

# The Impact of Digital Fairy Tales on Foreign Language Learning: Enhancing Literacy and Engagement in German Language Learning

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**Abstract:** This research investigates the impact of digital versus traditional print versions of Grimm Brothers' fairy tales on German language learners, focusing on their engagement, comprehension, and language acquisition outcomes. By employing a mixed-methods approach that includes an internal SWOT analysis and structured interviews with both students and lecturers, the study explores the distinctive learning experiences facilitated by digital storytelling. The first phase of the research involved a SWOT analysis to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with using digital formats in language instruction. Key findings indicated that digital fairy tales significantly enhance learner engagement through interactive multimedia elements such as animations, audio narration, and subtitles. These features not only support vocabulary development and listening comprehension but also foster a deeper emotional connection to the narratives. The second phase involved interviews with 25 second-year German honors students and 5 experienced lecturers, revealing a strong preference among students for digital fairy tales. Participants highlighted the convenience and accessibility of digital formats, enabling them to engage with stories anytime and anywhere. The integration of audio and visual elements facilitated comprehension, allowing students to connect spoken and written language effectively. In contrast, lecturers emphasized the necessity of engaging with original printed texts to develop a rich vocabulary and cultural understanding, while recognizing the value of digital formats as supplementary materials that enhance listening skills and promote independent learning. Furthermore, the research revealed concerns regarding the potential limitations of digital formats on creativity and imagination, as students may rely on visual representations rather than engaging their imaginative faculties. Nonetheless, both students and educators acknowledged that innovative teaching strategies can be employed to maximize the benefits of each format, encouraging active participation and deeper learning. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of integrating digital and traditional fairy tales in German language education to create a comprehensive and engaging learning experience. By leveraging the strengths of both formats, educators can enhance language acquisition and foster a lifelong appreciation for storytelling among learners.

**Keywords:** digital storytelling, fairy tales, German language education, learner engagement, language acquisition.

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## **Introduction**

The digital age has revolutionized how educational content is delivered, and German language education is no exception. Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, once passed down orally and later immortalized in print, are now widely available in digital formats such as e-books, interactive apps, and animated clips with subtitles. These digital versions offer multimedia elements like audio narration, animations, and interactive tasks, which can enhance learners' comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and overall engagement. While traditional print fairy tales have long been used to teach cultural values and reading skills, digital formats provide new opportunities for immersive language learning, especially in fostering creative writing, critical thinking, and discussion activities. Moreover, digital fairy tales cater to diverse learning environments, making them accessible for both classroom and distance learners. This shift presents both benefits and challenges, and exploring the comparative effectiveness of digital versus print formats can provide valuable insights into how fairy tales can be used to enhance literacy and cultural understanding in German language education.

## **Literature Review**

The integration of digital storytelling into education has gained significant attention in recent years, particularly in the context of language learning. Research on digital storytelling highlights its potential to engage learners through multimedia elements, offering a multisensory learning experience. According to Robin (2016), digital storytelling combines traditional narrative structures with digital media such as images, audio, and video, enhancing both the cognitive and emotional involvement of students. In language learning, this approach can foster better engagement, as learners are not only exposed to linguistic input but also supported by visual and auditory cues, aiding comprehension and retention. Fairy tales, in particular, have been identified as powerful tools for this purpose, given their simple yet culturally rich narratives. Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, which are widely available in digital formats with interactive features, have been shown to facilitate vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension (Zhang, 2018). However, alongside these benefits, several challenges arise, such as the potential

for cognitive overload when learners are presented with too many multimedia elements simultaneously (Mayer, 2017).

### **The Role of Grimm's Fairy Tales in Language Education**

Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, deeply rooted in German culture, have long been used as a resource in teaching the German language. Research emphasizes that these tales provide rich cultural contexts and vocabulary that allow learners to immerse themselves in authentic linguistic environments (Kiefer & Wiesner, 2019). The use of fairy tales, particularly in beginner and intermediate levels, helps learners not only acquire language skills but also develop a deeper understanding of cultural nuances. In a study by Müller (2020), German language learners exposed to Grimm's fairy tales in digital formats demonstrated improved listening and reading comprehension, attributed to the support provided by multimedia elements such as subtitles and narration. Furthermore, digital tools allow educators to adapt fairy tales to various proficiency levels, ensuring that learners can comprehend the stories while simultaneously challenging them to advance their skills.

### **Traditional Print vs. Digital Formats: Educator Perspectives**

The shift from traditional print fairy tales to digital formats has sparked debate among educators regarding the comparative effectiveness of these mediums. While traditional printed fairy tales allow for deep reading and encourage imagination through textual interpretation, digital versions offer a multimodal experience that can increase accessibility and engagement, particularly for younger or less proficient learners (Schmidt & Weber, 2021). However, research also suggests that digital formats may lead to distractions if learners focus more on the visual and interactive components rather than the text itself (Haake, 2018). Educators report mixed experiences; some prefer the linear narrative structure of printed versions that foster a more focused reading experience, while others appreciate the interactive potential of digital tales that allow for enriched comprehension through animations and audio support (Klein, 2021). This difference in approaches suggests that both formats have their merits, depending on the learners' objectives and proficiency levels.

## **Learner Experience**

Learner experiences with both printed and digital fairy tales can vary significantly, influencing their engagement and language acquisition. In traditional print formats, learners often benefit from a deep reading experience, allowing them to focus on textual interpretation and critical thinking. The tactile nature of printed books encourages a slower, more deliberate engagement with the material, which can enhance comprehension and retention of vocabulary and narrative structures. Research indicates that activities such as guided discussions, character analysis, and summarization exercises are frequently employed in conjunction with printed texts, fostering a reflective learning environment where students can express their interpretations and connect themes across different tales (Kiefer & Wiesner, 2019). This approach not only builds language skills but also encourages learners to appreciate the nuances of storytelling in the German language, contributing to a richer understanding of cultural contexts (Müller, 2020).

## **Enhancing Engagement through Digital Fairy Tales**

In contrast, digital versions of fairy tales introduce a range of interactive teaching activities that can significantly enrich the learning experience. Digital storytelling tools enable learners to engage with the material through interactive tasks such as quizzes, drag-and-drop exercises, and multimedia storytelling projects, promoting active participation and collaboration among peers (Robin, 2016). Research has shown that the incorporation of audio narration and visual aids can enhance comprehension and support learners with different learning styles (Schmidt & Weber, 2021). Furthermore, digital platforms facilitate creative activities such as role-playing, where students reenact scenes from the fairy tales, or digital storytelling projects that encourage them to create their own narratives using the original tales as inspiration (Zhang, 2018). These interactive approaches not only foster engagement but also help learners develop practical language skills, making the learning experience more dynamic and enjoyable, thereby highlighting the unique advantages of using digital formats in German language education.

While existing studies have explored the general benefits of digital storytelling in education and the use of Grimm Brothers' fairy tales for German

language learning, there is a lack of focused research on how digital fairy tales offer a distinct and enhanced learning experience compared to traditional print versions, particularly in the context of German language acquisition. Digital formats, with their interactive elements such as animations, audio narration, and subtitles provide a more immersive and engaging environment that caters to different learning styles and enhances learners' vocabulary development, listening comprehension, and pronunciation skills. Despite these benefits, the long-term impact of these tools on deeper language acquisition, including grammar comprehension and linguistic fluency, remains underexplored. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to how digital fairy tales enable educators to incorporate interactive teaching strategies, such as role-playing, creative writing, and multimedia-based discussions, which foster active participation and a deeper understanding of the German language. This research aims to address these gaps by examining the unique advantages digital fairy tales offer for both language acquisition and teaching practices, providing a comparative analysis of the learning experiences and outcomes associated with both print and digital versions in German language education.

### **Objectives and Research Questions**

The main objective of this research is to explore the differences in learning experiences between German language learners who engage with digital versus print versions of Grimm Brothers' fairy tales and to identify how the teaching activities differ between these formats. Specifically, the research aims to investigate how interactive elements in digital fairy tales, such as animations, audio narration, and subtitles, provide a unique learning experience and support language acquisition, including vocabulary development, listening comprehension, and pronunciation skills. The research will also explore the types of teaching activities and strategies that digital formats enable, such as role-playing and multimedia discussions, and how these activities differ from those used with traditional printed versions. The study seeks to understand how these interactive tools can enhance both the engagement and language outcomes of learners, while also examining learners' and educators' perceptions of the effectiveness of digital fairy tales in improving language acquisition compared to traditional methods.

## **Research Methodology**

The first step of the research methodology had involved conducting an internal SWOT analysis to examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with using digital versus traditional fairy tales for German language learning. This theoretical approach, grounded in existing literature, had emphasized the enhanced engagement, interactivity, and multimedia tools afforded by digital formats, while also addressing challenges such as cognitive overload and technological barriers. The SWOT analysis had served as a foundational framework for understanding how digital fairy tales influenced language acquisition and teaching strategies in comparison to traditional print versions.

In the second phase, purposeful sampling had been employed to select two research samples. The first sample had comprised 25 second-year German honors degree students who had taken the course unit "Introduction to German Folklore," where they had studied German fairy tales using both print and digital media. This group had been specifically chosen due to their exposure to both formats. The second sample had included 5 lecturers, selected for expert interviews based on their experience teaching these materials. Structured interviews had been conducted with both students and lecturers to gain empirical insights into their experiences with digital fairy tales and their perceptions of how these tools impacted learning and teaching. This combination of SWOT analysis and interviews had ensured a comprehensive understanding of the impact of using digital fairy tales in the foreign language learning context.

## **Data Analysis**

The findings from the SWOT analysis revealed critical insights into the use of digital versus traditional fairy tales in German language teaching. Strengths highlighted that digital fairy tales significantly enhance learner engagement and interactivity. The incorporation of multimedia elements—such as audio narration, animations, and interactive tasks—supports diverse learning styles and facilitates a deeper understanding of narratives. Additionally, digital formats provide immediate access to a variety of fairy tales, enabling educators to present culturally rich content in a way that resonates with students.

Conversely, weaknesses included potential cognitive overload, as the richness of multimedia can overwhelm learners, especially those with lower digital literacy skills. Technical issues, such as unreliable internet connections and inadequate access to devices, can also hinder the effectiveness of digital storytelling, creating barriers to successful language acquisition.

The analysis indicated significant opportunities for enhancing German language instruction through digital fairy tales. The increasing availability of digital resources allows educators to integrate fairy tales innovatively into the curriculum, encouraging creative teaching approaches. Furthermore, digital platforms can facilitate collaborative learning experiences, where students engage in discussions, role-plays, and creative writing based on the narratives, fostering a dynamic classroom environment. However, threats were identified, including the risk of diminishing appreciation for traditional print media. As digital formats become more prevalent, there is a concern that students may lose interest in reading traditional texts, which are essential for developing critical thinking and comprehension skills. Additionally, reliance on technology may create disparities among students with varying access to digital tools, potentially widening the educational gap. Overall, these findings underscore the complexities involved in utilizing both digital and traditional fairy tales for effective German language teaching.

### **Data Analysis of Student Interviews**

The data gathered from student interviews revealed several key insights regarding their preferences and experiences with digital versus traditional print fairy tales in German language learning. A thematic analysis identified recurring themes within the responses, leading to a structured understanding of their perspectives. The primary sub-themes that emerged included preferences for digital formats, accessibility and engagement, ease of comprehension, and emotional resonance of storytelling.

## **Preferences for Digital Formats**

The interviews indicated a clear preference among most students for digital fairy tale versions over their printed counterparts. Many students expressed that multimedia aspects, such as animations and audio narration, significantly enhanced their engagement with the stories. One student articulated, “Listening to the audio while watching the animations feels like I’m transported back to my childhood; it’s nostalgic.” This sentiment was echoed by others, who noted that digital fairy tales evoked a sense of wonder and imagination that was often lacking in print versions.

Students emphasized that the integration of visual and auditory elements allowed them to visualize the content better, fostering a more profound emotional connection to the narratives. One participant stated, “When I watch the digital versions, I feel like I am actually experiencing the stories rather than just reading them. It’s much more engaging.” This insight underscores the importance of multi-sensory learning experiences in enhancing student engagement and motivation, particularly in language acquisition.

## **Accessibility and Engagement**

Accessibility emerged as another crucial theme in the students’ interviews. Many highlighted the convenience of digital fairy tales, noting that they could access these resources anytime and anywhere using various devices. One student remarked, “It’s great that I can listen to these stories on my way to class or while doing chores at home.” The ability to revisit stories at their convenience provided learners with a sense of autonomy over their learning process.

The availability of subtitles in many digital formats further enhanced comprehension and engagement. Students noted that following along with the text while listening to the audio made it easier to grasp the narratives. One student explained, “When I can see the words while I listen, it helps me understand the story better. I can pause and replay parts that are confusing.” This feature aids comprehension and supports language learning by allowing students to connect spoken and written language more effectively.

## **Ease of Comprehension**

The theme of ease of comprehension emerged prominently. Many students found traditional print versions to be lengthy and time-consuming. “Sometimes, I feel overwhelmed by the long texts in the printed versions,” one participant noted. They highlighted that the extended length of printed fairy tales often made it difficult to maintain focus and fully grasp the content. In contrast, students appreciated the concise summaries often provided in digital versions, typically distilling the core narrative into 5 to 10 minutes of engaging content. “I can get the main ideas quickly without spending hours reading,” one student commented, reinforcing the appeal of digital storytelling in accommodating busy schedules and shorter attention spans.

The combination of audio, visual, and textual elements in digital formats was perceived as a significant advantage in supporting comprehension. One student articulated, “The way the digital versions summarize the story makes it so much easier to understand. I don’t feel lost in long paragraphs.” This finding highlights the importance of brevity and clarity in educational resources, especially for language learners who may struggle with complex sentence structures and vocabulary in traditional texts.

## **Emotional Resonance of Storytelling**

Another vital aspect of the students’ experiences was the emotional resonance that digital fairy tales elicited. Students reported that the combination of familiar stories with engaging multimedia elements created a powerful emotional connection to the content. Many reflected on how these digital stories reminded them of their childhood experiences, enhancing their enjoyment of the learning process. “It feels like a trip down memory lane; I remember my parents reading these stories to me,” one student shared.

This emotional engagement is crucial for language learning, as it fosters a positive attitude toward the material and encourages learners to invest more effort in their studies. Research has shown that emotionally charged experiences can enhance memory retention and motivation in educational contexts (Mayer, 2017). The ability of digital fairy tales to evoke nostalgia and joy can serve as a powerful

motivator for students to engage with the German language, promoting not only language acquisition but also a lifelong appreciation for storytelling.

### **Data Analysis of Expert Interviews with Academic Staff**

The data collected from interviews with lecturers of the German section of the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Kelaniya provided valuable insights into their perspectives on using printed versus digital versions of fairy tales in German language education. A thematic analysis categorized key findings into sub-topics: the necessity of printed texts, the role of digital formats as supplementary materials, the impact on creativity and imagination, and the similarities in designing interactive activities.

#### **The Necessity of Printed Texts**

A predominant view among lecturers was that using printed versions of fairy tales is essential, as these texts represent the original, unadapted narratives. They emphasized that reading the original German versions is crucial for learners, as these texts contain colloquial language, rich vocabulary, and various folk forms integral to the language learning process. One lecturer stated, “The original texts provide learners with the authentic language they need to develop a high-level vocabulary.” This emphasis on exposure to authentic language aligns with the pedagogical understanding that direct engagement with original texts enhances linguistic competence.

Additionally, the cultural and traditional values embedded within the original fairy tales were highlighted as significant benefits of utilizing printed texts. The lecturers believed that these narratives serve as cultural artifacts, providing students with insights into German heritage and societal norms. One expert remarked, “By reading these original texts, students not only learn the language but also gain a deeper understanding of the cultural context in which these stories exist.” Furthermore, the lecturers noted the practical necessity of familiarizing learners with the original texts, as students are required to read excerpts during written exams. This necessity reinforces the importance of engaging with the original versions to prepare students adequately for assessments.

## **Digital Formats as Supplementary Materials**

While lecturers acknowledged the importance of printed texts, they also recognized the potential of digital formats as valuable supplementary materials. Many educators expressed the view that digital versions can enhance listening skills and facilitate specific exercises designed to train learners in retrieving information from audio texts. One lecturer pointed out, “Digital fairy tales can be excellent tools for listening exercises. They provide an engaging way for students to develop their comprehension skills.” This perspective highlights the role of digital storytelling in promoting active listening, a crucial component of language acquisition.

The lecturers noted that digital formats can introduce students to a wider variety of fairy tales within a shorter timeframe. One educator stated, “Students can familiarize themselves with multiple stories quickly through digital media, which is particularly useful when they need to explore various narratives for comparative analyses.” This ability to access numerous stories in a condensed format allows for a more diverse literary exposure, enabling learners to engage with a range of cultural narratives without the time constraints associated with traditional texts.

Moreover, digital versions can facilitate self-study opportunities, allowing students to listen to and understand the fairy tales independently, aided by subtitles that support comprehension. One lecturer emphasized, “With digital fairy tales, students can work at their own pace, pausing and replaying sections as needed. This kind of flexibility is invaluable for language learners.” However, lecturers acknowledged that while digital formats offer valuable support, they cannot fully replace the depth of understanding fostered through engagement with original texts.

## **Impact on Creativity and Imagination**

Another critical theme from the interviews was the impact of printed versus digital versions on learners’ creativity and imagination. The lecturers posited that the rich, descriptive language in original texts allows students to engage their imagination, creating vivid mental images of characters and settings. One lecturer explained, “When students read the printed versions, they have to visualize the

world and the characters, which enhances their creative thinking.” This aspect of reading encourages learners to interpret the stories personally, fostering a deeper connection to the narrative.

Conversely, there was concern that when students first watch digital versions, the visual representations of characters and settings could dominate their imagination, leading them to rely on the images presented in the videos. “If learners see the digital version first, those visuals may become fixed in their minds, limiting their ability to imagine the stories creatively,” one lecturer remarked. This observation highlights the importance of providing learners opportunities to engage with original texts before exposing them to digital adaptations, ensuring their imaginative faculties remain active.

Additionally, the lecturers discussed how the language richness in printed texts contributes to imagination depth. The colloquial language and regional dialects incorporated into the narratives can

### **Summary of Findings**

The analysis of the data gathered from the SWOT analysis and student and lecturer interviews reveals intricate dynamics in employing digital versus traditional fairy tales in German language teaching. Digital formats significantly enhance learner engagement through multimedia elements, promoting diverse learning styles and immediate access to culturally rich content. However, challenges such as cognitive overload, technical issues, and the risk of diminishing interest in traditional print media were identified. Students expressed a strong preference for digital fairy tales, citing their immersive nature and accessibility, which fostered emotional connections and improved comprehension. In contrast, lecturers emphasized the necessity of engaging with original texts for vocabulary development and cultural understanding while recognizing the value of digital resources as supplementary tools. The findings highlight the importance of a balanced approach that integrates both digital and traditional materials, maximizing the benefits of each format and creating a dynamic, enriching learning environment for German language learners.

## Conclusion

This research has explored the intricate dynamics of using digital versus traditional fairy tales in the German language teaching context. The findings highlight the complementary roles these formats play in enhancing learners' engagement, comprehension, and emotional connection to the narratives. Digital fairy tales, enriched with multimedia elements, significantly improve engagement by accommodating diverse learning styles and providing immediate access to culturally relevant content. Students expressed a strong preference for these formats, appreciating the immersive experiences they offer, which foster deeper emotional connections and enhance comprehension through visual and auditory elements. However, this research also identifies challenges associated with the over-reliance on digital formats, such as potential cognitive overload and diminished interest in traditional texts, which are essential for developing critical thinking, vocabulary, and cultural understanding. Lecturers emphasized the necessity of traditional printed texts, which provide authentic language exposure, cultural insights, and opportunities for imaginative engagement that digital formats cannot fully replicate.

The integration of both digital and traditional fairy tales presents a unique opportunity for educators to create a balanced and dynamic learning environment. This research underscores the need for language instructors to harness the strengths of both formats, ensuring that learners benefit from the engaging aspects of digital storytelling while also being grounded in the linguistic and cultural richness offered by traditional texts. As educators navigate the complexities of digital and traditional storytelling, it is crucial to remain attentive to students' varying levels of digital literacy and access to technology. By implementing strategies that blend both approaches, educators can enhance the effectiveness of German language instruction, fostering a deeper appreciation for the language and its cultural narratives among learners.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations emerge for educators and curriculum developers in the field of German language teaching. First, it is vital to design a curriculum that integrates both digital and traditional fairy tales in a complementary manner. Educators should begin lessons with traditional texts to establish a foundation of authentic language and cultural context. Once learners have engaged with the original stories, digital adaptations can be introduced to enrich their understanding and offer varied interpretations of the narratives. This balanced approach ensures that students develop critical language skills while enjoying the benefits of multimedia engagement. Additionally, creating structured lesson plans that highlight the strengths of each format will enable educators to facilitate discussions that promote critical thinking and cultural awareness. For instance, teachers can initiate conversations about how digital adaptations may alter perceptions of traditional narratives, encouraging students to reflect on the nuances of storytelling across formats.

Furthermore, professional development opportunities focusing on digital literacy and pedagogical strategies should be prioritized for educators. Workshops and training sessions can equip teachers with the skills needed to effectively integrate technology into their classrooms while remaining cognizant of potential pitfalls, such as cognitive overload and reliance on digital tools. Collaborating with educational technologists can help educators select appropriate digital resources and develop creative teaching methods that align with curriculum goals. Additionally, fostering an inclusive learning environment that addresses varying levels of access to technology is crucial. Providing alternative resources for students with limited access to devices or the internet can help mitigate disparities and ensure that all learners benefit from the curriculum. Educators should also actively seek student feedback to continuously adapt and improve their teaching approaches, allowing for an ongoing dialogue about the effectiveness of the materials used.

Finally, researchers in the field of foreign language education should continue to explore the implications of digital storytelling on language acquisition and cultural competency. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term impact of

integrated digital and traditional storytelling approaches can yield valuable insights into best practices and curricular development. Investigating how students interact with and respond to different formats can further inform teaching strategies and resource selection. By remaining engaged in research and professional discourse, educators can enhance their understanding of effective language instruction, ultimately fostering a more robust and enriched educational experience for their students.

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