

USING DIORAMA-BASED PROJECTS TO FOSTER STUDENTS' NARRATIVE MEANING-MAKING

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored how a diorama-based project fostered narrative meaning-making among junior high school EFL students. The study was conducted with ninth-grade students at a state junior high school in Indonesia who had previously experienced difficulties understanding and orally expressing narrative texts. Semi-structured interviews and reflective photovoice were used to collect data from five focal students, which were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings indicated that the diorama-based project supported students in collaboratively constructing narrative meaning, developing narrative understanding across sequential project stages, and reconstructing stories more coherently during oral storytelling activities. The sequential project stages also helped students connect abstract narrative concepts with visual and physical representations while improving their confidence during storytelling activities. These findings imply that the employment of Diorama-Based Project learning can create a positive, engaging, multimodal environment that supports narrative comprehension and oral communication in EFL classes.

Keywords: *Collaboration, Diorama, EFL Students, Learning Experience, Narrative Meaning-Making, Project-Based Learning*

Sari

Studi kasus kualitatif ini meneliti bagaimana proyek berbasis diorama mendorong pemahaman makna naratif pada siswa EFL sekolah menengah. Studi ini dilakukan dengan siswa kelas sembilan di sebuah SMP negeri di Indonesia yang sebelumnya mengalami kesulitan dalam memahami dan mempresentasikan teks naratif secara lisan. Wawancara semi-terstruktur dan photovoice reflektif digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data dari lima kelompok fokus siswa, yang dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik reflektif. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa proyek berbasis diorama mendukung siswa dalam membangun makna naratif secara kolaboratif, mengembangkan pemahaman naratif di seluruh fase proyek yang berurutan, dan merekonstruksi cerita secara lebih koheren selama kegiatan bercerita lisan. Fase proyek yang berurutan juga membantu siswa menghubungkan konsep naratif abstrak dengan citra visual dan fisik sambil meningkatkan kepercayaan diri mereka selama kegiatan bercerita. Temuan ini menyiratkan bahwa penggunaan pembelajaran Proyek Berbasis Diorama dapat menciptakan lingkungan multimodal yang positif, menarik, dan mendukung pemahaman naratif serta komunikasi lisan di kelas EFL.

Kata kunci: *Diorama, Konstruksi Makna Naratif, Kolaborasi, Pembelajaran Berbasis Proyek, Pengalaman Belajar, Siswa EFL*

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This study

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes viewed engagement with narrative texts as something more than simply identifying text structure or translating vocabulary. Students were expected to understand the story's events, link ideas, and communicate meaning through oral and collaborative activities. Narrative learning also required students to actively construct meaning from characters, settings, and sequences rather than simply memorizing language forms. In the junior high school EFL context, students faced difficulties in narrative learning because classroom practices tended to focus on text structure and translation-focused instruction (Pasaribu et al., 2020). Previous studies showed that integrating Project-Based Learning and multimodal storytelling activities

supported students' narrative writing skills and communication competence (Rasyid et al., 2025).

This study was conducted in a ninth-grade classroom at a state junior high school in West Java, Indonesia, where many students struggled to understand tale sequences, interpret characters' actions, and communicate narrative meaning during oral storytelling tasks. Students also showed low participation and low confidence during storytelling activities because they rarely used English outside the classroom. Although previous studies have highlighted the benefits of project-based and multimodal learning, there was limited qualitative research that examined how physical multimodal artifacts, such as dioramas, supported students' collaborative narrative meaning-making and oral story reconstruction in junior high school EFL classrooms. Therefore, this study aimed to explore how the implementation of a diorama-based project shaped EFL students' narrative meaning-making and learning experiences.

Methods

Research Design

This study was designed as a qualitative case study to evaluate how a Diorama-Based Project shaped EFL students' narrative meaning-making and learning experiences in a specific classroom context. A case study was considered suitable for this research because it aimed to understand the students' experiences in a bounded educational project within a single ninth-grade class. The methods employed in this study were intended to gather information regarding participants' behaviors, thoughts, and emotions within a particular context (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Setting and Participants

The study took place in a ninth-grade EFL classroom at a state junior high school in West Java, Indonesia. The researcher selected five focal students using purposive sampling, with one student representing each project group, to obtain rich and detailed descriptions of their experiences during the diorama project. The participants consisted of two males and three females aged 14-15 years. These students showed different levels of engagement and how they worked with others during the project.

Data Collection

The researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews and students' reflective photovoice. The interviews were conducted after the completion of the project and lasted approximately 10-20 minutes. Open-ended questions encouraged students to share their personal experiences during the project. To support the interview data, students created reflective photovoice during the diorama project. The participants took photographs and wrote short descriptions to describe key moments, interactions, and activities within their groups. These students' reflective photovoice provided an overview of how the project activities encouraged them to collaboratively understand and present their narrative stories.

Research Procedures

The researcher obtained permission from the school before conducting the study and informed students that participation was voluntary. The Diorama-Based Project Learning was conducted over four classroom sessions from 4 to 25 November 2025. First, students produced narrative texts and jointly planned their diorama designs. Following the planning phase, the students worked collaboratively to construct three-dimensional story scenes, with each member contributing ideas to build the physical artifact. Finally, each group presented their project stories to the class and sequentially retold each scene during the oral presentation. Throughout the project, the researcher facilitated the learning activities while observing students' interaction, participation, and experiences during the diorama project. At the end of the program, individual semi-structured interviews and reflective photovoice collection were conducted.

Data Analysis

The study analyzed the data using the Reflexive Thematic Analysis framework by Braun & Clarke (2021). The datasets were read several times to become familiar with them. From both data sets, initial codes were generated and subsequently aggregated into larger

themes relating to students' narrative meaning-making and learning experiences. Themes were evaluated and refined, then interpreted in relation to the research focus.

Results

This study revealed that the diorama-based project fundamentally shaped EFL students' narrative meaning-making and their learning experiences through several interrelated dimensions.

Collaborative Meaning-Making During Narrative Learning

The findings showed that the diorama project encouraged students to work collaboratively during narrative learning activities. Group members discussed the story conflict, clarified what the characters did, and decided on the story sequence as a group. A participant explained, *"My friends helped me understand which part showed the problem and which part showed the ending"*. Another student who was interviewed shared a similar story, stating, *"I understood the plot better because we discussed the story together."* These comments suggested that collaboration helped students analyze stories and develop a shared understanding of their meanings. In this process, students built a grasp of narrative through collaborative conversation and shared interpretation of the story's events.

Visualizing Narrative Meaning Through Diorama Construction

The hands-on construction process enabled students to connect narrative texts with visual and physical representations. Throughout the construction stage, members of each group reread their narrative texts while arranging characters, settings, and story scenes in the diorama. One participant recalled, *"I simply read the text before, but after I made the scene, I understood why the character did what they did."* The photovoice reflection in **Figure 4.1** also showed that the diorama appeared to facilitate students' understanding of narrative sequences more clearly. Through visual representation and direct interaction with the scenes, students moved beyond passive reading to develop a clearer understanding of the characters and story events.



Figure 4.1 Student's photovoice on understanding story sequence through the diorama

Sequential Project Stages and Narrative Understanding

Students experienced narrative learning progressively across four project stages: writing narrative texts, planning the diorama, constructing story scenes, and presenting the stories orally. One student reflected, *"drafting the story helped me understand the plot first before making the diorama."* indicating that the writing activities supported students to understand the plot before representing it visually. Project participants then discussed and selected important scenes to include in the diorama. One participant highlighted, *"We had to pick the main scenes from the story."* which showed that students actively negotiated which events were most essential to the narrative. Students also arranged characters and settings based on the tale's events. A focal student shared, *"When we made the scenes, I understood better why the events happened in that order."* Group members later used the

completed diorama to explain the story more coherently during the oral presentation stage. A participant reflected, “*diorama helped me remember what happened next when i was telling the story.*” This comment suggested that the diorama functioned as a visual aid that helped students recall and organize story events during oral retelling. Overall, narrative understanding appeared to develop progressively across the project stages, helping students organize story events and understand the narrative flow more clearly.

Reconstructing Visual Narratives Enhanced Story Coherence

Participants in this study reconstructed narrative sequences by connecting story events with the visual scenes in the diorama. The diorama helped students organize orientation, conflict, and resolution more clearly during oral storytelling activities. Students referred to specific scenes and characters while explaining the order of events during presentations. One learner explained, “*I explained the story by pointing to the diorama. I knew which part came first and which part ended the story, so I did not get confused when I spoke.*” The visual arrangement of scenes helped students maintain narrative coherence and retell the stories in a more organized manner during classroom presentations.

Building Confidence Through Artifact-Supported Storytelling

The diorama helped students reduce anxiety during oral storytelling activities. Students used the visual objects and story scenes as references while presenting the narratives in front of the class. One student admitted, “*Before the diorama, I was afraid to speak in English.*” She further explained that “*using the diorama gave me support because I could explain what I wanted to say with the props or objects.*” **Figure 4.2** also showed that the diorama helped students stay focused, remember story sequences, and speak more confidently during presentations. By using the diorama as a storytelling support, students focused more on communicating meaning and explaining the story flow instead of worrying about grammatical accuracy. As a result, students appeared more willing and confident to present their stories during classroom presentations.



Figure 4.2 Student's photovoice showed increased confidence during oral storytelling

Discussion

This study showed that Diorama-Based Project supported EFL students' narrative meaning-making through collaborative discussion and oral storytelling activities. Students engaged in a discussion of the story's events, selected important scenes, constructed a visual representation, and used the finished diorama to more effectively retell the narrative. These findings support sociocultural and constructivist perspectives, which indicate interaction and active engagement with meaningful learning artifacts (Sesay et al., 2025; Smagorinsky, 2023). The completed diorama also functioned as multimodal support during oral storytelling activities. It helped students maintain narrative coherence and increased their confidence when communicating narrative meanings. These findings support previous studies highlighting the benefits of multimodal and project-based learning for student engagement, oral participation, and meaningful learning in the EFL classroom (Rozi et al., 2025).

Conclusion & recommendation

This study showed that Diorama-Based Project shaped EFL students' narrative meaning-making through collaborative discussion, visual representation, and sequential learning activities. The project helped students organize story events more clearly, reconstruct narrative sequences more coherently, and communicate stories more confidently during

oral storytelling activities. An important contribution of this research is its demonstration of how a physical multimodal artifact, in the form of a diorama, supported students' narrative meaning-making across different stages of narrative learning. Based on the findings, Diorama-Based Projects may be considered as an alternative multimodal activity for supporting narrative learning in junior high school EFL classroom. Future studies may explore its implementation in different educational contexts or examine its potential contribution to other language skills.

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Declaration of AI Use

During the writing of the current manuscript, the authors used AI for language editing, formatting, and revising the draft. During the literature search and screening, AI was used. The authors reviewed and verified all material that has been generated and revised from the original sources. The authors bear total responsibility for the accuracy of the content of this manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

There are no potential errors during data collection.

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