

**FOSTERING JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS'  
READING COMPREHENSION OF NARRATIVE TEXTS  
THROUGH THE USE OF ENGLISH-MEDIUM COMICS**

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Abstract

The research was aimed at improving the reading comprehension of the second graders of SMP N 2 Kediri by incorporating English-medium comics as teaching materials in teaching narrative texts. The study was a collaborative classroom-action research (CAR) done through Kemmis & McTaggart's (1988) four CAR stages: *planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting*. The study was conducted in one cycle, in which the second researcher served as the teacher during the implementation stage. The subjects of the study were 34 second semester students at Class VIII E at SMP N 2 Kediri in the academic year 2010/2011, who, based on the pre-test, proved to have low reading comprehension. The instruments used for collecting data included tests, observation sheet, questionnaire, and informal interview. The findings of the study reveal positive results of the use of English-medium comics both in terms of students' achievement in reading comprehension and their responses towards the use of comics in their reading class. The critical analysis of the results of the study indicated that comics aided the students' comprehension of narrative texts because they could facilitate the students' understanding of vocabulary used in the reading passage.

Keywords: *collaborative, comics, reading*

## **1. Background**

The teaching of English in Junior High Schools in Indonesia based on the School-Based Curriculum so-called *KTSP*—the latest curriculum—is focused on the mastery of the four language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Under the *KTSP*, the teaching of the four skills is conducted based on genre-approach, the main characteristic of which is the teaching of texts of various genres like descriptive, procedure (introduced in year VII), recount, narrative (year VIII), and report text (Year IX). Genre approach views that in order to be able to use the language, learners should know kinds of texts used by the native speakers of the language learned, the structures of the texts, the purposes of the texts, and the language typically used in the texts. Therefore, much of the teaching and learning process in Indonesian high schools, which is particularly true in reading lessons, is dealt with ‘training’ the students to be able to identify the main characteristics of English texts, including the generic structure of the text, the purpose of the text (*social function*), and the language typically used in the text (*register*).

Reading as one of the four skills taught in the English subject in Indonesian high schools plays a significant role. First of all, reading is a means of practicing language skill, that is, reading skill itself. Besides, the importance of reading, in fact, lies in its

function of providing English exposure (linguistic input) as well as knowledge input to learners (Cahyono, 2010). In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), and learning environment provides very limited contact with native speakers. Therefore, teachers so much depend on reading to give their students sufficient English exposure, and according to Renandya (2004 in Cahyono &Widiati, 2011), reading ability has become the main objective of English instruction in Indonesia. To give enough exposure to students, in addition to reading, English teachers can actually hope from listening lessons. However in Indonesia, listening materials are not easily accessible and it is a fact that many English textbooks for high schools which are sold in the market are rarely equipped with listening materials. Therefore, it is not an unusual picture to see if much of the English teaching and learning in high schools in Indonesia, especially in Bali province, is dominated with reading instruction. Given the importance of reading in the teaching of English in Indonesian high schools, it is essential that reading lessons should be made interesting and motivating for the students.

Making reading an interesting lesson, however, seems to be hard to be realized and this is at least what can be inferred from the preliminary observation done by the researchers in the teaching of narrative texts in Class VIII E of SMP<sup>1</sup>Negeri 2 Kediri,

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<sup>1</sup>Junior High School (English translation)

Tabanan, Bali. As revealed during the observation, the teaching of narratives in the class appeared to be monotonous and boring. That kind of impression can be traced from two aspects of the instruction. First of all, it was due to the reading materials used. Having to teach narrative texts, the teacher gave the students some folk tales, but most of the stories given have unfortunately been so familiar to the students, such as Snow White, Cinderella, Pinocchio, and so forth. Having a prior knowledge of the text being discussed can benefit the students in understanding it. However, since reading is a dominant activity done in the teaching of English in the class, using texts with familiar stories made the students lose their interest into reading the texts because the texts were easy and no longer challenging for them. Another factor came from the dull look of the narrative text used by the teacher. The texts used were usually taken from the students' worksheets. Almost in every reading instruction, the students—which belonged to young learners—were faced with a reading text which was quite lengthy and fully loaded with lines of sentences, without any interesting pictures at all. This made the students looked easily bored and unenthusiastic in attending the class.

Activities conducted during the teaching of narratives in the class under study were, as a matter of fact, quite innovative. It used to begin with individual reading of the text by the students followed by the teacher's reading-aloud. After that, the class was

guided to have a small discussion focusing on the characters of the story, the setting, and the identification of the generic structure of the text as demanded by the genre approach. The next step was group work in which the students were divided into groups of four. They were assigned to find the main events of the story and answered several comprehension questions related to it. A discussion of the students' answers ended the reading activity. In fact, the students following these activities found no difficulty in comprehending the text. However, this only happened when they dealt with the familiar stories because when they were given a relatively new story like "The Ant and the Grasshopper", they could not do well in answering the comprehension questions following the text. The interview with some of the students in the class indicated that the students' failure in comprehending the new text happened because they had problems with the meaning of new words used in the text. It seemed that being too much exposed with familiar texts did not give them enough experience to deal with difficult words.

The students' problem in understanding a new text was proved by the results of the pre-test. The pre-test results showed that the mean of the students of Class VIII E of SMP Negeri 2 Kediri was 61.65 out of 100. This mean, in fact, indicated that the students' reading comprehension had met the passing grade

(*KKM*<sup>2</sup>) set in the class which was 61.00. However, there were still 19 students, or 55.88% from the total number of the class (34) who still had scores below the passing grade. In other words, there were still more than half of the class who still had a problem in comprehending narrative texts.

As discussed above, there were two problems faced in the teaching of narratives in the class under study. The first problem was the low interest of the students which resulted from familiar and unchallenging stories and the dull appearance of the text used by the teacher, resulting in the students feeling bored and less challenged in following the lesson. The second problem was the low reading comprehension of most of the students, which was due to the students' lack of vocabulary. As reading is a very important skill for English learners to master, the two major problems found in Class VIII of SMP Negeri 2 Kediri should be tackled.

The present study focused on solving the two major problems faced by the Class VIII E students of SMP 2 Kediri in the even semester of the academic year 2010/2011 by integrating English-medium comics into the reading instruction of narrative texts. The study was aimed at answering three research problems, namely (1) Can English-medium comics improve the reading

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<sup>2</sup>*KKM* stands for *Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimum* ('Minimum Success Criterion')

comprehension of narrative texts of the students in the class under study?; (2) How is the students' response toward the integration of English-medium comics in teaching of narrative texts in their reading class?; and (3) What are the steps of integrating English-medium comics that can effectively improve the reading comprehension of narrative texts of the students under study?

The use of comics was chosen as a solution, first, because a comic commonly presents a story so that it can be used to teach narrative texts (Combs, 2003 in Drolet, 2009) that the present study concerned with. Furthermore, as stated by Csabay (2006), comics have some advantages if used as an instructional medium in the teaching of English. Referring to Oller's (1983) Episode Hypothesis—which states that texts, either written or oral, which are episodically organized can be stored and memorized much easier than those which are less episodically organized—Csabay contends that it will become easier for learners to learn English if they are given sentences that are related with each other based on a logical structure and a certain sequence of events such as that in a comic. Secondly, comics can facilitate learning of vocabulary and grammars. It is so since comics provides contexts and logical story lines that can make students better able to memorize and apply words and grammatical points introduced in comics.

Thirdly, being accompanied with visual pictures, comics will be able to increase students' motivation, and enable the

students to memorize words, expressions, and concepts learned better. Csabay further adds that the visual element of comics is also beneficial to the development of students' communicative competence because comics present everyday situations with the use of informal spoken language like idioms, slang, contracted forms, as well as cultural expressions. These kinds of expressions are completed with non-verbal communication like gestures and body language which are important aspects in developing communicative competence. Finally, comics are authentic materials and if students successfully understand authentic texts like comics, their motivation and confidence will increase.

As a teaching technique, the use of comics has been proved to be effective in increasing students' reading comprehension. An experimental study by Liu (2004) investigated the effect of comics on the students' reading comprehension and found that the low-level students obtaining the high-level text with a comic strip significantly gained higher scores than the high-level students obtaining the high-level text only (without a comic strip). Liu's study supports the previous study by Hudson (1982 in Liu, 2004: 229) who also found that the use of visuals (picture cues) worked better for lower proficient readers rather than more advanced readers because visuals can serve as a solution for the "deficits of lower proficiency readers" and that more proficiency readers deal more with non-visual information in the



reading comprehension process. Another study was done in Indonesia by Inderiyani (2011) who found that reading comics could successfully increase the reading comprehension and motivation of the seventh year students of a private junior high school in Surakarta.

From the advantages of using comics stated by Csabay (2006) and the positive results of comics as reported in the research by Liu (2004), Hudson (1982 in Liu, 2004), and Inderiyani (2011) above, integrating comics in the teaching of narratives was believed to be able to overcome the problems faced by the students of of Class VIII E of SMP Negeri 2 Kediri in their reading class.

Some researchers (Derrick, 2008; Csabay, 2006) have proposed some activities in which comic strips can be used to teach ESL/EFL students. Csabay (2006), for instance, offered four learning activities using comics. First, the students can be asked to arrange the pieces of a comic strip that have been cut apart into a proper sequence to tell the story. Second, the speech bubbles are separated from the comic and the students are asked to arrange the correct sequence of the speech bubbles. Third, the last panel of a comic strip is cut out and the students are asked to continue the story either in a written or spoken mode. Fourth, the students are asked to complete some missing information in a story based on a comic strip later given to them. In this study, the integration of

comics was implemented quite similarly with Csabay's fourth activity. The difference was that in the study, the narrative text written based on the comic was already complete. Thus, the students read the comic first, and then read the text later on. By this, it was hoped that they would be able to guess the meaning of vocabulary used in the text by associating it with the picture in the comic. However, in between the two steps, the students would arrange some jumbled sentences representing the main events in the comic to make sure that the students had already understood the story as suggested by Sheakoski (2008).

## **2. Research Method**

The current research employed a classroom action research (CAR) design by Kemmis&McTaggart, 1988). According to them, a CAR is a cyclic process where each cycle is conducted in four interrelated steps: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The research was done at Class VIII E students of SMP 2 Kediri in the even semester of the academic year 2010/2011 and accomplished in one cycle which consisted of three teaching sessions and another meeting for the post-test administration. In the study, second researcher served as the teacher. The subjects consisted of 34 students. The research was done in the class since it was found that the students there had problems in their narrative reading class: low interest in the reading class and low reading comprehension of narrative texts.

Based on the lesson plan in the planning step of the study, the teaching of narrative texts integrating comics was generally conducted through 7 stages, i.e. (1) the students read the comic silently; (2) the teacher reads the comic aloud; (3) the students are asked to sequence the jumbled sentences representing the occurrences of events in the story; (4) the students read the narrative text based on the same story as in the comic; (5) the students are asked to do the comprehension questions; (6) discussing the students' answers on the comprehension questions; (7) the students were also given a completion activity as a follow-up activity. The activity assigned the subjects to fill in a number of blank sentences with some words from the comics they read during the lesson. This was actually done to see whether using comics had some effect on the subjects' vocabulary understanding since based on the preliminary observation, the students' lack of vocabulary was regarded as the cause for their low reading comprehension.

In the study, three English-medium comic strips were used and all were taken from *Tinkle Digest* published by India Book House (Pai, 1997). The three comic strips were respectively entitled *Kapish*, *Friends of the Forest*, and *Those Cursed Sweet Grapes*.

There were four kinds of instruments used for data collection in the study, i.e. tests, questionnaire, researcher's diary, and informal interview. There were two kinds of tests used, namely

pre-test and post-test I. The questionnaire contained 15 items which were divided into 10 positive statements and 5 negative statements. (See Appendix 1 for the complete questionnaire). The items in the questionnaire mainly asked the students' feeling toward the integration of comics in their narrative reading class and provided 5 alternative answers arranged in Likert scale in each of the items. The informal interview was done to 7 students to find out in more depth information related to the students' response toward the use of comics. The data were analyzed descriptive qualitatively. Descriptive analysis was done to the results of the tests and questionnaire while the results of the researcher's diary and informal interview were analyzed qualitatively. The results from the tests, questionnaire, researcher's diary, and informal interview were cross-checked with each other to find comprehensive results of the study.

There were three success indicators set in the current research, which were determined from three aspects, namely mean of students' reading comprehension in the post-test, percentage of class success, and students' positive response. The mean score for the success indicator in the study was 61.00 out of 100, which was the passing grade (*KKM*) set by the English teacher in the class under study. In terms of class success, the study was considered successful if at least 75% of the subjects obtained score at least 61.00 in the post-test. Meanwhile, for students' positive response,

the study was considered successful if at least 75% subjects gave response under positive categories (*agree* or *strongly agree* for positive statements, and *disagree* and *strongly disagree* for negative statements) in the questionnaire.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

#### 3.1 Research Findings

Based on the results of the study, it was found that there was an increase in the mean score from the pre-test to the post-test one. The subjects' mean of reading comprehension in the pre-test and post test I can be seen in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Success Indicator for Mean, and Results of the Pre-test and Post-test I

Success Indicator for Mean (Passing Grade or <i>KKM</i> )	Mean of Pre-test	Mean of Post-test I
61.00	61.65	76.03

Table 3.1 showed that the subjects' mean in the pre-test is 61.65 and increases to 76.03, and that the subjects' mean in the Post-test I has exceeded the success indicator for mean set in the study. These findings revealed that integrating comics in the teaching of reading successfully improved the subjects' reading comprehension of narrative texts.

Besides an increase in mean score, the research results also showed an improvement in the percentage of the students who obtained scores which are the same or above the passing grade (*KKM*) after the reading instruction that integrated comic strips. Table 3.2 shows the number and percentage of the subjects who obtained scores below *KKM*, and who obtained scores the same as above *KKM*.

Table 3.2: The Class Success (Seen from *KKM*) in the Pre-test and Post test I

Scores	Pre-Test		Post-test I	
	Number of	%	Number of	%
<i>KKM</i> X	15	44.12	29	85.29
X < <i>KKM</i>	19	55.88	5	14.71

Table 3.2 reveals that there were only 15 students out of 34 (44.12%) who obtained scores the same or above *KKM* while by the end of cycle I, this improves to become 29 students (85.29%). The percentage of the class success in the post-test I was higher than 75%. In other words, the integration of comics into the reading class had successfully increased the class success as required by the success indicator of the study for class success.

In line with the previous research findings, the results of the questionnaire also indicated positive results. Almost all of the students gave positive responses to each of the 15 items in the questionnaire as can be seen in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3: The Subjects' Positive Responses in the Questionnaire

No of Items	Positive Responses (%)
1	100%
2	100%
3	85%
4	88%
5	94%
6	97%
7	97%
8	97%
9	94%
10	88%
11	94%
12	82%
13	94%
14	91%
15	91%

Based on Table 3.3, it is clear that the subjects' positive responses in all items have been above 75% and this means that the study successfully met the third success indicator for students' positive response in the study.

Based on the questionnaire results, 100% students stated that they like the use of comics because it could avoid them from boredom, 100% students agreed that they liked comics because comics are accompanied with pictures, and 91% thought that the use of comics could make reading narrative texts enjoyable and challenging. With regard to the advantages of comics, 94%

students said that comics could make them comprehend the narrative text more easily. Most of the students thought that comics could make them more easily identify the characters (85%), the setting (94%), and the plot (94%). Interestingly, 88% students stated that comics really helped them understand the meaning of difficult words in the narrative text. As many as 94% of them concurred that the use of comics could make them more confident in answering the comprehension questions, and 94% of them, even, agreed that the use of comics would be continued in the next teaching of narrative texts. Meanwhile to the negative statements, 82% students disagreed that the use of comics did not help them understand the narrative text more easily. As many as 94% students disagreed that comics made reading the narrative text more difficult and 94% students disagreed that comics did not make them motivated in reading narrative texts.

In support to the results of questionnaire, the students interviewed also stated that the use of comics could make them interested in reading narrative texts. They said that with comics, they felt no longer bored in following the reading class because comics helped make them better understand the content of the text such as the characters, the setting, and the structure of the story. Interestingly, they admitted that the pictures in the comics could help them to understand the meanings of new words they found in the comic, which in turn helped them comprehend the narrative



text given after they read the comic. Furthermore, they stated that pictures really helped them to add their vocabulary size, especially with regard to action verbs like *leap*, *lift*, *chase*, and *drag*.

### 3.2 Discussion

As discussed in the background of the study, even though the subjects' mean (61.65) as shown by the pre-test had fulfilled the passing grade (*KKM*) set in the class under study (61.00), the class success was still below the expected class success ( 75%) in the class under study. With the fact that only 44.12% students were successful in the pre-test, it can be inferred that the subjects' mean in the pre-test was actually contributed by a few number of subjects who scored high in the pre-test. After the integration of comics in the teaching of narratives in the class, there was an increase of the subjects' mean to 76.03, or there was an increase of 14.38 points (23.33%) from the subjects' mean in the pre-test, which was 61.65. The increase of mean happened because after the treatment in Cycle I, the number of the subjects who achieved or exceeded *KKM* was getting greater to 29 students out of 34. As proved by the results of the post-test I, the percentage of the class success was increasing to 85.29%, or there was an increase of 41.17% class success from the class success in the pre-test (44.12%) as shown in Figure 3.1.

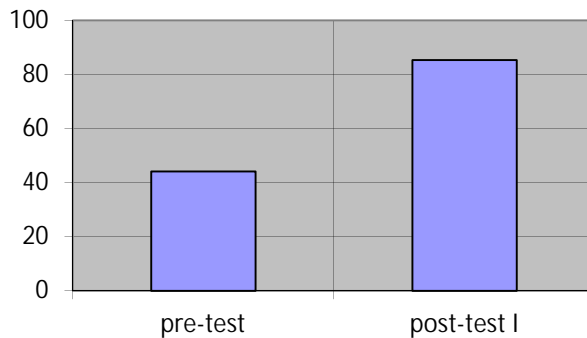


Figure 3.1: Comparison of Class Success Percentage between Pre-test and Post-test I

The fact that most of the students failed in the pre-test indicated that the technique of teaching narratives used by the teacher before the study had not been so effective to maximize the subjects' potential to comprehend a narrative text. Since the class success in the pre-test was only 44.12%, it can also be said that only a small number of subjects who were benefited from the teaching technique used by the teacher. The technique of teaching narrative before the treatment was actually almost the same as that during the treatment. The only difference was that during the treatment, the students were given a comic strip to read before they were given a narrative text which was written based on the comic strip. By this, it can be concluded that the improvement in the subjects' mean score and class success as proved in the post-test I was likely due to the integration of comic strips.

The fact that 85.29% students achieved scores the same or higher than *KKM* reflected that the integration of comics in the study could successfully empower the potential of the majority of the students. As discussed earlier, research by Liu (2004) found that comic strips accompanying texts work best for lower-level students. Given this research finding, therefore, it is reasonable that comic strips integrated during the present study was successful in improving the reading comprehension of the subjects, who based on the pre-test, mostly belonged to low-proficiency readers (55.88%, or nearly 60%). Another explanation why integrating comics was successful in this study can also be derived from Hudson's (1982 cited in Liu, 2004: 229) research finding. Based on his study, Hudson inferred that picture cues work better for lower proficiency readers rather than more advanced readers because visual element through the pictures "can overcome deficits of lower proficiency readers" and that higher proficiency readers "bring more non-visual information" to their reading comprehension process. That is why in the present study, the integration of comics—which also share visual elements—was able to foster the students' reading comprehension of narrative texts.

Liu and Hudson's findings as cited above can also explain why the teaching technique used by the teacher before the study was done was unsuccessful. Even though the activities of the

teaching technique were quite the same as those during the study, the former lacks one important element, that is, the visual element of the narrative text used in the teaching. Since most of the subjects before the study were low proficiency readers, the absence of visual imagery such as comics in the narrative text used did not assist the students' reading comprehension process. A reading text without visual imagery is, based on Liu (2004) and Hudson's (in Liu, 2004), is good only for more advanced readers, not lower-level readers. Since there was no visual help in the narrative text used as implemented by the teacher before the study, most of the students still had problem in their reading comprehension of narrative texts.

Visual and contextual elements available in comics are really important to help learners understand a narrative text. With these elements, comics can make learners better able to associate a word, an expression, and a concept with the pictures and contexts in the comic (Csabay, 2006). Therefore, the use of comics can also facilitate vocabulary learning (Csabay, 2006). As a result of being able to understand the language used in the comics, the subjects could easily understand the narrative text later given to them because the narrative text was written based on the comic by the teacher. This advantage of comics was supported by the results of the questionnaire and informal interview which revealed that the students felt the pictures in the comics could help them understand

the content of the narrative texts better. For them, comics helped them to associate the meaning of some difficult words they found, and assisted them to identify the characters, the setting, as well as the plot, making them confident in answering the comprehension questions. From the observation conducted during the lesson, it was also seen that the students often successfully guessed the meanings of some difficult words by looking at the pictures in the comic. For example, some students sometimes mentioned the Indonesian equivalent of a certain verb (e.g. *pounce*) when responding to the teacher's prompt, or when a student initiated to ask the teacher whether his guess of the meaning of a word was correct or not. The students also seemed to find no difficulty when they did the completion activity at the end of each meeting in the cycle. The students apparently had no difficulty in filling in the blank sentences with the words from the comic in that activity.

Besides helping learners with the language, the visual element of the comics can increase the students' interest in learning (Hsieh, 2010). From the results of the questionnaire and interview, it is clear that the subjects liked comics because they had some pictures inside. Motivation is key in learning (Csabay, 2006), and since the subjects liked the use of comics, they became interested in reading the text. The results of the observation during the lesson also indicated the same results. During the observation, it was showed that most of the students looked very happy and

enthusiastic, and they were all very serious in reading the comic and the text.

Based on the results of the study, all three success indicators set in the study had been successfully fulfilled. Therefore, based on the results of the reflection step, the study was terminated up to Cycle I. Even though there were still 14.71% students still obtaining scores below *KKM*, the study was not continued to the next cycle because it was believed that these students would be successful if the use of comics was continued in the class.

#### **4. Conclusion and Suggestion**

Based on the research results, integrating English-medium comics was proved successful in increasing the reading comprehension of narrative text of the Class VIII E students of SMP 2 Kediri in the even semester of the academic year 2010/2011 as showed from the increase of the students' mean score and the class success percentage at the end of Cycle I. Based on the results of questionnaire, interview, and observations during the study, the subjects' improvement was likely due to the strength of the visual element of comics in facilitating the subjects' vocabulary learning. The steps of integrating comics in the instruction of narrative texts that successfully improved the subjects' reading comprehension consisted of 7 steps, i.e. (1) the students read the comic silently; (2) the teacher reads the comic

aloud; (3) the students are asked to sequence the jumbled sentences representing the occurrences of events in the story; (4) the students read the narrative text based on the same story as in the comic; (5) the students are asked to do the comprehension questions; (6) discussing the students' answers on the comprehension questions; (7) follow-up activity: vocabulary-related activity, that is, filling in the gap.

Finally, based on this study, it can be suggested that other English teachers could use comics in their teaching of narrative texts, especially when they have low-proficient readers. Since it was likely that in this study the use of comics facilitated vocabulary learning, other researchers could further investigate the effect of comic use on vocabulary development.

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