targets

English to improve their own English. This aligned with Lo (2024), who critiqued the 'desire' and the patronising position for teaching English to the underrepresented communities for 'social justice' or 'inclusion'. The implementation of the SL subject did not aim merely to fulfil our 'desire' to serve and 'give voices to' the community. Reciprocally speaking, the refugee centre provided the students opportunities to engage in intercultural learning and communication with English, as well as children to create stories with. This further corroborates Bringle and Hatcher's (1996) advocacy for reciprocity in SL partnerships to maximise learning outcomes.

From the perspective of English learning and use, there are no 'native speakers' in this SL subject; neither is there a 'Western' model that follows so-called "progressive, communicative and student-centred English language teaching methods" (Lo, 2022, para. 2, 'English Language Education in Hong Kong'). The SL setting described in this study was a naturalistic and authentic communicative environment for the students to interact with the asylum-seeking children, who mainly spoke English in their daily lives. The SL students were, therefore, encouraged to use English for communicative purposes and to not agonise over accurate usage or grammar compared to other English subjects. Such a setting privileged 'fluency' over 'accuracy' (Skehan, 2009) and emphasised interaction, expressiveness and creativity instead of rigid grammatical rules and citation protocols. Overall, the use of English for storytelling in the out-of-the-classroom setting promoted a 'third space' for both the students and the children to share their stories, identities and cultures (Darvin & Norton, 2014).

6.2 Storytelling in English with GenAI: Expressing voices, identities, and agency

The ownership of the stories asserted by the students suggests their strong sense of identity through self-expression, whether for their own narratives or those co-constructed with the children. This corroborates Hakanurmi's (2017) argument for the sense of coherence in storytelling, in that "identities are…shaped through the way they express feelings and experiences" (p. 150). During the process of story co-creation with the children, there was also co-construction of understanding and meaning about each other instead of monologues of individuals (Hakanurmi, 2017). These social interactions as real-life experiences cannot be reproduced by any AI tools, however capable they are of producing human-like texts or emulating human-like writing styles.

In addition, the students' reflections on GenAI use in the story creation processes were contrary to the (mis)conception that students of lower English proficiency might exhibit overreliance on AI-generated texts (Creely, 2024) or use

them to circumvent their writing assignments (Higgs & Stornaiuolo, 2024). These students, as reported in this study, displayed criticality, and used GenAI to compensate for their weaknesses (translating, restructuring, and editing their stories). They did not unquestioningly use whatever was produced by ChatGPT but evaluated the results of AI-generated texts. They even came up with editing strategies to fit their own purposes. This may reflect their awareness not just of the credibility of GenAI, but also of the authenticity of their stories written in their own words. This finding also aligns with the notion that digital story creation provides students opportunities to choose meanings to be put in the stories (Kim & Li, 2021). In all, while GenAI tools may have an impact on criticality and creativity (Nikolopoulou, 2024), this SL subject provided a safe space for the students to experiment with such tools.

The agency of the students as both storytellers and English learners was also explored in the interviews. As discussed in 5.2 and 5.3, they displayed a strong sense of ownership of the feelings and ideas they put into their stories, instead of treating AI as a 'sentient' being, interpreting their emotions and feelings. The findings largely corroborate Higgs and Stornaiuolo's (2024) study on adolescent students' perceptions of GenAI, and their concerns about AI-generated outputs, especially about what was considered 'authentic'. Apart from those who had no knowledge about GenAI at all, their views on appreciating 'real' writing as valuable and to express themselves aesthetically aligned with the SL students, who chose not to delegate the writing process to GenAI. Their making active and critical decisions regarding the use of AI tools can be viewed as increased agency. Implications of student authorship and agency for writing instruction may involve active teacher support. Such support shall seek "to promote independent learning and cultivat[e] conversations aimed at fostering students' unique voices" (Han, 2024, p. 12).

7. Concluding remarks

This paper has investigated the roles of English and GenAI in an undergraduate service-learning subject involving digital storytelling. We have found that, in the SL setting requiring English for interacting with the served community, English played a crucial role in demonstrating creativity and facilitating effective communication. This was enacted through story creation activities and interactions with the children respectively. Assuming an equal subject position as the children in terms of English use, the SL students view English as a 'global' language rather than a 'prestigious' one in the traditional instrumentalist/colonial sense (Lin & Motha, 2020). The implication is that, while planning language-related SL sub-

jects, curriculum developers need to reconsider the functions of English in real-life environments and acknowledge the possible variations of English(es) owing to different cultures (Lo, 2022).

The use of GenAI in the subject was intended to facilitate a smoother story creation process. Its role, however, remained largely peripheral, as the students used GenAI tools as a co-pilot for drafting and crafting their written stories. While GenAI increased some of the students' confidence in using English, they preferred to create their own personal stories. Additionally, the co-construction of stories with the children relied mostly upon authentic conversations during the service period. This communication among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds provided experiential learning experience for the students to use English for creative and communicative purposes. Since the use of GenAI becomes imminent in learning and assessment, teachers need to encourage students' critical reflectivity on originality and (co-)authorship as independent story writers (Fisher, 2023; Han, 2024).

Besides the important findings, the present study has three limitations that warrant future studies. First, while highlighting how the SL subject with DST components and GenAI use may have 'decolonized' language learning and use, the scope of the present study did not allow for more elaborate discussions on how GenAI may 'reinforce' a particular English standard to which language learners may fully subscribe. For example, it is worthwhile investigating how students would edit the drafts provided by ChatGPT to exhibit and maintain their original 'voices' (e.g., Clark & Ivanič, 1997; Matsuda, 2015). Such investigations may involve observational studies with approaches such as the think-aloud protocol (Zhang & Zhang, 2019) or qualitative discourse analysis (Aguillon et al., 2022). Second, this case study only represents one language-related SL subject allowing GenAI use as a co-pilot. As the number of SL subjects continues to grow in Hong Kong higher education institutions, future studies may also include similar SL subjects and more participants to observe GenAI uses and processes therein. Third, ethical clearance could not be sought to interview the asylum-seeking children; therefore, this study did not investigate their perspectives on the story creation process with the students, and their English use in various social settings in Hong Kong. Future directions of our interest may involve investigating how the local language education policy may influence their language acquisition (Koyama & Kasper, 2022).

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Appendix 1. Student individual semi-structured interview protocol

1. Before coming to our service-learning subject, how would you describe your English proficiency?
2. In the first round of story creation, how would you describe the quality of your story?
   a. What mattered to you the most in this round of story creation?
   b. What did you do when there were feelings or ideas you wished to describe, but you could not find the right words to say them?
3. Before this course, how would you describe
   a. Your understanding about the service recipients, who were from different cultural backgrounds?
   b. Your understanding about using English for purposes other than writing academic essays and reports?
   c. What was your relationship with English like in general? In what contexts do you use it (speaking and writing in particular)?
4. Can you describe a particular scenario that you find the most unforgettable, in that you really stepped out and spoke with the children and other people at the centre in English?
5. In the story-creating activities, we used quite a number of technologies, including traditional and digital ones.
   a. At each stage of the story creation, which technology helped you the most?
   b. Which technology did you consider the most difficult to manage?
   c. How did you overcome any difficulties related to the use of technologies?
6. We used podcasting as one of the storytelling modes, can you share with us
   a. What did you learn from this experience?
   b. To what extent did it change how you think about using English?
7. How do you feel about using English for creative purposes?
8. Can you rate your English proficiency now, as you have created stories on your own and with the children in English for the most part?
9. When studying the SL subject, did you use ChatGPT (or similar AI tools) to help you craft your own personal story? If yes, what questions/prompts did you use?

10. Did you use ChatGPT as a translation tool? If yes, what materials did you ask ChatGPT to translate during the course?
11. Have you ever used ChatGPT to help when co-creating stories with the children in Week 12?
12. What prompts have you given to ChatGPT to help you co-create the stories?
13. Are the results given by ChatGPT useful? Why or why not?
14. Has ChatGPT changed the way you approach written assessments?
15. Did you use ChatGPT's answers directly? Or did you use them selectively?
16. How did you prompt ChatGPT and StableDiffusion to generate the illustration to help with the podcast?
17. If you have used AI for the stories, do you think it is a form of plagiarism or cheating? Why or why not?
18. Do you think the college should hold workshops to teach students how to use AI effectively to complete learning tasks? Why?

Appendix 2. Coding schema with corresponding examples

Codes	Examples
Role of English to the students	
Importance for intercultural communication	"*English is the most convenient way of communication in Hong Kong with teachers and classmates.*" (Jingxuan) "*English gives a person an international vision.*" (Malong) "*I think English needs to be learned because English is the top language used in the entire world.*" (Eshaal)
Instrumentalist nature	"*All the other classes are just about essays and everything.*" (Maryam) "*I also think [English] is very important for academic studies … and for future jobs.*" (Jingxuan)
Concerns arising from learning English	"*My English is too bad that I don't know where to begin.*" (Ka-hong) "*That I'm good at English doesn't mean English courses are easier … there are difficulties.*" (Shreya)
Positive and negative feelings	"*I dared not speak [in English] because my teacher picked on my grammar.*" (Hiu-tung) "*I used to hate it … there's a lot of things going on in my head with English.*" (Eshaal)
AI use in the SL subject	
Image generation	"*Only used it for generating images for the stories.*" (Eshaal)
Translating ideas into English	"*For my personal story, I used Chinese to draft my story and then used AI to translate it into English.*" (Ka-long)

Appendix 2. *(continued)*

Codes	Examples
	"I used ChatGPT to translate my story into English, and I refined the translation." (King-hin)
Organising ideas	*"AI would help me put the ideas into a paragraph."* (Jingxuan)
Polishing stories	*"I asked ChatGPT to … find another way to write it."* (Kwok-hing)
Reasons for using/ Not using AI in the storytelling processes	
Credibility issues	*"ChatGPT is taking [students'] credibility away."* (Maryam) *"I didn't want to be accused of plagiarism [using AI] without educating myself first."* (Shreya)
Preferring one's own ideas	*"I prefer my 'bad writing' to be genuine."* (Malong) *"I don't think ChatGPT would have told my story better than I did … it's my own story."* (Maryam) *"I'd rather 'keep my feet on the ground' and write the story myself."* (Ka-hong)
Lack of knowledge about AI	*"It was like I was living under the rock … I didn't know ChatGPT existed."* (Shreya) *"I didn't know how to chat with ChatGPT [on Poe]."* (Hiu-tung)

Address for correspondence

Lok Ming Eric Cheung
Division of Languages and Communication
College of Professional and Continuing Education
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
WK-S1316, PolyU West Kowloon Campus, 9 Hoi Ting Road
Yau Ma Tei, Kowloon
Hong Kong
lokmingeric.cheung@cpce-polyu.edu.hk
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8263-1196

Co-author information

Huiwen Shi
Division of Languages and Communication
College of Professional and Continuing Education
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
huiwen.shi@cpce-polyu.edu.hk

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