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Digital adaptations of science fiction and fantasy literature to promote literary competence

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This study engaged Taiwanese undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in digital adaptations of science fiction and fantasy (SFF) literature to foster literary competence. Participants collaboratively adapted SFF narratives into digital stories to address social issues. Analysis of surveys, videos, and interviews, using an adapted literary competence framework, revealed enhanced literary knowledge, deeper interactions with texts, learner empowerment, and nuanced socio-cultural perspectives. The study also expanded the theoretical framework of literary competence to encompass digital SFF adaptations.

Keywords: literary competence, digital adaptations, science fiction, fantasy literature

Introduction

Literary competence involves applying literary conventions to interpret literary texts, requiring sensitivity to linguistic, socio-cultural, and historical elements (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Culler, 1975; Spiro, 1991). Spiro (1991) defined this as the ability to appreciate, respond to, analyze, and enjoy literature, as well as to relate literary works to personal and social contexts. Fostering these skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners is challenging as it requires competences beyond basic linguistic skills (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Spiro, 1991).

In EFL contexts, to bridge the gap between linguistic skills and higher-order interpretation, digital literary adaptation offers a potential pedagogical approach. This concept constitutes an act of “re-vision” by altering and reinterpreting literary works across media and contexts (Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013; Sanders, 2006, p. 19). By reworking plots, perspectives, and narrative form, learners cultivate critical and creative sensibilities (Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013; Sanders, 2006). Digital adaptations further enhance storytelling skills, critical thinking, and technological fluency through “multimodal dimensionality,” when learners transform narration and emotions into visible actions and dialogue (Kargin, 2023, p. 168; Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013).

While traditional EFL literature instruction often focuses on linguistic

comprehension or passive interpretation, this study makes a novel contribution to English language teaching by investigating the intersection of digital adaptation and the subversive nature of science fiction and fantasy (SFF) genres. SFF literature, shaped by social progress, scientific innovation, and the supernatural across time and setting, offers a platform to expose societal gaps and challenge dominant ideologies (Jackson, 2009; Leggatt, 2010). Learners are encouraged to question power dynamics and social norms (Freire, 1970; Kargin, 2023). Ultimately, this research addressed two research questions: (1) How do digital adaptations of SFF foster literary competence? and (2) Do students find digital adaptations of SFF more effective than other genres in developing creative and critical perspectives?

Methods

Participants included 29 Taiwanese undergraduate EFL students (21 females, 8 males) enrolled in a fall 2023 course. The curriculum explored SFF's social functions through English translations of Nikolai Gogol's "The Nose" (1836), Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), Haruki Murakami's "Samsa in Love" (2013), Yasutaka Tsutsui's "Standing Woman" (2006), and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007), along with Peter Kuper's graphic novel *The Metamorphosis* (2004) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Participants collaboratively adapted selected readings into 8–10-minute videos addressing contemporary issues. The production process included a written outline, instructor feedback, and video production.

Data sources included participants' post-course surveys, adaptation videos, and interviews. The surveys asked about their views on SFF, adaptation strategies, preferences for digital adaptations, and perceived benefits of developing literacy competence. In the interviews, participants explained intertextual connections, justified their adaptation strategies, and evaluated the learning approach.

Eight groups produced live-action adaptation projects using amateur filmmaking and freely available editing tools such as CapCut and PowerDirector (videos available [here](#)). These adaptations included prequels, sequels, and reimagined settings, addressing social issues such as authoritarianism in modern Taipei, social exclusion, sexual harassment, conformity, alienation, family dynamics, and sexual identity.

Survey responses in Likert-scale format were analyzed quantitatively. Adaptation videos and interviews were examined using a deductive thematic strategy to assess literary competence based on a framework (shown in the Results section) adapted from Spiro's (1991) six global levels of literary competence and associated skills (p. 39, 44–45), with the focus on SFF adaptations. Two independent reviewers, with literature teaching experiences coded the interview data, followed by the researcher's separate analysis. Discrepancies were discussed collaboratively, and final adjustments were made to ensure consistency.

Results

Research question 1: Fostering literary competence through digital adaptations of SFF

Table 1 outlines the adapted literary competence framework with illustrative interview data.

Table 1. Adapted theoretical framework of literary competence and discourse analysis examples (interview data)

Global levels	Specific skills	Examples (Interviews)
1. Informed appreciation of literature	(a) Learn to appreciate the author’s writing talents in using setting, character, imagery, language, etc. (b) Learn to appreciate the value or message of the original work	“Adapting Kafka’s story deepened my appreciation of the author’s intentions” (Group 5)
2. Ability to respond to literature: 2.1. Appropriately	(a) Understand the literary conventions of SFF (b) Understand the social functions of SFF (c) Understand the literary elements and stylistic devices used in the original work (d) Express ideas or opinions on social issues addressed in the original or adapted work	“Our video raise[d] awareness of sexual harassment” (Group 3)
2.2. Critically	(a) Identify, question, or challenge the assumptions described or criticized in the original work or the wider social and cultural contexts (b) Analyze the original work or the addressed social issue from multiple perspectives or using critical frameworks (c) Analyze and criticize the original work critically	“The project allowed us to look at the story in a more critical way, fostering new perspectives” (Group 2)
2.3. Creatively	(a) Learn to be creative (stimulated creativity)	“I could use my imagination and creativity in ways that I hadn’t thought of before” (Group 5)
3. Ability to analyze and define responses in literature	(a) Analyze the significance of the original work in the context of literary adaptation (b) Explain intertextual connections between the original work and the adapted work	“We reused Han’s plotline about losing interest in eating meat” (Group 4)
4. Ability to relate literature to one’s personal experience/to empathize with text	(a) Consider the author’s personal experiences or attitude (b) Consider the students’ personal experiences or attitude (c) Learn to empathize the author’s or character’s feelings or emotions	“I studied Kafka’s philosophy and his relationship with his father and [included] all of these for modern audience to understand” (Group 5) “I sympathized with the character’s frustration of not being able to speak my thoughts” (Group 8)
5. Ability to place literature within a wider social/ cultural context	(a) Consider the author’s socio-cultural and historical contexts (b) Consider the students’ socio-cultural and historical contexts	“We addressed intergenerational family relationships in the present-day Taiwan” (Group 5)
6. Enjoyment of literature	(a) Enjoy reading SFF more (b) Enjoy reading the original work more	“My interest and appreciation for fantasy literature have increased greatly” (Group 2)

Interview results revealed participants' deeper appreciation of the source texts and SFF conventions. For instance, Group 5 researched Kafka's family background to address Asian family relationships in their prequel adaptation. Moreover, participants critically engaged with the narratives, creatively reinterpreting them within broader socio-cultural contexts such as Asian culture and society and Russian socialist settings. Participants also recognized the significance of the original works while relating them to real-life experiences. Some developed greater empathy for both authors and characters, as noted by a participant from Group 8 playing the protagonist's role and sharing frustration of being neglected as experienced by the original character in *The Vegetarian*. Ultimately, they demonstrated an enhanced understanding of socio-cultural contexts and enjoyment of reading SFF literature.

Survey results supported these findings. 83% (n=24) of participants reported greater appreciation of the authors' talents. 83% (n=24) noted improved ability to situate literary works within broader contexts, while 90% (n=26) challenged social and cultural assumptions. 76% (n=22) found the projects helpful for connecting literature with personal experience, and 90% (n=26) expressed emotional resonance with authors or characters. Furthermore, 76% (n=22) showed increased interest in reading SFF, and 79% (n=23) reported greater enjoyment of the original texts.

Research question 2: Evaluating digital adaptations of SFF versus other genres

Most participants found SFF more effective for stimulating creativity. Group 3 observed that unlike other genres requiring extensive literary knowledge, SFF encouraged "rich imagination to generate different ideas and convey deeper messages." Group 5 appreciated SFF's creative flexibility, which helped realize their ideas, but stressed the need to reinterpret the author's message with caution to maintain its integrity.

Digital adaptations allowed participants to transfer key themes, events, and character interactions into visual form through filming techniques. For example, Group 1 adjusted acting, facial expressions, and emotions to align with their adaptation's message, while Group 3 observed that visualizing adaptations demanded more creativity than traditional writing. Survey results also showed 83% (n=24) of participants preferring digital adaptations over traditional writing. Overall, participants improved creativity by using digital tools and repurposing everyday items as filming props.

Discussion

Results indicated that transforming SFF works into videos developed literary competence, particularly encouraging critical engagement and creativity. Participants became "better readers" who engaged more attentively with the form and structure of difficult texts (Blell & Eisenmann, 2018, p. 298). This confirms that adaptations benefit EFL learners studying literature while facing language barriers.

The projects enabled participants to analyze SFF conventions when recontextualizing source materials to address social issues, fostering cultural and discursive competence, the ability to identify and engage with the specific cultural discourses (Alter & Ratheiser, 2019). Critical interaction with texts and emotional engagement

strengthened affective ties to themes and characters, resulting in renewed insights and empathic competence (Alter & Ratheiser, 2019). Such engagement ultimately deepened appreciation and enjoyment of SFF literature.

Course design provided essential scaffolding for creative and critical engagement. The selected SFF works and supporting lectures guided participants through the adaptation process, positioning them as both readers and adapters. This experience cultivated higher-order cognitive and critical thinking skills from comprehension and comparison of originals to producing digital adaptations, empowering learners to express their perspectives while taking pride in their creative adaptations (Sanders, 2006).

Conclusion

This study contributed empirical findings on the use of digital adaptations of SFF literature to cultivate literary competence in an EFL context. Specifically, it extended Spiro's (1991) framework by operationalizing its six global levels of literary competence, ranging from informed appreciation to personal and social-cultural contextualization, to evaluate the affordances of digital adaptations. While Spiro's original model focused on traditional text-based interpretation, this research integrated criteria for digital adaptations and the SFF genres, providing a specialized tool to measure how students use digital tools to challenge social norms and engage in creative intertextual dialogues. Future research could involve more diverse learner populations and develop broader assessment criteria to deepen understanding of how digital literary adaptations foster literary competence in various educational settings.

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