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Developing Seventh-Grade Students' Vocabulary through Digital Comics: A Case Study Using the Globalcomix Platform

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Abstract: Vocabulary development is a crucial component of language learning, particularly for adolescent learners in EFL contexts. In practice, however, many teachers in Majalengka continue to rely on conventional methods that offer limited contextualization for vocabulary instruction. To address this issue, engaging media such as digital comics can be used to motivate students and promote active learning. This study investigates how seventh-grade students acquire new vocabulary through the use of digital comics, focusing specifically on the GlobalComix platform, which remains underexplored in previous research. This study employed a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through non-participant observations that documented the learning activities of 34 seventh-grade students at a public junior high school in Majalengka. An observation checklist served as the primary research instrument, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that GlobalComix supports students' vocabulary development by providing contextualized input through the combination of text and visual elements. Students demonstrated enthusiasm, active participation, and improved comprehension during the learning process. Overall, GlobalComix offers an enjoyable and effective learning experience that enhances vocabulary understanding and fosters greater engagement in English language lessons. Future research is recommended to explore the long-term impact of digital comics across different educational levels and contexts, as well as to compare their effectiveness with other forms of visual media.

Keywords: *vocabulary development; adolescent learners; EFL learner; multimodal text; digital comics*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning is a persistent challenge for junior high school students, yet it serves as the foundation of all language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Without adequate vocabulary knowledge, learners struggle to comprehend texts, participate in classroom activities, and express ideas effectively. As Wilkins in Agazzi (2022) states, "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed," emphasizing the central role of vocabulary in communication. Early and systematic vocabulary development is therefore essential for building students' English proficiency (Sun & Yin, 2020).

Vocabulary growth is closely related to students' cognitive development and overall academic performance. It requires understanding the form, meaning, and use of words across contexts, supporting both receptive and productive skills (Robiya et al., 2024; Susanto, 2017). Nation (2001, as cited in Susanto, 2017) highlights the reciprocal relationship between language skills and vocabulary development. Research also indicates that receptive vocabulary knowledge strongly predicts reading performance, grammatical awareness, and comprehension (Sun & Yin, 2020). However, for Indonesian EFL learners, vocabulary learning is particularly challenging due to linguistic differences between English and Indonesian, leading to difficulties in pronunciation, spelling, and word recognition (Rosyada & Apoko, 2023).

In a junior high school in Majalengka, students exhibit similar challenges, including limited vocabulary and weak reading comprehension (Surmanov & Azimova, 2020). Addressing these issues requires teachers to select engaging and meaningful learning materials that motivate students

and facilitate comprehension. One promising instructional medium is digital comics, which integrate images and text to provide contextual cues that support vocabulary learning. Digital tools, when used effectively, can enhance vocabulary acquisition (Hermagustiana & Rusmawaty, 2018). As multimodal texts, digital comics combine visual and verbal information, making word meanings easier to infer and increasing student engagement (Aggleton, 2018; Juliana, 2021).

Comics also promote narrative understanding through the interplay of panels, sequences, and visual-textual relationships (Laubrock & Wildfeuer, 2018). When accessed through digital platforms, they require active interpretation and provide immersive learning experiences (Skwarzyński, 2019; Rizzi et al., 2023). Today, platforms such as Webtoon, Mangatoon, and GlobalComix offer accessible comic content for language learning (Al Farissi et al., 2024). GlobalComix, in particular, allows students to learn new words contextually without overreliance on dictionaries.

Although numerous studies report the positive effects of digital comics on vocabulary acquisition (Arief et al., 2022; Castillo-Cuesta & Quinonez-Beltran, 2022; Tacuri, 2023; Korompot et al., 2022; Rutta et al., 2021), research specifically exploring GlobalComix—especially among adolescent Indonesian EFL learners—remains limited. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the use of GlobalComix as a digital medium to support vocabulary development among seventh-grade students in Majalengka. Thus, the research is question is formulated: How do students develop their vocabulary through a digital comic?

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2003) to investigate how digital comics facilitate vocabulary development among junior high school students. The participants were 34 seventh-grade students from a public junior high school in Majalengka, Indonesia. All students participated in classroom observations designed to capture the vocabulary learning process as they engaged with digital comics.

To address the research objective, observation was used as the primary data collection technique. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer and documented the learning activities through video recordings. This approach enabled a detailed and naturalistic capture of students' engagement, behaviors, and interactions with the digital comic platform.

An observation checklist served as the main research instrument. The checklist included indicators related to vocabulary use, student engagement, contextual comprehension, and the ways students interacted with the digital comic medium. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes associated with students' vocabulary development. The analytical procedure followed these steps: 1) Familiarization**:** Reviewing observation videos repeatedly to gain a thorough understanding of the learning context and student performance; 2) Initial Coding**:** Generating preliminary codes related to vocabulary learning behaviors and interaction patterns; 3) Theme Development**:** Grouping related codes into broader thematic categories; 4) Theme Review**:** Refining and validating emerging themes to ensure alignment with the data; and 5) Theme Definition and Reporting**:** Clearly defining final themes and presenting them through descriptive analysis. This methodological approach provided rich, contextualized insights into how digital comics support vocabulary acquisition and the nature of students' learning experiences during the intervention.

RESULTS

This study aims to investigate students' vocabulary development through the digital comic, *GlobalComix*. The data was obtained from observation data, using an observation checklist as the instrument. The participants are the seventh-graders from H class, which consisted of 34 students. The researcher analyzed the data from video recordings during three meetings. The following section explains the findings that the researchers have found:

How Do Students Develop Their Vocabulary Through a Digital Comic?

After obtaining data through video recordings from observations during three meetings in the class of 7H, which consisted of 34 students, the results showed student activities in vocabulary learning through digital comics. Some aspects influence how digital comics can develop their vocabulary, such as visual aspects, typography, vocabulary, language and narrative, and media presentation. In the first meeting, the teacher gave the students the liberty to choose the stories from the *GlobalComix* platform as they preferred. However, in the second and third meetings, the comics used were "Captain Claws" from the *GlobalComix* app. The following are the research findings obtained in the classroom:

At the first meeting on April 30, 2025, the first aspect studied in teaching to develop students' vocabulary was the visual aspect. The teacher first explained the concept of digital comics. Students were made familiar with the display of *GlobalComix*. Curiosity and enthusiasm were shown at this first meeting when they were told that they were going to learn some new vocabulary from a digital comic.

Then, each student was asked to choose one comic available on *GlobalComix* to read, according to their respective interests, but it must be suitable for their characteristics and age. The teacher here simply facilitated and guided the students to stimulate them to read and understand the contents of the comic independently. The observation results showed that digital comics, as a visual medium, helped students learn new vocabulary in context. The conversation below demonstrates that illustrations in digital comics can support students' understanding of vocabulary in the story's context.

Excerpt 1:

T : "How can you say that the word **'youth'** can be interpreted as '*anak muda*' in your worksheet?"
S1 : "In the comic that I read, Entwined, most of the characters look so young, so I guess it meant '*muda*' or '*anak muda*'."

The example given in Excerpt 1 shows that the teacher asked one of the students after reading the comic on *GlobalComix*. The student assumed the meaning of the word **'youth'** because it represents *'anak muda'*. Another student also commented that the illustrations can help students develop their vocabulary during the second meeting, held on May 7, 2025. Excerpt 2 is the conversation that shows illustrations can help them understand the meaning of a new word:

Excerpt 2:

T : "Can you mention any new words from the digital comic you read?"
S2 : "'**Transformed**', Miss."
T : "Can you explain what it means and elaborate?"
S2 : "'*Berubah*,' because it is clearly shown that the character has changed into some superhero, and I have heard that word before. It is so identical with *Ultraman*."
T : "That is right, **'transformed'** means changed."

In the second example (Excerpt 2), it can be seen that the teacher was trying to ask the students questions after they had read the comic they had chosen independently. The students confidently answered by guessing the words based on the illustrations or pictures, even though they had not yet received an explanation from the teacher. Typography was the next aspect that contributed to the development of students' vocabulary. The text layout, font type, and font size in digital comics greatly influence students' understanding of vocabulary, in particular for those whose vocabulary is still developing. This was observed in the second meeting held on May 7, 2025. The teacher used a digital comic titled "Captain Claws" from the *GlobalComix* platform. During the question-and-answer session, the teacher asked the students for their opinions on the readability of the text in the comic.

Excerpt 3:

T : "Were you having difficulty reading the text in the "Captain Claws" comic?"
S3 : "No, Miss. Because the text was not small and was easy to read."
T : "What about the font? Do you think the font size was too large or too small?"
S1 : "The font is not too large or too small, Miss. I could understand what the characters were talking about."

This dialogue demonstrates (Excerpt 3) that appropriate typography, such as a font size that is neither too large nor too small, helped students grasp the story's content while also understanding the vocabulary used by the characters. With text that was easy to read, students were not only focused on the images but also more engaged in reading and understanding the words that appear in the dialogue, which ultimately supported the natural development of their vocabulary through the story's context.

In the third session on May 21, 2025, vocabulary learning focused more on student activities using the vocabulary they had found in the digital comic. Students began to develop their vocabulary more actively through activities involving synonyms and antonyms, as well as fill-in-the-blank exercises, and then it ended with students' reflection. Excerpt 4 is a clip of the interaction between students and teachers during the activities.

Excerpt 4:

T : "You have learned some new vocabulary from the 'Captain Claws' story, which includes, as you mentioned, the word **'attack'**, what is a synonym for it?
S4 : "It is **'strike'**, Miss,"
T : "Why do you think so?"
S4 : "Because in the comic, the characters, those cats, were fighting with other cats. So, I can guess that 'attack' is similar to **'strike'**, which means '*menyerang*'."

This dialogue shows that students not only remember vocabulary from reading the story, but also begin to connect it with other words that have similar meanings. This ability was essential for expanding students' active vocabulary. Besides being taught synonyms, students were encouraged to recognize the antonyms of some of the vocabulary in the digital comic story. One example of a word that is still being discussed is "attack". The teacher asked the students to find the opposite word of the given word based on their understanding of the context in the story. The following Excerpt 5 is the interaction between the teacher and the students:

Excerpt 5:

T : "Earlier, we discussed the synonym of **'attack'**, now, what is the antonym of it and why?
S4 : "I am going to go with **'defend'**, because the other three options, which **are assault, strike, and ambush**, are similar to the word **'attack'.** The word **'defend'** is the opposite of **'attack'**, which means *'mempertahankan'*. The reason I can guess is that the main character wants to save the world from evil."

The interaction given in Excerpt 5 shows that students memorized vocabulary, analyzed the story's context, and use strategies to guess the meaning through visuals and narratives. Students appeared confident when guessing the meaning of words based on their reading experience. In the next session, students were also asked to complete the blank text using language from the comic.

Excerpt 6:

T : "What word fits the sentence: Today was a _____ day at school.?"
S6 : "I think **'nice'** is fitting to complete the sentence, which closely means to *'indah'* or *'menyenangkan'* in this context. In the first chapter of the comic, we are introduced to their beautiful city."

Through this activity (Excerpt 6), students learned to recognize words in a visual context and apply them in new sentences. This demonstrated that with the support of digital comic media, students can develop their vocabulary through meaningful, relevant, and enjoyable practice.

The language and narration aspects also contributed to developing students' vocabulary. The choice of words in the "Captain Claws" comic was appropriate for the students' language proficiency level and is supported by contextual narration. This was evident in classroom interactions during the learning process. Although not all the comics' narration explained the storyline and helped students understand the meaning of vocabulary in its entirety through supporting visual situations and contexts, some students might feel confused because the illustrations do not provide clear explanations and English is not their mother tongue. However, in one session, the teacher asked students about new words they had encountered and their usage as given in Excerpt 7:

T : "Are there any new words from the comic you read?"
S3 : "'**Noise'**, Miss. It means *'kebisingan'*.
T : "How do you know?"
S3 : "The main character just minds his own business until there is another cat who seems to surprise him at the window. The main character is angry because the expression in the panel shows that he is shocked and mad and says, 'Don't ever do that again!'"

Similar interactions also occurred when students were asked to explain the meaning of other words they found:

Excerpt 8:

T : "Anything else?"
S2 : "I have encountered the word **'count'**, which means '*menghitung*'."
T : "Does the language and narration help when you try to figure out the meaning?
S2 : "Yes, Miss. The characters begin to count from one to three."

These dialogues (Excerpt 8) show that the vocabulary in the comic was not only accessible to students but also appeared repeatedly in various contexts, allowing students to understand and reuse it. Teachers also actively guided students' understanding by clarifying the meaning of words and asking them to relate the words to the context of the story. This made the vocabulary learning process more contextual, communicative, and meaningful.

The final aspect observed was media presentation, namely, how digital comics' overall appearance influenced students' vocabulary understanding. At the end of the session, the teacher invited students to reflect on their experience of using digital comics as a learning medium.

Excerpt 9:

T : "What do you think about the content and the display of the comic you read today?"
S6 : "It was fun, Miss. The visuals were clear so I could focus on the story and characters."
T : "Oh? Were there any difficulties?"
S3 : "I was a little confused because the story was in English, but the story was interesting, and there were texts and pictures."

This response (Excerpt 9) shows that an interesting media design helps increase students' attention, although guidance is still needed in understanding the language used. The teacher then asked another student as depicted in Excerpt 11:

Excerpt 10:

T : "Which picture or story helped you understand the meaning of the word the most?"
S7 : "The word '*transformed*'. It shows the cats changing into superheroes in Captain Claw's story.
T : "So do you think learning from comics is easy, fun, or confusing?"
S7 : "Yes, it is fun. The images provide intense visualization and focus on the storyline and characters."

Through this conversation, it was evident that the visuals and narrative were systematically arranged in the digital comic to support students' understanding of vocabulary in terms of form and contextual usage. Digital comics presented stories and served as an enjoyable and in-depth learning tool for students, especially for developing their vocabulary.

Discussion

In this section, the researcher presents the research findings obtained from the data presented in the previous section as addressed in the first research question, "How do the students develop their vocabulary through digital comics?" The researcher obtained qualitative data from seventh-grade junior high school students. The researcher's data were analyzed using an observation checklist consisting of five aspects: visual, topography, vocabulary, language and narration, and media presentation. Adapted from Komang *et al. (2021),* this analysis examined how students learn vocabulary through digital comics.

Observation results show that using digital comics provides a contextual and visual experience for students in their vocabulary development during the vocabulary learning process. GlobalComix can make students understand the meaning through a combination of images, text, and storylines that are interconnected in the story, and students become interested. This is in line with Mulenga & Marbán (2020), who stated that digital comics are suitable for learning because they have visual elements that attract students' attention. Despite the various advantages of digital comics, sometimes students use Google Translate to translate new words they find. However, they can still read at the same time, between reading the story and seeing the illustrations simultaneously. This aligns with Muthmainnah *et al.*, (2022), who stated that digital comics can attract students' attention and encourage interest in learning because of their visual display, less congested text, and familiar characters. This can make students who dislike reading more engaged and motivated to learn vocabulary.

The findings also show that students take part in the application activities of the vocabulary they learn, such as synonyms and antonyms, to fill in the blanks, which shows that students do not just memorize the vocabulary they have learned. Still, they can construct understanding based on context. According to Chaikovska (2018), students can expand their vocabulary by reading comics and teaching synonyms and antonyms. When familiarized with the story, they get used to seeing new words from their context and more easily understand and remember their usage.

The visual aspects, topography, vocabulary, language and narration, and media presentation also clearly help students' concentration on the content of the story without being distracted by the

confusing text format, and it can be said that vocabulary learning through digital comics such as GlobalComix can encourage students' learning that meaningful and increase students' confidence in recognizing and using new vocabulary. This argument is in line with Flores-González *et al.,* (2024), who stated that students' repetitive and productive vocabulary skills can be improved due to the association of form and meaning through images and student activities that encourage students to remember and explore vocabulary creatively.

Students showed enthusiasm in developing their vocabulary with GlobalComix because it made learning fun and avoided boredom, as they claimed that it was easier to understand the meaning of words because they could see the images directly, which supports that visualization provides additional context that facilitates understanding. This is in line with the findings of Fitria *et al.,* (2023), who stated that students generally like comics because of the pictures accompanying the story. The use of comics in digital format in the modern learning era, in learning, especially vocabulary, gives an interesting and adaptive impression for students and helps students understand and easily remember new words because the pictures aid in it and are more effective than just text. This is supported by the opinion of Kusmajid *et al.,* (2024), who state that digital formats have flexibility that the printed version does not have. Furthermore, Barbre (2018) argued that, compared to comics and textbooks, comics have visual appeal and far more attractive features. These features include visual elements such as single or multi-panels, frames, iconic symbols, and writing styles resembling handwriting; functional features include narrative rhythm (Aggleton, 2018). With these features, seventh-grade students are helped by the features available in GlobalComix.

In this study, students memorized and engaged in reflective and fun activities that encouraged their active engagement. It can be concluded that digital comics are proven to create a creative, entertaining, and practical learning experience in developing and enriching students' vocabulary. The results of this observation align with previous research conducted by Arief *et al.*, (2022), which showed that digital comics significantly improved elementary school students' English learning outcomes. They used a qualitative approach with PowerPoint-based media and focused on academic achievement through pre-test and post-test. Similarly, research conducted by Rutta *et al.,* (2021) examined ComicsCLIL using mixed methods in the context of cross-content and language learning (CLIL) in Italy. They emphasized that digital comics are not only visual aids but also collaborative media that support students in writing stories, understanding meaning through narrative and visual contexts, and active engagement in the learning and teaching process. Although the approach, focus, method, and level of education differ between the two studies, they are similar in finding that visualization in comics helps students' understanding, increases learning motivation, and makes the learning process more enjoyable and meaningful. This study provides a detailed description, adds the missing parts of the previous studies, and provides an overview of the vocabulary learning process through digital comics at the junior high school level.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the integration of GlobalComix as a learning medium offers a positive and engaging approach to vocabulary development for junior high school students. The platform enhances students' comprehension and fosters active participation in English language learning. Its visual elements, layout, vocabulary presentation, narrative structure, and multimedia features support students in recognizing and retaining new words by pairing textual input with contextual images. These multimodal features make it easier for learners to infer meaning, understand usage, and internalize vocabulary within authentic contexts.

Students demonstrated their vocabulary understanding through various learning tasks, including constructing sentences, identifying synonyms and antonyms, completing gap-fill exercises, and participating in discussions and reflective activities based on the vocabulary encountered in the digital comics. These activities provided evidence of meaningful vocabulary acquisition rather than simple memorization.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the growing body of research on digital comics in language learning and may serve as a reference for future investigations. Further research is encouraged to examine the long-term effects of using GlobalComix at different educational levels and across varied learning environments. Since this platform remains underexplored in the EFL context, comparative studies with other visual media—such as animated videos or graphic novels—may also provide valuable insights into their relative effectiveness in building vocabulary.

In practical terms, this study offers implications for English language teachers seeking innovative instructional strategies. The findings support the integration of digital comics into classroom practices to create interactive, visually rich, and motivating learning experiences that enhance vocabulary mastery and overall student engagement.

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