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THE ENGLISH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE READING EDUCATIONAL COMICS BASED ON LOCAL WISDOM "THE STORY OF CANDI PARI

by

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Abstract:

This qualitative study explores seventh-grade students' perspectives on using "The Story of Candi Pari" educational comic in English reading instruction at SMP Dharma Wanita 7 Tanggulangin, East Java. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 selected students, alongside observations and documentation, which were later analyzed through thematic analysis. Eight themes emerged in response to two research questions. Students identified four strategies that enhanced reading skills: the integration of visual and textual components aided comprehension; gaining vocabulary in context was facilitated by various hints; making comics led to increased engagement; and visual panels helped in grasping narrative structure. Four additional themes represented the students' views: increased enthusiasm and enjoyment, a preference for visual formats that reduce reading anxiety, cultural significance which contributes to a deeper understanding through familiar local material, and pride in their local identity and history. The results indicate that educational comics rooted in local narratives can serve effectively as both instructional and reading resources. They encompass multiple dimensions of reading development, such as cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and sociocultural elements. This offers substantial proof of the effectiveness of culturally relevant multimodal approaches in secondary education in Indonesia.

Keywords: educational comics, the story of Candi Pari, reading skills, English language learning, local wisdom, student perspectives.

Abstrak:

Studi kualitatif ini mengeksplorasi perspektif siswa kelas tujuh dalam menggunakan komik edukasi "The Story of Candi Pari" dalam pengajaran membaca bahasa Inggris di SMP Dharma Wanita 7 Tanggulangin, Jawa Timur. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan 10 siswa terpilih, di samping observasi dan dokumentasi, yang kemudian dianalisis melalui analisis tematik. Delapan tema muncul sebagai tanggapan atas dua pertanyaan penelitian. Siswa mengidentifikasi empat strategi yang meningkatkan keterampilan membaca: integrasi komponen visual dan tekstual

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membantu pemahaman; mendapatkan kosakata dalam konteks difasilitasi oleh berbagai petunjuk; membuat komik menyebabkan peningkatan keterlibatan; dan panel visual membantu dalam memahami struktur naratif. Empat tema tambahan mewakili pandangan siswa: peningkatan antusiasme dan kenikmatan, preferensi untuk format visual yang mengurangi kecemasan membaca, signifikansi budaya yang berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih dalam melalui materi lokal yang sudah dikenal, dan kebanggaan dengan identitas dan sejarah lokal mereka. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa komik pendidikan yang berakar pada narasi lokal dapat berfungsi secara efektif sebagai sumber instruksional dan membaca. Mereka mencakup berbagai dimensi perkembangan membaca, seperti elemen kognitif, metakognitif, motivasi, dan sosial budaya. Ini menawarkan bukti substansial tentang efektivitas pendekatan multimoda yang relevan secara budaya dalam pendidikan menengah di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: *Komik Edukasi, Kisah Candi Pari, Keterampilan Membaca, Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris, Kearifan Lokal, Perspektif Siswa*

INTRODUCTION

Current research reveals that Indonesian students learning English still struggle quite a bit with understanding what they read, especially when it comes to stories. These problems come from not knowing enough words, not being very interested, and not having enough interesting things to read (Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023). Even though teachers have tried different ways to help, like using computers and easier books (Dahlina & Fadilah, 2022), there's still a big need for learning materials that fit the local culture and look appealing. These materials should help students get better at reading and learn more about their own culture (Azhary & Fatimah, 2024). This study wants to help by looking at what students think about using learning comics based on local stories, specifically "The Story of Candi Pari," as a new way to get better at reading stories and to value local traditions.

A lack of vocabulary makes these challenges worse; research indicates that a limited vocabulary is directly related to lower reading comprehension in Indonesian EFL learners (Lydia Kusumahwati et al., 2022). In addition, there are some areas where current methods of teaching reading to Indonesian students learning English as a foreign language could be better. First, despite the growing understanding of how important visual literacy is, not many studies have investigated using comic books as learning tools for teaching reading, especially for high school students (Riance et al., 2024). Second, although studies recognize that including local culture in language learning is important (Tantri & Santosa, 2024), there is a lack of real-world applications that mix cultural material with visual forms of media. Third, many current studies concentrate on academic results instead of the experiences of students, leading to a lack of representation of learners' viewpoints in research on innovative reading teaching methods (Aman & Wallner, 2022). Fourth, the unique features of sequential art the

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blend of text and images in comics have not been thoroughly examined for their role in enhancing narrative understanding among Indonesian learners of *English as a Foreign Language (EFL)*.

Studies indicate that comics promote vocabulary learning due to the presence of images that offer contextual hints, helping to understand word meanings without relying on translation (Insam & Evenddy, 2022). Additionally, the sequential visual narrative format of comics enables readers to recognize story components such as the setting, characters, plot progression, and resolution more clearly than traditional prose (Smyth, 2022). For readers who are having difficulty or for those learning a new language, this dual-coding effect improves understanding and memory (Nisa et al., 2022). Recent research supports the idea that comics are effective in boosting reading interest. Amaliyah and Rande, 2024) discovered that digital comics greatly improved the reading comprehension of elementary students in Indonesia. Furthermore, when comics include local cultural elements, they fulfill two educational functions: enhancing language abilities while conveying cultural values and historical information (Zulaikaha et al., 2025).

This research began with insights gained during School Field Practice (PLP) I and II at ***SMP Dharma Wanita*** 7 Tanggulangin in East Java. The research team discovered precise issues in teaching English to seventh-grade pupils, especially regarding their capabilities in understanding stories. Observations within the classroom showed that pupils displayed insufficient interaction with the reading materials provided in textbooks, had a limited grasp of story structures, and demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm for reading tasks. These observations led the researchers to investigate different teaching techniques using "The Story of Candi Pari," a local traditional story from Sidoarjo Regency rendered in a comic book style. One of the significant historical sites from the 14th century is Candi Pari, located in Porong, Sidoarjo Regency, East Java. A narrative based on Candi Pari describes the story as being built in honour of *Jaka Pandeleган and Nyai Roro Walang Angin* and contains teachings about ethical principles of integrity, cooperation and wisdom. By transforming this culturally relevant story into a comic format, the research supplies students with reading resources that link English language education to their local identity and cultural background. This cultural foundation is consistent with *constructivist* learning theory, which highlights that

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significant learning happens when new information relates to learners' current cultural and experiential backgrounds (Szabó & Csépes, 2023).

Existing studies offer considerable proof that using comics is helpful when learning a language, but we still need to know more about what students think and about resources customized for different cultures. Raharja (2023) conducted a study with Indonesian vocational high schoolers comparing digital comics versus standard PowerPoint presentations; the data clearly showed a major positive change ($p < 0.001$) in understanding the meaning of words, with the group using comics paying more attention and being more interested. Likewise, (Pratiwi et al., 2025) thoroughly examined 27 studies about digital comics in Indonesian primary schools (2020-2025), with results indicating that most of the studies (74%) showed good effects, like a 32-45% gain in how well students understood what they read and remembered new words.

Research specifically addressing local culture integration in comic-based instruction remains limited but shows promising results. Kusmajid et al., (2024) developed digital comics based on local wisdom for elementary students' reading comprehension enhancement, with qualitative findings demonstrating that locally contextualized visual narratives made learning more meaningful and culturally relevant. Aryani et al., (2025) conducted a study on digital comics rooted in folklore within the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) at a Surabaya high school, with 92% of students showing a sense of honor for their regional background and a new sense of value for time-honored stories. However, even though Tekin and İlhan, (2025) conducted a study using semi-structured interviews with 19 Erasmus students to explore their experiences with digital comics in learning foreign languages, the focus was primarily on improvements in language skills, with little emphasis placed on cultural aspects. This methodological gap results in significantly unanswered questions: How do students perceive their learning experiences with comics? Which specific aspects do they consider beneficial or challenging? How do they perceive the relationship between visual and written elements? What effect do cultural awareness and significance have on their involvement and comprehension?

This study is based on *multimodal literacy* theory, *dual coding* theory and *constructivism*. The multimodal literacy theory, as outlined by Unsworth et al., (2022), proposes that individuals generate meaning using different semiotic systems, which

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encompass linguistic, visual, spatial, and gestural forms. Comics serve as a distinct illustration of multimodal texts as they combine written language, sequential images, layout design, and the interplay between visuals and text to convey narrative meaning (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2022). *Constructivist* learning theory emphasizes that learners actively participate in creating their knowledge by engaging in experiences, social interactions, and connecting new information to what they have already known (Tohari & Rahman, 2024). Culturally relevant teaching improves constructivism by proposing that education becomes more meaningful when the resources used in instruction reflect students' cultural backgrounds, values, and life experiences (Sedik, 2025).

Based on these theoretical frameworks and the deficiencies identified in existing literature, this research investigates how narrative *reading skills* are enhanced by educational comics that incorporate local wisdom. The research centers around two primary inquiries: Research Questions. These inquiries underscore the viewpoints of learners, seeking to grasp how integrating comics boosts reading capabilities and to explore how students engage with, interpret, and judge reading methods utilizing comics. By prioritizing students' perspectives, this research offers substantial insights rooted in a phenomenological approach, thus enhancing outcome-focused studies.

1. How does the use of "The Story of Candi Pari" comic contribute to enhancing seventh-grade students' *reading skills* from their perspectives?
2. What are seventh-grade students' perspectives on using "The Story of Candi Pari" comic in English language learning?

METHOD

Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore seventh-grade students' perspectives on using "The Story of Candi Pari" comic in English reading instruction. The qualitative approach was selected because it enables in-depth investigation of participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations through direct interaction with research subjects in natural contexts (Lim, 2025). The research focuses specifically on exploring students' experiential perspectives across three dimensions: (1) pedagogical perspectives examining how the comic supports reading comprehension, vocabulary learning,

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and narrative understanding; (2) motivational perspectives investigating engagement, interest, and enjoyment; and (3) cultural perspectives emphasizing cultural significance, identity connections, and sociocultural aspects in teaching techniques.

Participant

This research was conducted from March 4-9, 2024, at SMP Dharma Wanita 7 Tanggulangin, Sidoarjo, East Java, Indonesia. The participants consisted of 10 seventh-grade students (6 female, 4 male), ages 12-13, selected through *purposive sampling* techniques. *Purposive sampling* represents a specific non-random sampling approach in which investigators intentionally select individuals based on specific qualities directly relevant to the aims of the investigation (Fadhillah et al., 2024). All participants participated in the entire series of comic-based reading tasks: reading the comic, group discussions, and creating their own comic versions. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from school administrators and teachers, and students provided verbal assent.

Instrument

Three instruments were employed for data collection: semi-structured interviews (primary), non-participant observation (supporting), and documentation (supporting). The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions organized around three perspective dimensions with 14 total questions covering pedagogical aspects (6 questions), motivational aspects (4 questions), and cultural aspects (4 questions). The interview guide employed probing follow-up questions (e.g., "Can you explain more?", "Can you give an example?") to elicit detailed, elaborate responses. Interview questions were created by modifying frameworks from (Rahayu & Rukmi, 2021). The interview guide was validated by two lecturers in English education and one seasoned English teacher. Inter-rater reliability for observations was confirmed at 87% agreement.



Figure 1. “The story of Candi Pari” comic used for teaching

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The educational comic titled "The Story of Candi Pari" is utilized as teaching material in this research. The comic merges English storytelling with culturally significant images that illustrate the folktale related to the building of the Candi Pari temple during the time of the Majapahit Kingdom in Sidoarjo, East Java. Using documentation, students were able to access and evaluate their work and interact with different materials during the analysis, which was an important aspect of triangulation.

Data collecting technique

Data collection occurred across three phases over seven days (March 4-9, 2024), following structured procedures for each instrument:

Table 1. The data collection techniques

<i>Instrument</i>	<i>Dataset</i>	<i>Volume</i>
<i>Semi-structured interviews</i>	• <i>Audio recordings</i>	a) <i>5 files (15 minutes total)</i>
	• <i>Verbatim transcripts</i>	b) <i>10 pages</i>
	• <i>Interviewer reflections</i>	c) <i>4 pages</i>
<i>Non-participant observation Documentation</i>	• <i>Field notes</i>	a) <i>4 pages total</i>
	• <i>Photographs</i>	b) <i>5 images</i>
	• <i>Student comic artifacts</i>	c) <i>10 works (from interviewees)</i>
	• <i>Activity logs</i>	d) <i>4 pages</i>

Data collection occurred across three phases over seven days (March 4-9, 2024). Phase 1 (Pre-teaching, Day 1) introduced the comic to 30 students and distributed materials. Phase 2 (Primary instruction, Days 2-4) involved independent reading (Day 2), small group discussions (Day 3), and comic creation (Day 4). Phase 3 (Post-teaching, Days 5-7) included reflection and presentations (Day 5), followed by individual interviews with 10 selected students (Days 6-7). Interviews were conducted in Indonesian (participants' L1), audio-recorded with consent, and lasted approximately 3 minutes each. Non-participatory observations captured engagement actions, feelings displayed, and cultural responses. Documentation included photographs and student-created comics.

Data analysis technique

Data were examined through Thematic Analysis in accordance with (Braun & Clarke, 2023) six-step process. The process consisted of: (1) familiarization with data through transcription and repeated reading; (2) generating preliminary codes identifying meaningful

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segments related to pedagogical, motivational, and cultural perspectives; (3) identifying themes by organizing related codes through mind mapping and visual sorting methods, producing 18 possible themes; (4) reviewing themes for internal consistency and external accuracy, with observation data and documents reviewed for cross-verification; (5) defining and naming themes, resulting in eight key themes categorized by research questions; and (6) producing the report with clear examples from interview transcripts, with Indonesian quotes translated into English while maintaining intended meanings and cultural nuances.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents findings from thematic analysis of interview data, supported by observation and documentation evidence. The results are organized according to the two research questions: (1) How does the use of "The Story of Candi Pari" comic contribute to enhancing seventh-grade students' *reading skills* from their perspectives? (2) What are seventh-grade students' perspectives on using "The Story of Candi Pari" comic in English language learning?

How the comic contributes to enhancing reading skills (RQ1)

Theme 1: Visual-textual integration facilitates comprehension

Visual-textual integration facilitates comprehension all 10 participants (100%) expressed that the combination of images and text in the comic significantly aided their understanding of the narrative. Students consistently mentioned that illustrations provided immediate visual context that clarified story meaning without requiring constant translation or teacher explanation. Observation data confirmed students spent less time consulting dictionaries and showed higher engagement levels during comic reading compared to textbook lessons.



Figure 2. Students individually read the comic

Theme 2: Contextualized vocabulary learning through multimodal cues

Contextualized vocabulary learning nine participants (90%) reported that the comic helped them learn and remember new English vocabulary more effectively than traditional text-only approaches. Visual representations provided contextual clues that made word meanings memorable. One contrasting perspective noted that abstract words still required additional explanation. Documentation showed students successfully incorporated new vocabulary in their created comics.

Theme 3: Comic creation promotes deeper textual engagement

Comic creation promotes deeper textual engagement. All participants (100%) indicated that creating their own comic versions required careful, deep reading and fostered active engagement with the text in ways that passive reading does not. Student-created comics demonstrated sophisticated comprehension accurate plot representation, appropriate character development, and coherent narrative flow.



Figure 3. Student-created comics

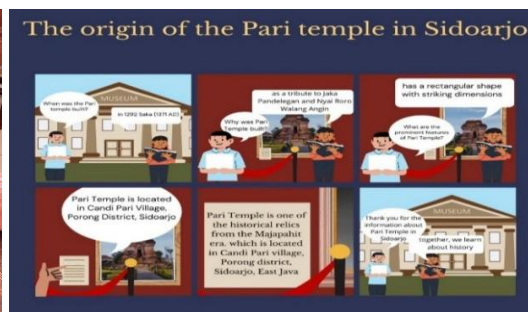


Figure 4. Students' comic book creations

Documentation evidence: Student-created comics demonstrated sophisticated comprehension accurate plot representation, appropriate character development, and coherent narrative flow. Many students added creative interpretations (different visual styles, slight plot variations, additional panels) that required deep understanding to execute successfully.

Theme 4: Enhanced understanding of narrative structure

Eight participants (80%) reported that the comic format helped them better understand narrative text structure (orientation, complication, resolution) because it visualized these components explicitly through panel sequences. Observation notes documented students' ability to identify story stages during group. Students' perspectives on how the comic supported their *reading skill* development revealed four major themes presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes related to reading skills enhancement (RQ1)

Theme	Sub-themes	Frequency	Percentage
Theme 1: Visual-Textual Integration Facilitates Comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Images clarify narrative meaning - Illustrations support plot understanding - Visual context reduces translation dependency 	10/10	100%
Theme 2: Contextualized Vocabulary Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pictures aid word meaning inference - Memorable vocabulary through visual association - - Reduced reliance on dictionaries 	9/10	90%
Theme 3: Comic Creation Promotes Deeper Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Re-reading for creation accuracy - Active meaning-making through production - - Critical analysis of narrative elements 	10/10	100%
Theme 4: Enhanced Understanding of Narrative Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clear visualization of story stages - Explicit identification of plot elements - Understanding of orientation-complication-resolution 	8/10	80%

Students' perspectives on using the comic in learning (RQ2)

Analysis of students' overall perspectives on comic-based learning revealed four additional themes presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes related to students' perspectives on comic use (RQ2)

Theme	Sub-themes	Frequency	Percentage
Theme 5: Increased Reading Motivation and Enjoyment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Comics are more enjoyable than textbooks - Sustained reading interest - Willingness to read more 	10/10	100%
Theme 6: Preference for Visual Learning Format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visual format suits learning style - Reduce reading anxiety - Makes English less intimidating 	9/10	90%
Theme 7: Cultural Relevance Enhances Meaningfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Connection to familiar local context - Easier to relate to story content - Makes English learning more relevant 	10/10	100%
Theme 8: Pride in Local Identity and Heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased cultural awareness - Appreciation for regional history - Pride in learning about local heritage 	8/10	80%

Theme 5: Increased reading motivation and enjoyment

Increased Reading Motivation and Enjoyment All participants (100%) unanimously expressed that reading the comic was significantly more enjoyable than reading conventional textbooks, and this enjoyment increased their motivation to engage with English reading materials. Observation data confirmed higher engagement levels, fewer off-task behaviors, and sustained attention during comic-based activities.

Theme 6: Preference for visual learning format

Preference for Visual Learning Format Nine participants (90%) expressed preference for visual learning formats, explaining that comics suited their learning styles better than text-heavy materials and reduced anxiety associated with English reading. One contrasting perspective noted no problems with regular text but admitted comics were more visually appealing.

Theme 7: Cultural relevance enhances meaningfulness

Cultural Relevance Enhances Meaningfulness All participants (100%) expressed that learning English through a local story from their own region made the learning experience more meaningful and relevant to their lives. Students felt more connected to learning materials featuring familiar local contexts rather than foreign stories.

Theme 8: Pride in local identity and heritage

Pride in Local Identity and Heritage Eight participants (80%) expressed that the activity fostered pride in their local cultural heritage and increased appreciation for regional history. Nuanced perspectives noted that while some already knew about Candi Pari from local history lessons, reading it in English and creating comics gave new perspective and deeper appreciation.

Discussion

This section interprets the findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. The discussion is organized according to the eight major themes from students' perspectives.

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Theme 1: visual-textual integration facilitates comprehension

All participants valued visual-textual integration for enhancing comprehension, aligning with dual coding theory (Evi Khoirun Nisa et al., 2022) and multimodal literacy theory (Unsworth et al., 2022). Students constructed understanding by simultaneously processing English text and visual illustrations, with each mode supporting the other. This corroborates (Unsworth et al., 2022) research showing that multimodal texts provide multiple entry points for understanding. Similarly, (Rande et al., 2025) found digital comics improved Indonesian students' reading literacy through visual scaffolding. Supporting evidence: Student S1 explained that pictures eliminated constant translation needs by providing contextual frameworks:

"When I read the comic, I didn't need to translate every word because the pictures already explained what was happening. For example, when there was a word, I didn't know, I could look at the picture and immediately understand the situation." (S1).

Student S7 added:

"What helped most was that the pictures showed the sequence of events. So, I knew what happened first, then what, and how it ended. This made me understand the plot better." (S7).

Connection to theory: These findings support social semiotics theory (F. V. Lim & Tan-Chia, 2022) that meaning-making is inherently multimodal. Students naturally leveraged both linguistic and visual systems, demonstrating sophisticated multimodal literacy capabilities. The present study extends previous research by revealing how students consciously experience visual scaffolding as a comprehension strategy.

Theme 2: Contextualized vocabulary learning

Students reported that comics facilitated vocabulary acquisition through contextualized visual cues. Visual representations made word meanings inferable, created memorable visual-lexical associations, and reduced dictionary reliance supporting (Nofrian & Sujarwati, 2023) framework that contextualized encounters promote deeper vocabulary retention. This aligns with (Misnayanti et al., 2024) study showing webtoons improved Indonesian students' vocabulary mastery. Supporting evidence: Student S2 demonstrated incidental vocabulary acquisition:

"There was the word 'construction' in the story that I didn't know before. But because that panel showed people building the temple, I immediately knew it meant 'pembangunan' (building/construction) without needing a dictionary. And because I saw the picture, the word became easier to remember." (S2).

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Student S9 noted the naturalness of learning:

"This comic made me learn vocabulary without feeling like I was studying. Because I focused on the story and pictures, the vocabulary just came naturally." (S9).

Important limitation: Student S6 noted that abstract vocabulary still requires explicit explanation:

"For very abstract words, pictures don't always help. For example, words like 'wisdom' or 'cooperation' still need more explanation." (S6).

This finding suggests that while visual cues are highly effective for concrete vocabulary, teachers should provide additional scaffolding for abstract concepts. Theoretical implication: Images function as semiotic mediators (Tohari & Rahman, 2024) scaffolding lexical knowledge within students' zones of proximal development. The comic format provides what (Insam & Evenddy, 2022) describe as contextual hints that help understand word meanings without relying on translation.

Theme 3: Comic creation promotes deeper engagement

Creating comics fostered deeper engagement through: (1) multiple re-readings, (2) critical analysis of narrative elements, (3) synthesis into visual-textual formats, and (4) metacognitive awareness. This transforms reading from passive reception to active knowledge construction, aligning with (Cusni Anjani et al., 2023) research on elementary students' comic creation enhancing critical literacy. Supporting evidence: Student S3 reflected on the metacognitive dimension:

"When I just read the comic the first time, I understood the story generally. But when I had to create my own comic, I had to re-read more carefully paying attention to character details, dialogues, event sequences, and moral messages. This process made me understand the story much more deeply." (S3).

Student S10 explained the critical thinking required:

"I had to think: which parts are most important to include? How can I convey the story's message through pictures? This made me think critically about the reading content, not just read passively." (S10).

Unique contribution: The present study reveals students' metacognitive awareness of how creation promotes comprehension of valuable insights not captured in quantitative studies. Students explicitly recognized that creation functioned as a "comprehension test" forcing true understanding. Theoretical explanation: Reader response theory (Hestika Ginting, 2025) explains this phenomenon: creation required "aesthetic reading" (deeply experiencing narratives) rather than "efferent reading" (information extraction). Documentation evidence

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showed student-created comics demonstrated sophisticated comprehension accurate plot representation, appropriate character development, and coherent narrative flow, with many adding creative interpretations requiring deep understanding. Pedagogical implication: Comic creation supports *project-based learning (PBL)* in EFL instruction an authentic project motivating engagement while developing *reading skills* (Puriasih & Trisna, 2022).

Theme 4: Enhanced understanding of narrative structure

Comics clarified narrative structure through visual panel organization. Panel sequences externalized narrative stages (orientation, complication, resolution), making implicit structures explicit and visible aligning with (Arika Rosalina et al., 2025) findings. Supporting evidence: Student S4 described how panel divisions enhanced structural understanding:

"In the comic, the story structure is very clear. The first panels show the introduction (orientation) who the characters are, where the place is. Then the middle panels show the conflict or problem (complication). And the final panels show the resolution. This panel division made me understand narrative text structure better than learning from theory alone." (S4).

Student S2 contrasted comics with traditional texts:

"Usually when reading long narrative texts in textbooks, I'm confused where the conflict starts or when the climax is. But in comics, the transition from one stage to another is clearly visible through panel changes and pictures. This helped me identify story structure." (S2).

Theoretical connection: (Cohn, 2020) concept of visual narrative comprehension applies comics provide external visible structures that students internalize as mental schemas for future narratives. (Tohari & Rahman, 2024) concept of external-to-internal development explains how comics provide external visible structures that students internalize as mental schemas, supporting Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.

Theme 5: Increased reading motivation and enjoyment

All students indicated greater motivation and enjoyment, providing further proof that comics improve engagement (Zulaikaha et al., 2025). Students indicated that entertainment made reading seem less challenging, visual attractiveness kept their interest alive, and story curiosity encouraged continued reading. Supporting evidence: Student S5 demonstrated intrinsic motivation:

"Reading this comic was really fun! Usually when told to read long texts in textbooks, I'm lazy and bored. But with the comic, I was even curious to know the story continuation. I even read the comic twice because it was exciting." (S5).

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This voluntary re-reading illustrates genuine drive for reading motivated by pleasure rather than obligation (Mirosunaily & Pramudiani, 2021). Student S10 expressed enthusiasm for future learning:

"If reading lessons always used comics like this, I would definitely be more enthusiastic about learning English. It doesn't feel heavy like reading textbooks." (S10).

Theoretical explanation: Flow theory, as outlined by Thissen et al. (2022) comics offer challenges that are well balanced, not overly easy (which results in boredom) and not excessively difficult (which leads to frustration) thereby fostering flow states characterized by high levels of involvement. Flow is described as an enjoyable mental state achieved during an engaging task, which arises when there is a suitable balance between the challenges presented by the material and the abilities of the reader. Crucial observation: Students distinctly compared reading comics (pleasant) with reading textbooks (uninteresting), suggesting comics can lower emotional obstacles such as reading anxiety (Azizatuz Zahro Al Faruq, 2019), thereby enhancing reading confidence.

Theme 6: Preference for visual learning formats

Students preferred visual formats because they: (1) reduce cognitive overwhelm, (2) decrease reading anxiety by providing comprehension "safety nets," and (3) accommodate diverse learner needs, particularly benefiting struggling readers. This aligns with (Gritter et al., 2023) findings that graphic novels support multilingual learners by reducing language barriers. Supporting evidence: Student S3 described how visuals reduce anxiety:

"I'm the type of person who learns more easily with pictures. When I see long texts full of letters, I immediately feel overwhelmed. But comics with their pictures make me feel more comfortable and not afraid to try reading." (S3).

Student S7 revealed comics' affective function not just cognitive scaffolding but emotional support:

"Reading English text often causes anxiety because I'm afraid of not understanding. But with comics, the anxiety is reduced because there are pictures that I can hold onto if I'm stuck with the words." (S7).

This metaphor of pictures as "handholds" powerfully illustrates the psychological safety comics provide. Contrasting perspective: Student S9 offered a nuanced view:

"I actually don't have problems with regular text. But I admit comics are more visually appealing and make the reading experience more enjoyable." (S9).

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This suggests comics benefit not only struggling readers but all learners through enhanced engagement. Practical implication: These perspectives support differentiated instruction incorporating varied reading materials, honoring learner agency while accommodating diverse needs.

Theme 7: Cultural relevance enhances meaningfulness

Local cultural content enriched the significance of learning, greatly reinforcing the principles of culturally relevant teaching (Ni Nyoman Tantri & Made Hery Santosa, 2024). Students indicated that familiar local locations rendered the material "real and relevant" instead of "abstract or foreign." This finding corresponds with (Kadek Icahayati et al., 2024) research demonstrating that comics grounded in local wisdom facilitate value internalization and enhance language skills. Supporting evidence: Student S2 expressed connection to learning materials:

"Learning English usually uses stories from foreign countries that are far from our lives. But this Candi Pari story is close to us, this is a story from our own region. So, I feel more connected to the learning material. I thought, 'Wow, I can tell stories from my region in English!'"

Student S8 revealed how local content redefined English learning:

"Sometimes when learning English using materials from the west continuously, it feels like English is not for us. But when we can use English to tell our own culture, it feels like English also belongs to us. So, it becomes more relevant to our lives."

Key observation: This reframing of English from a foreign language for accessing foreign cultures to a tool for expressing local identity represents a significant shift in language ideology with important implications for learner motivation and cultural identity. Theoretical foundation: According to constructivism, learning occurs efficiently when information is correlated with established cognitive structures (Tohari & Rahman, 2024). Familiar cultural narratives provide cognitive scaffolding that supports new language acquisition.

Theme 8: Pride in local identity and heritage

Students expressed increased cultural pride and heritage appreciation, demonstrating that language learning becomes a vehicle for cultural preservation and identity formation supporting (Nasir et al., 2025) argument about integrating local wisdom and strengthening cultural identity. Supporting evidence: Student S1 reflected on transformed cultural awareness:

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"Before, I didn't really care about local history. But after reading and creating comics about Candi Pari, I became more appreciative of cultural heritage in our region. I became proud that our region has interesting stories and history." (S1).

Student S3 identified moral values:

"The values in the Candi Pari story like respecting parents, cooperation, and listening to advice are important values in our culture. Learning about this while learning English makes learning more meaningful and also builds character." (S3).

Nuanced perspective: Students S6 and S9 noted:

"We already knew about Candi Pari from local history lessons before. But reading it in English and creating comics gave new perspective and made us appreciate this story more." (S6 and S9).

This suggests that engaging with familiar content through new modalities (English language, comic format) can deepen appreciation even for known narratives. Theoretical relationship: Social identity theory (Khadka, 2024) indicates that learning about cultural heritage enhances social identity and fosters a sense of belonging. This sense of pride has various functions: it fosters intrinsic motivation, aids in the development of positive self-concept, and establishes a foundation for intercultural competence. Character education dimension: Student S3's identification of values (respecting parents, cooperation, wisdom) demonstrates comics' potential for character development, aligning with (Ni'mah & Ahmad Farid Utsman, 2024) research on comics' character-building capacity. This dual function language learning plus moral education makes culturally relevant comics particularly valuable in Indonesian educational contexts emphasizing character formation.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Conclusion

This in-depth study aimed to understand how seventh-grade students felt about utilizing "The Story of Candi Pari" comic for their English reading lessons at SMP Dharma Wanita 7 Tanggulangin, located in East Java. Thematic analysis brought to light eight key ideas. Concerning the ways that comics improve reading abilities (RQ1), students pointed out four specific methods: the combination of pictures and words made understanding easier by lessening the need to translate; learning vocabulary in context happened because illustrations helped them figure out and remember new words; making comics encouraged more involvement by making them read again and think carefully; and a better grasp of how stories are structured came from visual panels that made the story's parts clearer. As for the students'

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viewpoints (RQ2), four main ideas came up: they felt more driven and enjoyed the lessons more; they liked the visual formats better because it made them less nervous about reading; the fact that it was culturally relevant made learning significant because it used local material; and they felt proud of their local culture, which helped them become more aware of their culture while also improving their English skills.

Limitation

This study was limited to a small group of seventh-grade students from SMP Dharma Wanita 7 Tanggulangin, Sidoarjo, over a relatively short research period of one week. Therefore, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other educational contexts or levels. Future studies are encouraged to involve larger and more diverse samples and to extend the duration of the implementation to better capture long-term learning outcomes.

Implication

The findings of this study indicate that embedding regional culture within English teaching resources carries considerable educational importance. Educators and those involved in curriculum design should be motivated to create and utilize teaching tools that link language acquisition with the cultural contexts of students, thereby enhancing the authenticity and significance of the lessons. Additionally, schools might explore the inclusion of locally inspired content like comics in language courses to promote creativity, student involvement, and cross-cultural comprehension.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured interview guide

The Interview guide consisted of open-ended questions organized around the three perspective dimensions:

A. Pedagogical Perspective Questions (6 questions):

1. How did the comic help you understand the story compared to reading regular text?
2. What parts of the comic made it easier or harder to understand the English narrative?
3. How did the pictures help you understand new vocabulary?
4. Can you describe how you figured out the story structure (beginning, conflict, ending) from the comic?
5. Did creating your own comic help you understand the story better? How?
6. What *reading skills* do you think you have practiced while using the comic?

B. Motivational Perspective Questions (4 questions):

1. How did you feel about reading the Candi Pari comic compared to textbook stories?
2. What made you interested or not interested in reading this comic?
3. Did the comic make you want to read more? Why or why not?
4. How did creating your own comic version affect your interest in the story?

C. Cultural Perspective Questions (4 questions):

1. What did you think about learning English through a local story from Sidoarjo?
2. How did reading about Candi Pari make you feel about local culture?
3. Did knowing the story was from your region change how you felt about reading it in English?
4. What cultural values or lessons did you learn from the story?

Appendix B: Thematic analysis - theme development process

Eight key themes were identified, categorized by the research questions:

RQ1 - In what ways does the comic improve reading abilities?

- Theme 1: The combination of visual and textual elements enhances understanding.
- Theme 2: Learning vocabulary in context using various types of cues.
- Theme 3: Creating comics encourages more meaningful involvement.
- Theme 4: Improved comprehension of narrative structure

RQ2 - How do students view the use of the comic?

- Theme 5: Enhanced motivation for reading and increased enjoyment.
- Theme 6: Favoring visual learning methods
- Theme 7: Cultural significance increases importance.
- Theme 8: Honor in community identity and cultural heritage