

THE PERCEPTION STUDENTS OF KHAIRA UMMAH BOARDING SCHOOL ON THE USE OF WEBTOON AS DIGITAL LITERACY TOWARD READING MATERIALS

Safira Naim Hidayat¹, Diah Retno Widowati², Henny Rahmawati³
^{1,2,3} *Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris FKIP Universitas Islam Malang*
Email: 1 22121073082@unisma.ac.id,

Abstrak

This study explores students' perceptions at Khaira Ummah Boarding School regarding the use of Webtoon as a digital literacy tool for reading English materials. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, the research examines how Webtoon influences reading habits, motivation, and comprehension. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with students who engaged with Webtoon as part of their reading activities. The findings indicate that students perceive Webtoon as an engaging and enjoyable platform, with colorful visuals, interactive features, and relatable content that increase motivation and interest in reading. Webtoon's alignment with students' digital lifestyles makes reading more accessible and appealing. The study highlights the potential of integrating digital media into educational practices to support literacy development, particularly among digital-native learners. It emphasizes the need for innovative approaches in teaching reading and encourages further research on the long-term effects of Webtoon in various learning environments.

Keywords: : Digital Literacy, Webtoon, Reading Materials, Narrative Inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a foundational skill that supports academic performance, critical thinking, and language acquisition, particularly in ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts. Despite its importance, many students struggle to maintain interest in traditional reading materials, especially in today's digital age. The rapid advancement of technology has changed students' habits, with more time spent on digital platforms than engaging with printed texts. This shift necessitates a transformation in how reading is introduced and sustained in educational environments, especially among digital-native learners.

One promising digital medium is Webtoon, a mobile-based comic platform originating from South Korea. Its engaging visuals, episodic storytelling, and user-friendly design have made it highly appealing to young readers. Studies (e.g., Wulandari et al., 2019; Octavia & Wibowo, 2021) have shown that Webtoon can enhance vocabulary mastery and reading motivation. The integration of images, colloquial dialogues, and relatable storylines provides students with exposure to authentic language in a fun, accessible format. This supports the concept of extensive reading, which encourages students to read widely and for pleasure, without the pressure of testing or academic grading.

However, much of the existing literature focuses on the effectiveness of Webtoon in quantitative terms, often overlooking the lived experiences and personal reflections of learners who engage with this medium. Additionally, few studies examine how Webtoon functions as a digital literacy tool within formal educational settings. Most research lacks narrative depth and fails to

explore students' perspectives on how Webtoon affects their reading comprehension, language confidence, and motivation to read in English.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the perceptions of students at Khaira Ummah Boarding School regarding the use of Webtoon as digital literacy in English reading materials. Using a narrative inquiry method, this research seeks to uncover students' personal experiences, preferences, and reflections. The goal is to understand how Webtoon can be integrated effectively into language learning practices and to highlight its potential in motivating learners, developing literacy, and bridging the gap between technology and education.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using the narrative inquiry approach to explore students' perceptions of using Webtoon as a digital literacy tool for English reading materials. Narrative inquiry is particularly suitable for capturing detailed personal experiences and perspectives, allowing researchers to understand how individuals make meaning of their interactions with digital texts. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience through storytelling, making it appropriate for this research which aims to document students' reading journeys.

The participants in this study were five students from Khaira Ummah Islamic Boarding School who had been reading Webtoons regularly for more than six months. Selection criteria included a minimum of two years of study at the boarding school and demonstrated consistent engagement with English-language Webtoons. These students were chosen through purposive sampling to ensure the richness and relevance of the data collected. To protect their privacy, participants' identities were anonymized throughout the research process.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews and narrative prompts. Interviews were held in person, allowing the researcher to probe for deeper insights into students' reading habits, preferred genres, learning experiences, and perceived benefits from using Webtoon. Each interview session lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and included follow-up questions to ensure data validity. Participants were informed about the research goals and provided consent prior to participation.

The data analysis followed the procedures proposed by Connelly and Clandinin (2006) for narrative research. The researcher first transcribed and coded the interviews, identifying key themes related to motivation, reading engagement, vocabulary development, and emotional connection with Webtoon content. Data were then interpreted through thematic analysis to construct a coherent narrative reflecting the shared and individual experiences of the participants. This approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' stories while allowing for broader educational implications to be drawn.

FINDINGS

This study aimed to explore students' perceptions of Webtoon as a tool for digital literacy in English reading at Khaira Ummah Islamic Boarding School. Through narrative inquiry involving five participants who had engaged with Webtoon for more than six months, three primary findings were identified: (1) sustained reading engagement, (2) genre-based motivational preferences, and (3) perceived linguistic and affective benefits.

Table 1.

Theme	Key Insights
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Reading Engagement	2–8 years of Webtoon use; 2–5 hours/day; consistent daily or weekly reading habits
Genre Preferences	Romance, fantasy, slice of life, horror; genres influenced emotional connection and reading motivation
Language Development	Vocabulary improvement, better sentence understanding, oral reading fluency, exposure to authentic expressions
Motivational Benefits	Learning became enjoyable; Webtoon acted as a stress reliever and fostered sustained interest in reading English
Learning Challenges	Encountered idioms/slang; served as motivation to explore deeper meaning; increased curiosity about language

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students at Khaira Ummah Islamic Boarding School regarding the use of Webtoon as a digital literacy tool for reading English materials. The findings reveal that Webtoon not only serves as an engaging reading medium but also contributes significantly to students' language development and learning motivation. This section discusses the implications of these findings by relating them to existing literature and highlighting the unique contributions of this study.

1. Webtoon and Extensive Reading Engagement

The participants' consistent use of Webtoon for extended reading periods (2–5 hours per session) over multiple years supports the principles of extensive reading. Renandya and Jacobs (2002) argue that extensive reading, when conducted for pleasure and without pressure, leads to increased reading fluency and vocabulary growth. The students' autonomy in selecting when and what to read—combined with their habitual reading behaviors—indicates that Webtoon facilitates an ideal environment for voluntary language exposure. This aligns with Richards' (2001) model of extensive reading programs, which prioritize student choice, reading quantity, and enjoyment.

Unlike traditional reading texts, which are often disconnected from students' interests, Webtoon offers highly personalized, interactive, and visually appealing content. This accessibility and relevance promote a natural inclination toward reading, fulfilling the goals of modern literacy education in a digital context (Gambrell, 2015).

2. Genre Preferences and Affective Motivation

The role of genre preferences in motivating students is a particularly important contribution of this study. Romance and slice-of-life genres provided emotional relatability, while fantasy and horror genres stimulated curiosity and imaginative thinking. Previous studies (Octavia & Wibowo, 2021; Minarwati, 2021) have shown that digital comics can enhance motivation, but they did not thoroughly examine how specific genre choices influence emotional engagement.

This study shows that allowing students to choose genres that resonate with their identities and interests leads to greater emotional involvement, which in turn supports sustained reading behavior. The participants' descriptions of feeling "connected," "curious," or "emotionally satisfied" while reading Webtoons underscore the affective dimension of reading, which is often overlooked in language learning research.

3. Language Skill Development Through Webtoon

In terms of language acquisition, participants reported improvements in vocabulary, sentence structure awareness, and oral reading fluency. These findings reinforce Wulandari et al. (2019), who showed that Webtoon could enhance vocabulary mastery. However, this study goes further by highlighting that authentic dialogue, idiomatic language, and real-world expressions presented in Webtoons offer deeper linguistic exposure than many traditional materials.

Additionally, two students reported reading aloud, which supports speaking and pronunciation development. This aligns with findings by Setiadi (2021), but expands the discussion to include multi-skill integration, where reading, speaking, and even writing are indirectly supported through digital media engagement.

4. Webtoon as a Tool for Emotional Regulation and Learning Motivation

Another significant theme in this study is the role of Webtoon in reducing boredom and emotional fatigue. Students from boarding school settings—who often face academic pressure and routine—found that reading Webtoons served as a form of emotional relief. This supports Kruk et al. (2011), who defined boredom in learning as a psychological state that disrupts engagement. By acting as a source of relaxation and emotional stimulation, Webtoon helps maintain students' interest in learning English.

Moreover, the motivation to overcome difficulties—such as unfamiliar idioms or cultural references—reflects an internalized desire to improve. This supports Gardner's (1985) socio-educational theory of language learning, which emphasizes that intrinsic motivation, driven by learners' goals and interests, plays a critical role in second language success.

5. Contribution to Existing Research and Pedagogical Implications

Compared to prior research that mostly utilized quantitative methods, this study adds depth by using narrative inquiry to capture learners' personal experiences. It highlights how digital reading platforms like Webtoon can cater to both the cognitive and emotional needs of learners. The integration of visual storytelling, interactive design, and authentic language makes Webtoon a powerful supplement to traditional reading instruction.

From a pedagogical perspective, educators are encouraged to incorporate Webtoon or similar digital reading tools into English language teaching. Doing so not only aligns with students' digital behavior but also fosters a learning environment where students are more engaged, motivated, and emotionally connected to the material.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the perceptions of students at Khaira Ummah Islamic Boarding School regarding the use of Webtoon as a digital literacy tool for English reading. The findings indicate that Webtoon plays a significant role in fostering students' reading motivation, enhancing vocabulary acquisition, and supporting the development of English language skills. By offering engaging visual narratives and authentic dialogue, Webtoon provides a relevant and enjoyable alternative to traditional reading materials, particularly for digital-native learners.

Students demonstrated sustained engagement with Webtoon over extended periods, often incorporating it into their daily routines. Their genre preferences—ranging from romance to fantasy—highlight the importance of emotional and personal connection in motivating reading. Additionally, Webtoon contributed to students' learning by exposing them to conversational English, idioms, and sentence structures in a context that felt natural and meaningful.

Beyond cognitive gains, Webtoon also served as a motivational and emotional support tool, helping students relieve stress and avoid boredom, especially in structured learning environments like boarding schools. This affective dimension of learning underscores the value of integrating digital platforms into language education to promote both academic and personal development.

In conclusion, Webtoon is not only an effective medium for improving reading skills but also a relevant and engaging tool that aligns with students' interests and learning behaviors. Future educational practices should consider incorporating such digital platforms to enhance literacy, motivation, and learner autonomy in English language learning.

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Advisor I,

(Diah Retno Widowati, S.Pd., M.Pd)

NPP. 151201199032231