

Beyond the Textbook: University Students' Perceptions of Webtoon as a Digital Medium for English Vocabulary Enrichment

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary acquisition constitutes a foundational element in English language learning, yet many learners encounter significant challenges in developing and retaining lexical knowledge. This study aimed to investigate university students' perceptions of Webtoon—a digital comic application—as a supplementary medium for enhancing English vocabulary, specifically examining (1) how Webtoon facilitates vocabulary improvement and (2) which genre types are most effective for lexical development. Employing a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection instrument, six undergraduate students from the English Language Education program at a private university in Central Java were purposively selected and participated in this research. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically through open coding, categorization, and member-checking procedures to ensure credibility. The findings demonstrate that Webtoon facilitates vocabulary development through three primary mechanisms: engaging narrative content, contextual learning supported by visual scaffolding, and exposure to real-life language use including colloquialisms and idioms. Furthermore, students reported positive attitudes toward Webtoon's integration into their learning practices. Both formal- and informal-language genres were found to offer distinct advantages, suggesting that a balanced combination of genre types yields the most comprehensive vocabulary enrichment. These results underscore Webtoon's potential as an innovative and motivating pedagogical tool in English language education.



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A. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary serves as the bedrock of language competence, encompassing both the set of words stored in an individual's mental lexicon and those actively deployed in communication. Ambarwati and Mandasari (2020) assert that lexical knowledge directly mediates learners' ability to comprehend and produce oral and written texts, as an extensive vocabulary reduces the frequency of unfamiliar words encountered during reading and listening. This view is corroborated by Nordlund and Norberg (2020), who affirm that vocabulary constitutes an indispensable component of language instruction, particularly for young learners operating in foreign or second language environments. Afzal (2019) further contends that vocabulary forms the primary foundation upon which other language skills—reading, listening, speaking, and writing—are progressively constructed, and that without adequate lexical command, achieving proficiency in the target language becomes considerably more difficult. Corroborating this view, Klimova and Pikhart (2020) found that digital tools and applications designed for vocabulary

practice yielded significantly better learning outcomes than traditional methods, as they afford repeated, contextualized exposure to target words in ways that promote deeper cognitive processing and long-term retention.

Despite the recognized centrality of vocabulary in language learning, numerous obstacles impede its systematic development. Aji et al. (2021) document that the phonological–orthographic discrepancy in English presents a persistent barrier, as learners frequently struggle to reconcile differences between how words are pronounced and how they are spelled. This mismatch, coupled with limited intrinsic motivation, is identified as a principal reason why many students fail to expand their vocabulary beyond a basic threshold. Lutfiyah et al. (2022) complement this analysis by highlighting those motivational deficits and habitual avoidance of deliberate practice collectively reduce learners' vocabulary acquisition rates. Additionally, Susanto (2021) draws attention to the cognitive demand involved in mastering lexical nuances—including synonymy, antonymy, and contextually appropriate usage—as a further source of difficulty. Taken together, these challenges point to the need for innovative instructional media capable of sustaining learner engagement while simultaneously promoting deep lexical processing. Aloraini and Cardoso (2021) substantiate this argument by demonstrating that EFL learners who engaged with mobile-assisted vocabulary activities reported lower levels of learning anxiety and higher rates of autonomous study, underscoring the affective as well as cognitive benefits of technology-mediated vocabulary instruction.

In response to these challenges, scholars have increasingly advocated for the integration of technology-enhanced and visual learning media in vocabulary instruction. Wahyudin et al. (2021) note that conventional vocabulary teaching—characterized by rote memorization and decontextualized repetitive drills—tends to produce monotonous learning experiences that diminish student interest. They argue that teachers must select instructional media with care, ensuring that classroom materials generate a stimulating and enjoyable atmosphere. Among the technologically mediated alternatives gaining scholarly attention is Webtoon, a digital comic application that delivers a wide array of stories across multiple genres. Maharani (2021) explains that Webtoon's multimedia affordances—combining visual imagery, narrative structure, and diverse linguistic registers—make it particularly well-suited for capturing learner interest and facilitating incidental vocabulary acquisition. Erya and Pustika (2021) further note that Webtoon's diverse characters, engaging storylines, and multilingual content have garnered it a large following, especially among adolescent and young adult populations, thereby rendering it a potentially high-engagement medium for language learning. Yoon (2021) extends this line of inquiry by demonstrating that digital comics used in EFL university classrooms led to measurable gains in vocabulary breadth and reading comprehension, with participants citing visual narrative scaffolding as the primary mechanism facilitating their lexical inference and word retention.

Empirical evidence supports the efficacy of Webtoon as a vocabulary learning tool. Sari et al. (2023) reported that engagement with the Line Webtoon application exerted a measurable positive influence on students' lexical knowledge. Tifani et al. (2020) demonstrated that storytelling techniques mediated through Webtoon increased students' confidence in oral English production, attributing this outcome to the platform's graphic narrative format that fosters sustained reading motivation. In parallel, Castillo-Cuesta and Quinonez-Beltran (2022) established, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, that digital comics constituted an effective medium for EFL vocabulary learning, reinforcing the argument that visual-narrative formats can meaningfully augment lexical development.

Several related studies further contextualize the current inquiry. Aquariza and Susanto (2023) investigated comic strips as teaching aids for EFL vocabulary and found that they successfully promoted vocabulary retention and reading motivation. Sharma (2020) argued more broadly that comics represent a versatile tool for language teaching through literature, while Juliana (2021) specifically examined how comic strip use influenced student motivation in vocabulary mastery, finding significant benefits. The present study diverges from this body of work by positioning university students—rather than teachers or younger learners—as the primary research subjects, and by exploring both how Webtoon improves vocabulary and which genre types prove most effective in doing so. Furthermore, while prior research has documented immediate vocabulary gains attributable to Webtoon use, longitudinal research tracking sustained lexical development over time remains scarce, constituting a gap the present study begins to address.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study draws on three interrelated constructs. First, incidental vocabulary acquisition theory (Nation, 2001) posits that learners can acquire lexical knowledge without deliberate memorization when they engage meaningfully with comprehensible input—a process that visual narrative media such as Webtoon are well-positioned to support. Second, Mayer's (2009) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning provides a cognitive basis for understanding how the concurrent processing of verbal and visual information in comics enhances meaning construction and retention. Third, the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) suggests that low-anxiety, self-directed learning environments reduce barriers to language acquisition—a condition that the leisure-oriented consumption of Webtoon may naturally foster. Collectively, these frameworks provide a conceptual lens through which students' perceptions of Webtoon can be interpreted not merely as user preferences, but as theoretically grounded indicators of effective vocabulary learning conditions. Against this backdrop, this study aims to (1) identify the mechanisms through which Webtoon facilitates English vocabulary improvement among university students, and (2) determine which Webtoon genre types are perceived as most effective for lexical development.

B. METHODS

1. Participants

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, which is suited to investigating phenomena as they occur naturally without experimental manipulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted in three sequential stages. In the first stage, purposive sampling was used to select participants who met the criterion of regular Webtoon use, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. In the second stage, semi-structured interviews were administered individually, audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. In the third stage, the transcribed data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis procedure: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Analytical rigor was ensured through member-checking, whereby participants reviewed the initial findings to verify their accuracy and representativeness. Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the analytical process to minimize researcher bias.

2. Data Analysis

This study adopted a qualitative research design, employing semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection instrument. The research targeted undergraduate students enrolled in the English Language Education program at a private university in Central Java Province, Indonesia. Participants were aged between 19 and 22 years and were purposively selected on the basis of their regular use of the Webtoon application, ensuring informational depth and relevance. A total of six students participated in the study, a sample size consistent with the depth-oriented aims of qualitative inquiry (Afzal, 2019). This approach is consistent with the purposive sampling rationale outlined by Gentles et al. (2015), who argue that in qualitative health and education research, participant selection should prioritize informational richness over numerical sufficiency, and that samples of five to ten participants are routinely sufficient to achieve analytical saturation.

3. Instrument and Procedure

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, a methodological choice that affords researchers sufficient structural consistency to ensure comparability of responses while simultaneously permitting adaptive follow-up questioning in response to participants' individual narratives (Juliana, 2021). Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with established research ethics protocols. Each interview session was guided by eight questions, comprising two core questions and six supplementary questions. The two core questions addressed: (1) the mechanisms through which Webtoon supports vocabulary improvement; and (2) the genre types that participants perceived as most effective for vocabulary enhancement. Participants were encouraged to ground their responses in personal experience. All interview sessions were audio-recorded, subsequently transcribed verbatim, and then subjected to thematic analysis to generate findings.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Data Analyst

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a systematic procedure for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative datasets (Castillo-Cuesta & Quinonez-Beltran, 2022). The researcher first conducted open coding to segment the transcripts into discrete meaning units. These units were then grouped into categories reflecting shared semantic content. Following data reduction to eliminate responses that were tangential to the research indicators, the remaining data were synthesized and organized according to the study's thematic framework. Findings were subsequently verified through member-checking procedures to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the results.

Based on the semi-structured interviews conducted with six participants, the researcher identified and categorized the ways in which Webtoon contributes to students' vocabulary development. The consolidated findings are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of How Webtoon Improves Vocabulary

Research Focus	Category	Representative Learner Responses
Webtoon Improves Vocabulary	Engaging Content	<i>"By presenting new words in different contexts, it helps me to understand and remember the vocabulary better."</i> <i>"For Webtoons, there are many titles, so there are also many backgrounds. Some tell stories, for example, about the past or ancient kingdoms."</i> <i>"I find new words in Webtoons more often due to the use of colloquialisms, slang, and genre variations that introduce new vocabulary."</i>
	Contextual Learning	<i>"Webtoon visualization helps me to understand the meaning of new words by providing visual context that supports the text—for example, the images and expressions of the characters can help me guess the meaning of words through the situations and actions depicted."</i> <i>"Visualization is very important, because with it, if there is a difficult word, it will create a context so that words that were previously not understood, by looking at the picture, become more understood."</i>
	Real-life Language Use	<i>"I found it useful because the use of everyday language and slang in Webtoon was very helpful. It provides an understanding of how language is used in everyday conversation, including informal expressions and idioms not always present in textbooks."</i> <i>"Yes, the use of colloquialisms and slang also helps me to understand the variety of language used in everyday situations."</i>

The data presented in Table 1 reveal that the majority of participants identified three overarching mechanisms through which Webtoon facilitates vocabulary development. First, the platform's engaging content—including diverse storylines set across varied historical and cultural contexts—was reported to expose learners to a broad range of new lexical items. Second, the visual contextualization afforded by Webtoon's comic format enabled participants to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words by interpreting the accompanying imagery and character interactions. Third,

Webtoon's incorporation of authentic, informal language—including colloquialisms, idioms, and slang—provided learners with exposure to naturally occurring vocabulary not typically encountered in formal textbook instruction.

A quantitative summary of participant responses further illustrates the distribution of perceived benefits: engaging content was cited by all six participants, contextual learning was similarly identified by all six, and real-life language use was reported by five of the six participants. This near-unanimous endorsement across categories indicates a high degree of consensus regarding Webtoon's multidimensional contribution to vocabulary development.

Table 2. Genre Types and Their Perceived Effectiveness for Vocabulary Enhancement

Research Focus	Genre Type	Representative Learner Responses
Genres Most Effective for Vocabulary Improvement	Formal Language Genre	<i>"Genres with more formal language use are usually more effective for increasing higher-level vocabulary because they use more technical terms and deeper nuances of language."</i> <i>"Genres with more formalized language use may be more effective for improving vocabulary in terms of richness of vocabulary and understanding of contexts that may be broader."</i>
	Simple Language Genre	<i>"Genres with simpler language are more accessible to my brain. Because it's already quite familiar with the word, it will be easier to remember."</i> <i>"Genre with simple language is also important as it helps students understand everyday language and improves fluency in communication."</i>

The findings presented in table 2 indicate that students perceived both formal- and informal-language genres as effective, albeit in distinct ways. Formal-language genres—such as historical, fantasy, or drama narratives—were valued for their capacity to introduce advanced, domain-specific vocabulary and to expose learners to complex syntactic structures. In contrast, genres employing simpler, colloquial language were appreciated for their accessibility and their role in building familiarity with everyday communicative expressions. Taken together, the results suggest that neither genre type is inherently superior; rather, a complementary integration of both contributes optimally to comprehensive vocabulary development.

2. DISCUSSION

The results of this study align with a growing body of literature affirming the pedagogical value of digital comics and visual narrative media in foreign and second language vocabulary instruction. Novanti and Suprayogi (2021) contend that Webtoon's user-friendly interface and accessibility—available for download via the Play Store and usable at any time and location—make it a particularly practical resource for university students seeking supplementary language practice. The platform's capacity to accommodate leisure-time learning removes temporal and spatial constraints that often inhibit engagement with traditional learning materials. Ramli et al. (2022) provide convergent evidence, reporting that Indonesian EFL university students who incorporated digital media into their independent study routines outside formal class hours demonstrated measurably higher vocabulary growth compared to those who confined their practice to scheduled classroom sessions, attributing this advantage to increased frequency of target language exposure.

The current findings regarding the role of engaging content in vocabulary acquisition are consistent with those of Sorohiti and Kirsan (2023), who demonstrated that regular engagement with Webtoon narratives fosters habitual reading practices that, in turn, promote consistent exposure to new lexical items. Frequent, repeated encounters with vocabulary in varied narrative contexts—as described by Efendi (2022) and Sitinjak et al. (2022)—facilitate the kind of deep processing associated with long-term retention. The visual nature of Webtoon comics reinforces this process: as participants in the present study indicated, character expressions, situational cues, and graphical representations provide contextual scaffolding that assists in lexical inference and meaning-making.

The genre differentiation identified in this study has important implications for vocabulary instruction. Formal-language genres were perceived to advance higher-order lexical knowledge by introducing technical terminology and complex idiomatic expressions, thereby broadening the range of academic and professional registers available to learners. This finding resonates with the argument advanced by Khudlari and Efendi (2022) that Webtoon's genre diversity enables learners to simultaneously develop multiple dimensions of language competence—spanning both formal and informal registers. Conversely, genres employing everyday language supported the development of communicative fluency, enabling students to internalize common phrases and conversational conventions in naturalistic contexts. The data thus suggest that optimal vocabulary learning outcomes are achieved when learners engage with a balanced repertoire of genre types, a conclusion consonant with recommendations for diversified input in communicative language teaching. Alsowat (2016) provides empirical grounding for this recommendation, finding that EFL learners who engaged with digitally mediated texts spanning both formal and informal registers outperformed single-register groups on measures of both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge.

The predominantly positive perceptions reported by students in this study corroborate the broader affective dimension of vocabulary learning. Engaging with content that is perceived as enjoyable and motivating reduces the cognitive burden associated with deliberate memorization (Aji et al., 2021). Furthermore, the interactive and multimodal character of Webtoon—integrating image, text, and narrative—corresponds to established principles of multimedia learning, which posit that the concurrent processing of verbal and visual information enhances comprehension and retention (Castillo-Cuesta & Quinonez-Beltran, 2022). By situating vocabulary within meaningful narrative contexts, Webtoon mitigates the decontextualized character of conventional vocabulary instruction and supports incidental acquisition through

sustained engagement with authentic-like language input. Peters and Webb (2018) corroborate this mechanism, demonstrating in a controlled study that incidental vocabulary learning through meaning-focused reading of multimodal texts produced robust form-meaning mappings, particularly when the surrounding visual and narrative context reduced the ambiguity of unfamiliar lexical items. This pattern is further echoed in research on other digital media formats: Prayoga (2022), writing in *Exposure: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris*, found that crossword puzzle mobile games similarly enhanced vocabulary engagement among young learners by combining challenge, curiosity, and fantasy elements—underscoring that the common thread across effective digital vocabulary media is their capacity to sustain learner motivation through interactive, multimodal experiences.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study investigated university students' perceptions of Webtoon as a medium for English vocabulary enhancement, addressing two core questions: how Webtoon facilitates vocabulary improvement and which genre types are most conducive to lexical development. The findings indicate that students hold consistently positive attitudes toward Webtoon as a vocabulary learning tool, attributing its effectiveness to three principal mechanisms: engaging narrative content that sustains motivation and promotes repeated lexical exposure; visual contextualization that supports inferential meaning-making for unfamiliar words; and the use of authentic, real-life language—including colloquialisms, slang, and idioms—that supplements formal vocabulary instruction. With respect to genre, both formal-language and informal-language genres were perceived as valuable, albeit for different reasons; formal genres expand advanced and domain-specific vocabulary, while informal genres strengthen everyday communicative competence. A balanced integration of both genre types is therefore recommended to maximize vocabulary learning outcomes.

These findings carry practical implications for English language educators. Webtoon may be productively incorporated as a supplementary learning medium in university-level English courses, enabling students to engage with authentic linguistic input in a low-anxiety, self-directed context. Future research is encouraged to examine the long-term effects of Webtoon use on lexical retention, to identify genre-specific recommendations for learners at different proficiency levels, and to explore viable strategies for integrating Webtoon into formal curricular frameworks. Reinhardt (2019) argues that the full pedagogical potential of digital media in language learning remains unrealized in many institutional contexts due to a persistent gap between informal learner use and formal curricular integration; bridging this gap through principled task design and teacher professional development constitutes a pressing agenda for applied linguistics researchers and practitioners alike.

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