Improving Students' Reading Skill through Webtoon Application: A Classroom Action Research at SMP Nurul Hasaniah Percut Sei Tuan

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to improve the reading comprehension skills of seventh-grade students at SMP Nurul Hasaniah, Percut Sei Tuan by using the Webtoon application as a learning medium. The study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) following the Kemmis and McTaggart model, which consists of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting stages across two cycles. The research instruments included reading comprehension tests, observation sheets, field notes, documentation, and brief interviews. The findings revealed a significant improvement in students' reading comprehension. The average score increased from 56.8 in the pre-cycle to 71.2 in Cycle I, and to 83.4 in Cycle II. The percentage of students achieving the Minimum Mastery Criterion (≥ 70) rose from 24% to 68% in Cycle I, and reached 92% in Cycle II. The use of Webtoon also enhanced students' motivation, engagement, and enthusiasm during reading activities. Its multimodal features—visuals, dialogues, and narrative structure—effectively supported students' understanding of context, vocabulary, and storyline. Therefore, Webtoon can be considered an effective alternative digital learning medium for improving junior high school students' reading comprehension.

Keywords: Webtoon, reading comprehension, digital media, classroom action research, multimodality

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk meningkatkan kemampuan membaca siswa kelas VII di SMP Nurul Hasaniah, Percut Sei Tuan melalui penggunaan aplikasi Webtoon sebagai media pembelajaran. Metode yang digunakan adalah Penelitian Tindakan Kelas (PTK) model Kemmis dan McTaggart yang terdiri atas tahap perencanaan, tindakan, observasi, dan refleksi dalam dua siklus. Instrumen penelitian meliputi tes pemahaman membaca, lembar observasi, catatan lapangan, dokumentasi, dan wawancara singkat. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan peningkatan yang signifikan pada kemampuan membaca siswa. Nilai rata-rata meningkat dari 56,8 pada pra-siklus menjadi 71,2 pada Siklus I, dan 83,4 pada Siklus II. Persentase siswa yang mencapai KKM (≥ 70) naik dari 24% menjadi 68% pada Siklus I, dan 92% pada Siklus II. Penggunaan Webtoon juga terbukti meningkatkan motivasi, keterlibatan, dan antusiasme siswa dalam proses pembelajaran. Elemen multimodal dalam Webtoon—seperti visual, dialog, dan alur cerita—membantu siswa memahami konteks dan kosakata lebih efektif. Dengan demikian, Webtoon dapat dijadikan media pembelajaran alternatif yang efektif untuk meningkatkan kemampuan membaca siswa SMP.

Kata kunci: Webtoon, kemampuan membaca, media digital, PTK, multimodal

A. Introduction

Reading is one of the most essential language skills in English learning because it develops vocabulary, grammar knowledge, comprehension ability, and critical thinking. For EFL learners, reading is also a gateway to accessing global information and academic success. In Indonesia, reading

competence is one of the main objectives in English curriculum for junior high school. Students are expected to be able to understand descriptive, narrative, recount, and other types of texts. However, despite its importance, reading remains one of the most challenging skills for students.

Preliminary observation conducted at SMP Nurul Hasaniah, Percut Sei Tuan revealed that the majority of seventh-grade students struggled with reading comprehension. They encountered difficulties in decoding unfamiliar vocabulary, identifying main ideas, making inferences, and understanding narrative flow. Students also expressed that reading English texts from textbooks felt boring, difficult, and irrelevant to their everyday life. Such negative perceptions contributed to low motivation and poor reading performance.

Several factors were identified as the source of these problems. First, students rarely encountered authentic, meaningful, and visually supported reading materials. The reading passages in textbooks tend to be dense, static, and lack contextual cues. Second, conventional teaching approaches often revolve around teacher explanation, dictionary lookup, and completing comprehension questions—methods that are not aligned with students' learning preferences. Third, many students have limited exposure to English outside school, making reading even more difficult. Fourth, the current generation of learners, who are digital natives, show stronger interest in multimodal and interactive content rather than purely textual materials.

In today's digital era, students spend significant time engaging with online platforms, images, videos, and social media. Their learning habits and cognitive styles have shifted towards visual-digital modes. Therefore, it is important for teachers to adapt instructional strategies by incorporating digital learning media that align with students' technology-driven lifestyles. One digital platform that has gained massive popularity among young people in Indonesia is Webtoon, a mobile-based comic platform featuring colorful illustrations, dynamic storylines, and vertical scrolling formats.

Webtoon differs from traditional comics in many ways. It offers easily accessible stories, modern themes, digital formatting, and engaging visuals that support readers in making meaning from texts. The combination of images and written dialogue helps readers understand the storyline even with limited vocabulary. The episodic nature of Webtoon fosters curiosity and encourages repeated reading, contributing to improved reading fluency and motivation.

Given the reading challenges faced by students at SMP Nurul Hasaniah, integrating Webtoon into reading instruction has strong potential to improve comprehension and engagement. To systematically explore this potential, Classroom Action Research (CAR) was chosen as the methodological framework, allowing continuous refinement of teaching strategies based on classroom observations and reflections.

Reading is defined by Grabe & Stoller (2011) as an interactive, strategic, and meaning-making process. It involves decoding, predicting, inferring meanings, and constructing mental representations of text content. In EFL contexts, reading is more complex due to unfamiliar vocabulary and limited linguistic cues. Nunan (2003) states that effective reading requires both bottom-up processing (recognizing words and grammar) and top-down processing

(using background knowledge and predicting meaning).

For students at SMP Nurul Hasaniah, reading difficulties arise because they often focus only on decoding without understanding the meaning as a whole. This indicates the need for instructional media that support comprehension through contextual and visual cues.

Several common reading difficulties among junior high school students include: Limited vocabulary, making it hard to understand sentences; Difficulty identifying main ideas due to lack of strategy; Low motivation, which reduces reading engagement; Lack of prior knowledge about cultural contexts in English texts; Teacher-centered learning, which limits active participation.

Visual and digital media can help overcome these challenges by offering scaffolding through images and interactive narrative elements. Digital media support comprehension by offering multimodal input—text, images, audio, and animations. According to Lin (2014), multimodal narratives promote deeper understanding because learners process information through multiple channels. Research by Yunus et al. (2013) shows that visual aids help students understand vocabulary, sequence events, and infer meanings more effectively.

Digital tools also align with Vygotsky's theory, where learning occurs through mediated interaction. Technology serves as a mediator that helps students construct meaning more easily.

Webtoon is a digital comic platform that combines images and text to present stories in interactive ways. It provides visual scaffolding, making it easier for learners to understand vocabulary and plot. Students can interpret meaning through characters' facial expressions, settings, and actions. Because Webtoon stories are episodic, students remain curious and motivated to follow the next chapters.

Several studies support the use of Webtoon in EFL reading. Putri (2020) found that Webtoon improved reading comprehension significantly. Setiawan (2019) reported increased motivation and vocabulary acquisition. Kurniawati (2021) concluded that Webtoon enhances narrative comprehension. Yunus et al. (2013) highlighted the effectiveness of visual media for retention. Webtoon, therefore, is suitable for addressing both cognitive and affective reading challenges.

Motivation plays a central role in reading. Guthrie & Wigfield (2000) state that motivated students engage more deeply with texts, persist in reading activities, and apply reading strategies effectively. Webtoon stimulates intrinsic motivation because it is enjoyable and relatable. When students enjoy reading, comprehension naturally improves.

Given the challenges faced by students at SMP Nurul Hasaniah, Webtoon provides a solution by: offering engaging multimodal content, reducing cognitive load with visual clues, increasing motivation, supporting vocabulary learning, improving inferencing and prediction skills. Thus, Webtoon has strong potential to improve students' reading comprehension through structured CAR cycles.

B. Research Method

This study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) based on the cyclical model of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), which consists of four recursive stages: (1) planning, (2) acting, (3) observing, and (4) reflecting. CAR allows teachers and researchers to collaboratively investigate teaching

practices and systematically refine instructional strategies in order to solve classroom-based problems.

The selection of CAR was appropriate because the preliminary observations conducted at SMP Nurul Hasaniah, Percut Sei Tuan showed that students' reading comprehension was low, their motivation in reading activities was limited, and the use of traditional materials did not attract their interest. CAR gave the researcher an opportunity to introduce the Webtoon application as an innovative medium—then test, evaluate, and refine its use through iterative cycles.

This research consisted of two full cycles, with each cycle comprising two meetings. Each cycle followed the standard CAR structure: preparation, implementation, continuous observation, and reflective evaluation of the previous actions. After each cycle, improvements were introduced to enhance the intervention in the next cycle.

The research was conducted at SMP Nurul Hasaniah, Percut Sei Tuan, located in Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra. The school was selected because it showed a pressing need for improvement in reading instruction and had adequate support for integrating digital media such as Webtoon. Class observations revealed that students frequently struggled to comprehend texts and were often disengaged during reading lessons.

The participants were 25 seventh-grade students (12 males and 13 females) during the academic year 2025/2026. Their English proficiency varied from low to intermediate. Preliminary assessment showed that most students had limited vocabulary mastery, struggled to make inferences, had difficulty identifying main ideas, lacked motivation in reading English

texts, preferred digital and visual content to printed materials.

These characteristics made the group suitable for implementing and evaluating Webtoon as a digital reading medium. To collect valid, reliable, and comprehensive data, several instruments were used:

1. Reading Comprehension Test

This instrument measured students' reading achievement after each cycle. It consisted of multiple-choice and short-answer questions based on Webtoon episodes used in class. The test assessed comprehension skills including identifying main ideas, vocabulary understanding, inferencing, sequencing, and detail recognition.

2. Observation Sheets

Two structured observation sheets were used. Teacher Observation Sheet was used to monitor lesson implementation, clarity of instruction, use of Webtoon, classroom management, and pacing. Student Observation Sheet was used to observe students' engagement, motivation, attention, interaction, and problem-solving behaviors while using Webtoon.A collaborator teacher filled in these sheets to reduce bias and ensure objectivity.

3. Students' Activity Sheets

These measured students' involvement in learning tasks. Indicators included participation in discussions, asking and answering questions, responding to Webtoon content, and completing reading tasks.

4. Field Notes

The researcher recorded spontaneous events, students' reactions, difficulties, and important classroom moments that were not captured by

structured instruments. Field notes enriched the qualitative findings.

5. Documentation
Photos, screenshots of Webtoon materials, learning activities, students' worksheets, and videos were collected to support the description of the intervention process.

6. Interviews
Short interviews were conducted to understand students' attitudes toward Webtoon-based reading activities. These interviews focused on students' motivation, interest, challenges, and perceived benefits of using Webtoon.

All instruments were validated by English education experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with research objectives. This Classroom Action Research was conducted in two cycles, each implemented in four major steps:

Cycle I
a. Planning
The researcher:
1. Identified core reading problems through pre-observation.

2. Selected a Webtoon episode suitable for junior high school students in terms of vocabulary, moral value, and length.

3. Designed lesson plans integrating Webtoon into reading activities.

4. Prepared pre-reading tasks focusing on vocabulary prediction and character introduction.

5. Designed comprehension tasks including main idea identification, vocabulary in context, inferencing, and sequencing.

6. Prepared the reading comprehension test for Cycle I.

7. Prepared observation sheets, interview guides, activity sheets, and field note templates.

b. Acting
Activities in Cycle I included:
1. Introducing Webtoon and demonstrating how to navigate the platform.

2. Guiding students through pre-reading vocabulary and predicting storyline.

3. Students reading the Webtoon episode individually and in pairs.

4. Class discussion focusing on character actions, storyline, and vocabulary clues from visuals.

5. Students completing reading comprehension tasks.

c. Observing
The collaborator teacher observed:
1. Students' interest and motivation

2. Their engagement levels

3. How students interacted with Webtoon

4. Challenges encountered (e.g., unfamiliar words, fast scrolling)

5. Their collaboration during group work

Field notes also recorded spontaneous comments such as students expressing excitement, curiosity, or confusion.

d. Reflecting
Findings from Cycle I indicated:
1. Students showed increased motivation and participation.

2. Vocabulary understanding improved due to visual cues.

3. Some students relied too much on images and ignored textual information.

4. Some groups still needed guidance to discuss the plot effectively.

Thus, Cycle II improvements were planned: vocabulary games, more structured group discussions, extended inferencing tasks, and more direct comprehension checks.

Cycle II
a. Planning
Minor revisions included:
1. More interactive vocabulary pre-teaching (e.g., matching games).

2. More guided discussion prompts.

3. A new Webtoon episode with moderate linguistic difficulty.

4. Comprehension quizzes combining literal, inferential, and evaluative questions.

b. Acting
Implementation involved:
1. Group reading sessions

2. Vocabulary reinforcement

3. Students predicting events, discussing panels, explaining character behavior

4. Comprehension quizzes and sharing sessions

c. Observing
Observations showed:
1. Significant increase in motivation

2. Improved comprehension

3. Higher participation during discussions

4. More confidence in answering questions

5. Smooth collaboration in groups

d. Reflecting
Cycle II reached the success criteria, so the action research stopped.

Students demonstrated mastery of reading skills using Webtoon and showed positive attitudes toward reading.
Test results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The formulas used included:
Mean Score:

$$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum X}{N}$$

Improvement Percentage:

$$P = \frac{X_2 - X_1}{X_1} \times 100\%$$

The percentage of students achieving the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM = 70) was calculated for each cycle.
Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis by:
1. Data reduction

2. Data display

3. Drawing conclusions

Triangulation ensured data validity by comparing observations, interviews, and documentation.
This research was considered successful if:
1. At least 85% of students scored $\geq$ 70 in reading tests.

2. Students demonstrated increased motivation and active participation.

3. Observations showed improvement in comprehension, discussion ability, and engagement.

C. Result and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the Classroom Action Research conducted in two cycles and discusses the results in relation to relevant theories and previous studies. The data were obtained from reading comprehension tests, observation sheets, field notes, documentation, and interviews. The

analysis focuses on (1) students' reading comprehension improvement, (2) students' motivation and engagement, and (3) the effectiveness of Webtoon as a learning medium.

1. Results

1.1 Pre-Cycle Findings

The preliminary observation revealed several issues affecting the students' reading performance. Before the intervention, students often reported that reading English texts felt boring, difficult, and irrelevant to their daily lives. The diagnostic test administered before Cycle I showed that:

1. Only 6 out of 25 students (24%) reached the KKM score of 70.

2. The class average score was 56.8.

3. Students struggled to identify main ideas, understand vocabulary, and draw inferences from short texts.

4. During observation, the majority were passive, avoiding participation in discussions.

5. Students preferred visual content such as comics, animations, and short videos.

These conditions supported the necessity of introducing a multimodal digital medium such as Webtoon to increase motivation and improve comprehension.

1.2 Results of Cycle I

After implementing the Webtoon-based reading lessons in Cycle I, the students showed noticeable improvement both in reading achievement and motivation. The results of the Cycle I reading test are summarized below:

1. 17 out of 25 students (68%) achieved the KKM.

2. The class average increased from 56.8 to 71.2.

3. Students showed better understanding of plot sequence and character motivation because of visual cues in the Webtoon panels.

4. Participation increased, with more students volunteering to answer questions.

Observation notes indicated that students were highly interested in the Webtoon content. Many students expressed excitement when reading the panels and discussed characters among their peers. The multimodal elements— images, dialogues, background settings—helped them interpret meaning without relying solely on vocabulary memorization.

However, the reflection stage revealed several challenges:

1. Some students focused more on images than on text, limiting deeper comprehension.

2. Vocabulary understanding was still weak for several students.

3. Group discussions were sometimes dominated by a few active students.

Thus, improvement strategies were incorporated in Cycle II, such as vocabulary reinforcement, guided discussion prompts, and structured group tasks.

1.3 Results of Cycle II

Cycle II showed more significant improvements because of the adjustments made. The Cycle II reading test demonstrated:

1. 23 out of 25 students (92%) achieved the KKM.

2. The class average increased to 83.4.

3. Students were able to answer more inferential and evaluative questions.

4. Students' confidence and engagement improved significantly.

Observation sheets showed that:
1. Students worked more collaboratively in groups.

2. They were highly motivated and eager to read the next episode.

3. Students demonstrated better critical thinking when interpreting characters' actions and motivations.

Field notes recorded examples such as:
1. Students predicting next events in the Webtoon before reading.

2. Students using contextual visual cues to infer the meaning of new vocabulary.

3. Spontaneous comments such as "Miss, bagus kali ceritanya!" and "Saya paham karena gambarnya jelas."

The qualitative data confirmed that Webtoon helped students make sense of narrative structure, understand vocabulary in context, and stay engaged throughout the reading tasks.

2. Discussion

2.1 Improvement of Students' Reading Comprehension

The findings revealed that Webtoon significantly improved students' reading comprehension. The increase in the class average score—from 56.8 (pre-cycle) to 71.2 (Cycle I), and then to 83.4 (Cycle II)—demonstrates the positive impact of the Webtoon-based instruction. The majority of the students reached the KKM after Cycle II, meeting the success criteria.

This improvement is strongly supported by multimodal learning theory, which states that meaning is constructed through both visual and verbal modes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The combination of images, colors, characters, and narratives in Webtoon enabled students to connect verbal text with visual representation. This multimodal scaffolding reduced cognitive load and increased comprehension.

The results also align with other studies that show that digital comics improve reading comprehension among EFL learners because they provide contextual support, reduce anxiety, and make reading enjoyable (Liaw, 2019; Yen & Chen, 2020).

2.2 Students' Motivation and Engagement

Motivation is a crucial factor in reading success. The Webtoon app attracted students' intrinsic motivation because:
1. The stories were visually appealing.

2. The content was relatable to their daily lives.

3. Students were accustomed to using smartphones for entertainment.

During Cycle I and II, students were observed being more attentive, expressive, and collaborative. The use of Webtoon successfully transformed reading from a passive activity into an enjoyable and interactive experience. This is consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which suggests that interest and enjoyment enhance intrinsic motivation.

Furthermore, motivation increased because Webtoon reduced the anxiety often associated with reading English texts. Visual cues helped students interpret meaning without feeling overwhelmed by unfamiliar vocabulary. This finding is in line with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985), which states that lower anxiety improves language acquisition.

2.3 The Effectiveness of Webtoon as a Learning Medium

The integration of Webtoon in the English classroom proved to be highly effective. Webtoon supported students' learning in several ways:

1. Multimodal representation helped students decode meaning more easily.

2. Sequential panels supported narrative comprehension and logical thinking.

3. Dialogues improved students' understanding of conversational English.

4. Colors and facial expressions helped students infer mood, tone, and emotions.

5. Digital format matched students' technological preferences and learning styles.

Webtoon also encouraged peer interaction. Students often discussed characters, predictions, and meanings, promoting collaborative learning, which is essential in constructivist pedagogy. These findings confirm that digital comics are not only engaging but pedagogically valuable, especially in enhancing reading comprehension among EFL students.

2.4 Comparison Between Cycle I and Cycle II

The improvement from Cycle I to Cycle II reflects the iterative nature of Classroom Action Research. Adjustments made after Cycle I—such as vocabulary reinforcement, guided discussions, and structured group work—further enhanced the learning outcomes. Students became more confident in Cycle II, actively asking questions and sharing ideas.

The success of Cycle II shows that Webtoon, when combined with planned instructional strategies, is not just visually entertaining but academically effective in fostering comprehension and participation.

2.5 Overall Reflection

The findings across cycles indicate that:

1. Webtoon is a powerful tool for motivating junior high school learners.

2. Multimodal materials help students interpret meaning better than text-only materials.

3. The CAR design was effective in systematically refining the teaching process.

4. Students not only improved academically but also developed positive attitudes toward reading.

Thus, Webtoon can be recommended as an alternative medium in English reading instruction, especially in contexts where students lack interest in traditional reading materials.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This Classroom Action Research, conducted at SMP Nurul Hasaniah, Percut Sei Tuan, aimed to improve seventh-grade students' reading comprehension skills through the use of the Webtoon application as a digital multimodal learning medium. The findings of the two-cycle intervention demonstrated that Webtoon effectively enhanced students' reading performance, motivation, engagement, and overall learning experience.

The quantitative results showed a consistent and significant improvement in reading comprehension across the cycles. The average score increased from

56.8 in the pre-cycle to 71.2 in Cycle I, and further to 83.4 in Cycle II. Likewise, the percentage of students achieving the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM ≥ 70) increased from 24% before the intervention to 68% in Cycle I, and reached 92% in Cycle II. These improvements indicate that Webtoon provides substantial support for students in understanding vocabulary, identifying main ideas, making inferences, and comprehending narrative structures.

The qualitative data, including observations, field notes, interviews, and documentation, reinforced the quantitative findings. Students showed higher motivation, greater participation, and deeper engagement during Webtoon-based learning activities. They demonstrated enthusiasm for reading digital stories, collaborated more effectively with peers, and became more confident in expressing their ideas. The multimodal elements in Webtoon, such as visuals, colors, expressions, and panel sequencing, provided contextual cues that helped students interpret meaning more easily and enjoyably.

Overall, this study concludes that Webtoon is an effective and innovative digital learning medium for developing reading comprehension in junior high school students. Its multimodal features align well with contemporary learners' preferences, reduce reading anxiety, and support comprehension through visual scaffolding. The success of this study also highlights the importance of integrating engaging digital resources into English language teaching, particularly when addressing low motivation and limited comprehension skills.

Given the positive results, it is recommended that English teachers consider Webtoon as an alternative instructional tool, especially for teaching narrative texts and other reading materials. Future research may explore its use in different skills such as writing, speaking, or vocabulary mastery, as well as its implementation across various grade levels and school contexts.

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