Integrating Comic Strips in the Classroom amid the Pervasion of Technology

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ABSTRACT

There have been pervasive uses of technology and social media in the classrooms to improve the way English skills are taught. However, Indonesian students' proficiency in reading comprehension is still considered to be inadequate due to language barriers, the lack of motivation and the lack of visually engaging English texts. Therefore, the current study attempted to bring back a conventional way of teaching reading comprehension by integrating comic strips as an instructional media in the classroom. Employing Kemmis and McTaggart's Classroom Action Research, it was found that the implementation of comic strips successfully improved the students' low reading comprehension skill for 22 junior high school students.

Key Words: **Comic Strips, Reading Comprehension**

INTRODUCTION

According to a survey conducted by PISA in 2022, Indonesia was ranked 71st out of 81 countries in the students' reading performance category. It means that Indonesian students still have relatively low reading skills. Such low ability in reading can have significant effects on the students' academic performance in the long run. For instance, the students may struggle to comprehend and draw meaningful conclusions and information from a text. Furthermore, they may have limited vocabularies which impact their ability to understand sophisticated language. Later on, these

students may also have a decline in confidence to read and start losing interest in reading entirely. Such effects can pose certain challenges especially when the students learn reading in another language like English. However, in a world where the use of technology, especially social media, has taken everything by storm, mastering good English reading skills is supposed to be easy. Yet, in reality, the teaching and learning reading in English can be quite a challenge for both teachers and students.

Despite the pervasive use of technology and social media, especially in the classrooms, there is a growing realisation that these digital tools may have negatively contributed in students' interest in reading. For instance, there are immense numbers of information from technology especially through social media that can actually be distractions to the students (Rafiq, et al., 2019). This is because the constant streams of information are mostly presented in visually engaging yet short formats that can hinder sustained reading process and comprehension of the students. Moreover, the fast consumption of information on the social media can hinder the in-depth comprehension of the students since those contents are usually made for quick understanding. Prolonged exposure towards this 'social media reading' can eventually decrease the students' motivation to read real articles or passages which leads to low reading comprehension in the long run (Yanti, et al.,2020).

Meanwhile, reading comprehension is considered as the essence of all reading activities. Without having a good reading comprehension skill, students will gain nothing from what they read. Reading comprehension itself refers to an intricate procedure wherein readers actively contribute to extracting meaning from text by utilizing their pre-existing knowledge (Block, 2004). In improving reading comprehension, incorporating different elements to help students understand texts better and encourage them to actively engage with what they read is crucial. According to Nuttal (1982), there are five reading aspects which can positively contribute to the students' English texts reading comprehension, namely: main idea, references, inference, specific information and vocabulary. These five aspects must be taught by English teachers

during the instructional process in order to help students increase their reading comprehension skill.

However, as mentioned previously, teaching and learning reading can be quite a challenge for both teachers and students. Such challenge was found in an English classroom where one of the researchers taught as a substitute teacher. Based on the preliminary study, it was found that the students in the classroom had difficulty in understanding simple English texts, let alone comprehending longer and more complicated texts. Despite having been taught about how to read English texts in the previous grade, most of them still didn't understand much about it. This claim was proven by the students' academic scores in English especially from their quizzes and exam results which involved reading texts. In addition, the students claimed, during the interview sessions, that they had no interest in reading English because they were unable to comprehend the content of the texts.

The students mentioned three main reasons that contributed to their lack of interest in reading English texts. The first reason was due to the language barrier. The students thought that there were too many new unfamiliar English words. Subsequently, it was discovered that students excessively relied on Google Translate, often translating entire texts instead of individual words, leading to a limited acquisition of knowledge. The second reason was the lack of instructional media used in the class to promote reading comprehension. The teacher previously only utilised textbooks and whiteboard to teach them reading, and it eventually led to boredom and low motivation for the students. The third reason was the lack of appealing reading material to read. The students claimed that their social media contents were far more interesting to read than just reading or learn English from their student work books, making it harder for the students to learn reading comprehension skills. Therefore, to address these challenges, the researchers proposed the use of a conventional way of teaching reading comprehension by implementing comic strips in the classroom.

Comic strips are different from a comic book. Butler (in Rengur, et al., 2019) stated that a comic book is a short novel that packed its story in pictures, while a comic strip has its story

displayed into one or very few panels that appear daily in newspapers or magazines. Liu (2004) also added that a comic strip is a group of pictures packaged together to convey a story. Comic strips were popular before a significant decline in newspaper readership, prompting many newspapers to transition to digital platforms. Nonetheless, it is still recommended to incorporate comic strips into English instructional media, urging teachers to integrate them into their classrooms for various reasons.

First of all, comic strips can be entertaining to use for the students, they're also suitable for teaching a wide range of skills and various academic subjects (Snyder, 1997). Furthermore, Cary (2006) stated that using comic strips in the classroom can enhance students' comprehension of textual content, foster idea development, and instil a love for reading. This is because the readability criteria for comics are not solely dependent on words but also encompass the incorporation of images. As supported by Csabay (2006), comic strips provide the structure and the suitable stimulus to motivate students and enhance their creative working skills, encouraging them to express their creativity. Moreover, comics serve as supplementary cues, offering a conceptual foundation for organizing information. This facilitates the second language comprehension process, as students can create mental imagery systems when encountering unfamiliar words and expressions in a text (Purba, et al., 2021).

METHOD

The current study focused on the implementation of comic strips in an English classroom. The subjects of the study were 22 junior high school students. The study employed the four steps of classroom action research (CAR) by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), which consists of planning, acting, observing and reflecting stages.

Planning

In the planning stage, lesson plans, instructional media (i.e. comic strips), pre-test, post-test and regular worksheets, questionnaires for students' responses, and criteria of success were set and prepared. The lesson plans were designed by following the basic competencies of the national education curriculum for the second

grade of junior high school about recount text (i.e. 3.11 and 4.11). Meanwhile, the researchers designed three different comic strips to be implemented in the class by following Saraceni's (2003) key elements of comic strips which include panels, gutters, balloons and caption. The captions however, were written using simple past tense which highlights one of the characteristics of recount text. For the pre-test, post-test and the regular worksheets' questions, the researchers made 15 questions which focus on the students' main problems in reading comprehension according to the micro skills (Brown, 2004), namely determining the main idea of a text, making inferences, finding specific information, understanding meaning of words, and identifying references. As for the questionnaires, the researchers prepared a set of questionnaire which consists of nine questions to see the students' responses towards the comic strip implementations in the class and whether the comic strips have helped them with their reading comprehension problems. The researchers also planned two criteria of success in the current study, namely: 1) students are expected to demonstrate an improvement in scores from their pre-test to post-test results, 2) At least 85% of the total students score 60 or higher in the post-test.

Acting
The implementation of the planned instruments was conducted in six meetings. The pre-test was conducted in the first meeting, and then the next day, one of the researchers acted out as the classroom teacher and taught the students about recount text materials. Meanwhile, the three comic strips were implemented consecutively on the third, the fourth and the fifth meetings. On the sixth meeting, the researchers conducted the post-test and distributed the questionnaires to the students.

Observing
In this stage, the researchers observed the students' reading comprehension through their scores from the pre-test and the post-test results. Then, the questionnaires were used to see the students' responses after the implementation. Field notes were also used to write down details of important events that occurred in the

classroom related to comic strip implementation. In addition, a video recorder was also used to capture the classroom dynamic during the implementation.

Reflecting

After doing the implementation, the researchers reflected on the implementation of comic strips and the students' reading comprehension from the pre-test and post-test results as well as the results of post-implementation questionnaires.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Acting

At this stage, one of the researchers acted as a classroom teacher and implemented the cycle of classroom action research to improve the students' reading comprehension. In order to do so, the researcher gave the students the pre-test questions on the first meeting that they had to finish in less than 50 minutes. During the pre-test, most students showed their lack of confidence then they had to read the text in English. There were some students who were reluctant to work and some waited for their friend to finish, then they copied their friends' answers despite the researcher tried to convince them to answer according to their knowledge. In the results of the pre-test of the initial session, there are still many students who still make mistakes answering questions. On the second meeting, the researcher gave material recount text and asked questions regarding the generic structure of the text. However, the students were reluctant in answering, although some of them have answered pretty correctly in Bahasa Indonesia. They were also given some spoken and written practices about recount text's generic structure such as reading aloud and homework to write a recount text.

On the third, fourth and fifth meeting, the comic strips were employed in the instructional process. There were three main activities during the instructional process, namely opening activities, core activities, and closing activities. The comic strip was implemented during the core activities where the students were given one comic strip to be read together in a team. Then, the students were given the regular worksheet to practice answering

questions related to the five micro skills of reading comprehension. The worksheets weren't done solely by the students, instead the researcher discuss the answers with the class.

On the third day, the first comic strip was employed in the classroom. Some students seemed to be confused at how to read the comic because they weren't used to reading comics. Therefore, the researcher explained the aspects of comic strips and how to read it despite the apparent arrow instruction on where to read. The researcher asked questions using English during the core activities about what's explicitly drawn on the comic (i.e. the characters) which helped the students elicit knowledge. However, when the researcher shifted the questions that require them to read, some students thought the questions were hard because there were still some students who didn't read the story. Luckily, the students had reliable groups that could help him understand. This is in line with Swanson, et al. (2019) who stated that when students face complex issues, working together in a group can be helpful as everyone brings different skills and knowledge to process information. Some thought that the difficulty lied on the language, so the researcher had to use Bahasa Indonesia. As Hall and Cook (2012) argued that the use of the students' L1 can be beneficial in helping them understand the language.

On the fourth meeting, the second comic strip was implemented. The students began to show more interest in reading the comic and answering the questions. It could be perceived from the number of students who eagerly attempted to answer the questions given by the researcher despite still using Bahasa Indonesia. This was believed to be coming from having prior knowledge on the questions since the types of questions were similar with the previous day. This is because repeated exposure to words helps students access information related to those words in their minds, making repetition activities an effective solution in this context (Atikah, et al., 2018). Some were also eager to search for the meaning of some difficult words in the dictionary or asked the researcher about it. As stated by Purba, et al. (2021) that use of comic strips can eventually spark interest in the students.

On the fifth meeting, the implementation of the third comic strip was getting better compared to the previous meetings. Most if not all of the students answered the questions asked by the researcher with enthusiasm and more students answered in English compared to the previous meetings. Nobody asked difficult vocabulary anymore because they thought that the pictures in the comic had helped them a lot to figure out the meaning. This is supported by Thornbury's (2004) statement that images and visuals can assist in conveying the meaning of words.

On the sixth meeting, the post-test were given out to the students. The researcher explained to the students on how to work on the post-test questions. The students worked on the questions calmly and no one asked the researcher. They even collected the answers before the bell rang. After they had finished with doing the post-test, the questionnaires were distributed to gather the students' responses towards the implementation of the comic strips.

Observing

The pre-test and post-test data were analysed to determine if the utilization of comic strips had a positive impact on students' reading comprehension. Meanwhile, the questionnaires were also used to find out whether the students showed positive or negative responses on the implementation. The data is described as follows:

Table 1.1

The results of students´ reading comprehension in the pre-test and post-test

No	Students' Initials	Passing score is ≥ 60		Deviation
		Pre-test	Post-test	Post - pre
1	ABIM	40	77	+37
2	CCS	43	73	+30
3	IAS	43	80	+37
4	DDS	30	70	+40
5	DMP	50	80	+30
6	FM	47	83	+36
7	LA	33	67	+34
8	MRA	37	73	+36

9	MRA	57	80	+23
10	MRA	53	77	+24
11	MAH	57	83	+26
12	MFD	60	87	+27
13	MKI	57	90	+33
14	MKS	47	70	+23
15	MRR	47	77	+30
16	NH	60	77	+17
17	OZDP	57	83	+26
18	RSD	43	73	+30
19	RAA	63	90	+27
20	RSR	63	83	+20
21	RAP	37	77	+40
22	PZR	63	80	+17

From table 1.1 it can be perceived that only four out of 22 students passed the pre-test while 18 others failed the pre-test. Meanwhile, on the post-test column it can be perceived that all of the students passed the post-test. The deviation scores of the pre-test and post-test results are displayed on the last column on the right.

In addition, the researchers also used a questionnaire to find out the students' responses towards the comic strips implementation and whether the use of comic strips could help the students improve their reading comprehension in the aspects of identifying the main idea, finding specific information, understanding vocabulary, identifying reference, making inference. The data of the questionnaires are displayed in the following table:

Table 1.2
The result*s* of students´responses in the questionnaires

No	Description	Items	Rating			Total
			Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Students
1	Students' responses towards the implementation of comic	1-4	61%	36%	3%	22

	strips					
2	Students' responses whether the comic strips have helped them improved the five micro skills of reading comprehension	5-9	67%	26%	7%	22

From Figure 1.2 above, from 22 students, 61% (13 students) consistently answered that they agreed to like the implementation of comic strips in the class by the researchers, while 26% (8 students) chose neutral and 3% (1 student) said he/she disagreed to liking the implementation. Later it was found that the particular student did not like the implementation of comic strips because he/she wasn't always present in the class were often absent due to illness, which was a personal matter.

As for the students' responses whether the comic strips have helped them improve the five micro skills of reading comprehension, from 22 students, 67% (15 students) agreed that the use of comic strips was helpful to guide them determine the main idea of a text, find specific information, understanding vocabulary, identifying reference, and making inference. Meanwhile 26% (6 students) chose neutral because they said that the implementation helped only some of the micro skills, such as understanding vocabulary and identifying reference, but it was still difficult for them to determine the main idea of the text. As for the remaining 7% (1 student), he/she chose disagree because of the same reason as stated in the previous paragraph.

Reflecting

Based on the result of the pre-test and post-test as well as the results of the questionnaires, the researchers found that the results of the implementation had met the criteria of success. It could be perceived from the fulfilment of the criteria of success, namely: 1) Every student demonstrated an improvement in their scores from

the pre-test to the post-test; 2) Every student, accounting for 100%, achieved a minimum score on their post-test, surpassing the initial success criteria of 85%. Therefore, the researchers decided to stop the cycle and not continue the second cycle of the classroom action research.

CONCLUSION

Despite the use of technology and the emergence of social media in the classrooms, the use of traditional method such as comic strips to help students improve their reading comprehension skill is still relevant and favourable. The implementation of comic strips in this study has shown that it could successfully improve the students' low reading comprehension skill. Therefore, it is suggested for teachers to try various ways (digital or non-digital) to teach reading comprehension skills in their instructional process as long as they can attract the students' interest and motivation.

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