



## From Panels to Proficiency: Exploring How Digital Comics Boost EFL Students' Reading Engagement and Strategies

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### Article Info

Submitted: September, 2025

Accepted : October, 2025

Published : October, 2025

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### Keywords:

Digital Comics, EFL Students,  
Reading Engagement, Reading  
Strategies

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### Abstract

EFL students often face challenges in reading comprehension, particularly due to low motivation and difficulties in understanding complex texts. Despite the growing popularity of digital comics as a form of extensive reading, limited studies have explored how they support students' engagement and strategy use during reading. This study aimed to explore EFL students' engagement with digital comics and identify the reading strategies they employ to aid their reading comprehension. A qualitative case study approach was used in this research, and the data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five third- and fourth-year students from the English Education Study Program at the University of Jambi. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data. The findings revealed that students showed behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement while reading digital comics. They demonstrated frequent and flexible reading habits, strong interest in visuals and storylines, and mental efforts to overcome reading challenges. Additionally, students employed various reading strategies, including visualizing, making inferences, predicting, monitoring comprehension, re-reading, using translation tools, and taking notes. These findings suggest that digital comics can enhance students' motivation, support their reading processes, and improve reading comprehension through engagement and strategic reading.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the context of English language learning, EFL students are required to comprehend various types of texts, both academic and non-academic, such as textbooks, scholarly articles, and digital content. Reading comprehension is

crucial as it supports students in acquiring information, expanding vocabulary, and completing academic tasks. However, field observations show that many students still struggle to understand English texts. These difficulties are generally associated with limited vocabulary, low reading motivation, and a lack of engagement with texts, especially when the texts are lengthy and uninteresting (Diana & Markhamah, 2023; Robbani & Khoirotunnisa, 2021). The 2022 PISA data reported by the OECD also highlights the low reading interest among Indonesian students. Out of 81 participating countries, Indonesia ranked 68th, with an average score well below the international standard (OECD, 2022). These findings emphasize the urgency of exploring more engaging and accessible reading materials to enhance students' involvement and improve their reading comprehension skills.

Reading comprehension itself is a complex process and not just word recognition. This process requires readers to construct meaning, draw conclusions, and connect information with prior knowledge (Alghonaim, 2020; Butterfuss et al., 2020). Previous studies emphasize that vocabulary knowledge, reading fluency, and the use of strategies are crucial for comprehension at the literal, interpretive, and critical levels (Robbins, 1977; Fitria, 2019). In this case, student engagement also has a big influence on reading activities, which eventually improves students' reading skills. Engagement includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, ranging from reading frequency and interest to the strategic use of mental effort (Fredricks et al., 2004; Guthrie et al., 2012).

In this case, digital comics can be an effective reading medium to improve both engagement and comprehension. By combining text and images, digital comics provide an interesting reading experience. Recently, it has emerged as one of the popular forms of extensive reading materials, especially among young readers. Their visual appeal, concise dialogue, and accessibility through platforms like Webtoon and manga sites make them an attractive medium option for students with varying levels of English proficiency (Sorohiti & Kirsan, 2023; Erya & Pustika, 2021). Previous studies have shown the benefits of using digital comics in language learning, including increased reading motivation (Permatasari, 2023), vocabulary acquisition (Hidayah, 2023), and grammar improvement (Robbani & Khoirotunnisa, 2021). These findings suggest that

digital comics offer more than just entertainment but also support language development when used appropriately.

However, most studies tend to focus on students' general perceptions or on specific aspects such as vocabulary or motivation. Few studies have examined how EFL students actively engage with digital comics during the reading process or what strategies they use to comprehend the texts. Research by Yanto and Umah (2023) explored engagement through comic strips but was limited to vocational students and only behavioral aspects. Meanwhile, Ristian (2023) investigated reading strategies in manga but did not address emotional or cognitive engagement. Although Hidayah (2023) conducted a study at Universitas Jambi regarding students' perceptions of digital comics in vocabulary learning, the research did not explore how students engage with digital comics to support reading comprehension and the strategies they employ while reading. Moreover, no study at Universitas Jambi has yet examined digital comics as an extensive reading material from both engagement and strategic reading perspectives. These gaps highlight the need for a more in-depth investigation into university students' reading experiences with digital comics in a broader context. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following questions: (1) How do EFL students engage with digital comics to support their reading comprehension? (2) What reading strategies do the students use when reading digital comics?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore EFL students' reading engagement and reading strategies while interacting with digital comics. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to understand participants' experiences, meanings, and behaviors in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This design was suitable for capturing the nuanced experiences, behaviors, and cognitive strategies used by students during reading. The participants were five undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Jambi. They were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) currently in the third or fourth year of study, (2) students who have been using English-language digital comics for at least 3 years, and (3) willing to participate in the research. To recruit participants, the researchers distributed a Google Form containing

screening questions aligned with the established selection criteria. This preliminary screening allowed the researchers to identify candidates who matched the research needs. From the total responses received, five students who met all the criteria were selected for participation. This process ensured that the participants were not only relevant to the research focus but also had sufficient engagement with digital comics to provide meaningful insights.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The guide contained open-ended questions divided into two thematic sections: the first focused on reading engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects), and the second on reading strategies. The interview questions were developed based on theoretical frameworks from Fredricks et al. (2004) and Guthrie et al. (2012) on student engagement, as well as Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) on reading strategies, ensuring theoretical relevance and construct alignment. The interviews were conducted using two modes: face-to-face for three participants and via Zoom for the remaining two, depending on participants' availability and location. Each interview lasted between 15 to 30 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure clarity and comfort for the participants. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. During the interviews, probing questions were used to obtain richer descriptions and clarify participant responses when needed. In addition to the interview guide, the researchers used a mobile phone as an audio recording device and a notebook to take observational notes during the sessions. These tools supported accurate data capture and ensured important non-verbal cues.

The data that have been collected were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) and consist of six steps. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading the interview transcripts and repeatedly listening to the audio recordings. Second, initial codes were generated by highlighting relevant segments and grouping them based on recurring ideas. Third, themes were identified in alignment with the research questions and objectives. Fourth, the themes were reviewed to ensure their relevance and coherence across the dataset. Fifth, the themes were defined and named in a way that accurately represented the findings. Lastly, the results were compiled into a structured analytical report. To ensure credibility, member

checking was employed by returning the interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations to the participants for validation.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

Based on the thematic analysis of interview data from five participants, the findings are presented in five major themes: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, theoretical reading strategies, and problem-solving and support reading strategies. The identified findings are as follows.

**Table 1.**

Themes and sub-themes based on the research questions

Research Question	Theme	Sub-themes
RQ 1	Behavioral Engagement	Reading Engagement Patterns
	Emotional Engagement	Reading Selection and Accessibility
	Cognitive Engagement	Interest in Visual Media Interest in Story
		Emotional Barriers to Engagement
RQ 2	Theoretical Reading Comprehension	Reading Comprehension Strategies and Processes Cognitive Benefits of Reading Digital Comics
RQ 2	Theoretical Reading Comprehension	Making Inferences Visualizing Predicting Comprehension Monitoring
	Problem-solving and Support Reading Comprehension	Re-Reading Using Translation Tools External Information Seeking Note-taking Social Sharing

### ***Students' Engagement with Digital Comics for Reading Comprehension***

This section shows the findings related to the first research question regarding students' engagement with digital comics. The results stated that the students experience three engagements when reading digital comics.

### *Behavioral Engagement*

The behavioral aspect of students' engagement was evident in their reading frequency, time allocation, and reading habits. Most participants reported reading digital comics regularly, ranging from two to three times a week to almost every day. For instance, P5 stated:

"Every day for sure. Even if in a day, it's like, if I have free time, maybe I can fully read comics." (P5)

This response indicates a strong reading behavior. Besides that, Participants commonly preferred reading at night, particularly before bedtime, as it provided a calm atmosphere conducive to enjoyment and focus. However, several students also utilized brief moments during their daily routines, such as while waiting for others or during idle time, to read. As P2 explained:

"...When I'm waiting for my mother to do the shopping, I read. In the parking lot. When I'm waiting for my order to be completed, I read too." (P2)

This shows that students not only engage with digital comics in their relaxed time but also utilize the short time in the middle of their activities.

Reading duration varied significantly depending on the participants' level of interest in the story and their available free time. Some spent just 15–20 minutes, while others read for two to four hours in one sitting. Even P4 remarked that she spends 3 to 4 hours reading digital comics when she has free time. These habits suggest that students' engagement with digital comics was not only frequent but also flexible and well-integrated into their daily lives.

Furthermore, participants exhibited autonomy in choosing their reading materials. Genre preference—particularly romance, fantasy, and action—played a central role in material selection. They often searched for comics with similar themes or plots to those they had previously enjoyed. In terms of accessibility, students primarily used platforms like Webtoon but also turned to unofficial websites to find titles not available elsewhere. As P3 stated:

"The first one is Webtoon, then there are illegal sites on Google like Mangabat." (P3)

In line with that, P2 explained that illegal platforms like Batoto are used when there are no available digital comics they want to read on the official platforms. This behavior reflects students' initiative and willingness to explore diverse

sources to satisfy their reading interests, regardless of platform limitations. These findings indicate strong behavioral engagement among students with digital comics.

### *Emotional Engagement*

Students' emotional engagement with digital comics was influenced by their interest in both visual elements and storyline quality. All participants expressed that illustrations such as character expressions, clothing, and overall art style were major factors that attracted them to read. As P5 stated:

"It's the art, the drawings. Especially since I read historical ones, it's really interesting to see them wearing gowns."

This statement shows that visuals made the reading experience more enjoyable and helped participants better understand the storyline, as supported by P2, who noted that images and short dialogue made the story easier to follow.

In addition to visuals, participants emphasized that an engaging storyline contributed significantly to their emotional involvement. P2 shared that when the story was particularly interesting, she was motivated to read the entire comic in one sitting, suggesting that compelling narratives encouraged sustained reading and deeper emotional connection.

However, emotional engagement was also hindered by several factors. Participants reported losing interest due to overly complex conflicts, unappealing or inconsistent graphics, and poor translation quality. As P4 explained:

"First is because the translation is not good. Like, it's too formal, and also the ones who did the translation, English is not their first language." (P4)

These barriers suggest that while digital comics are engaging, certain elements can diminish students' motivation and enjoyment during the reading process.

### *Cognitive Engagement*

Students demonstrated cognitive engagement through their active efforts to understand digital comic content. One commonly used strategy was re-reading, especially when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary. To aid comprehension, participants frequently relied on translation tools such as Google Translate or DeepL. For instance, one participant described how she would alternate between reading the comic and translating unfamiliar words before starting over to grasp the storyline more clearly.

Visual cues also played a significant role in helping participants make sense of the plot. Some students used character design and expressions as hints to anticipate roles or narrative direction, while others formed mental imagery of the story through illustrations. As mentioned by P3:

"...For example, when the teacher's appearance is made overly well drawn, that usually means that she is definitely going to be the heroine, the female lead. It's predictable." (P3)

In addition, another participant mentioned seeking insights from online comment sections or video discussions, which offered alternative interpretations and enriched her understanding.

Beyond strategy use, students also reported cognitive benefits from reading digital comics. They noted improvements in vocabulary, grammar awareness, and imaginative thinking. As stated by P5:

"As for reading ability, yes... if I read from official sources, even though I'm not really focused on grammar, I'd be like, 'Oh, so if the situation is like this, the grammar is in past tense,' or 'Oh, so this one is in continuous tense,' things like that." (P5)

Others mentioned that consistent exposure to digital comics expanded their vocabulary and enhanced their ability to understand sentence structures.

These findings suggest that cognitive engagement was not limited to the act of reading but also extended to learning outcomes. Through a combination of strategic processing and reflection, participants deepened their comprehension and developed valuable language skills.

### ***Students' Reading Strategies to Help Comprehension***

Participants reported applying various strategies while reading digital comics to support their comprehension. These strategies are grouped into two themes: Theoretical Reading Strategies and Problem-Solving & Support Strategies.

#### ***Theoretical Reading Strategies***

This theme refers to a set of reading strategies drawn from theoretical frameworks and prior research by Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016), which were then identified in participants' responses during the interviews. These include making inferences, visualizing, predicting, and comprehension monitoring.



The first strategy is making inferences. Some participants used this strategy when they described interpreting unstated or ambiguous parts of the story through visual cues. For instance, P2 explained:

"... Because from the gestures drawn by the author, we can definitely understand what the dialogue means, which can sometimes be ambiguous. So, it aligns and becomes easier to understand." (P2)

This response reflects the act of connecting unclear information from the text with the illustrations.

Another common strategy was visualizing, which helped students mentally construct the storyline through image and text integration. P1 mentioned that he imagined scenes based on both the narration and the visuals. He explained:

"...Then I also look at the illustrations, since in digital comics there are pictures, so I can, from the storyline, I can imagine the story." (P1)

For students who encountered unfamiliar vocabulary, visuals became an alternative means to retain understanding without interrupting the reading flow.

Predicting was also employed, especially when students used character design and recurring narrative patterns to anticipate plot developments. One participant noted that particularly well-drawn characters often signaled their importance in the story, allowing him to guess future roles and outcomes.

Lastly, comprehension monitoring emerged as a crucial strategy. Students actively assessed their understanding and responded when comprehension broke down. Some, like P4, immediately consulted translation tools to resolve unfamiliar words. Others, like P2, preferred to continue reading entire sentences and rely on context to grasp meaning. These approaches suggest that students did not passively consume digital comics but monitored their comprehension and adapted their reading strategies accordingly.

#### *Problem-solving and Support Reading Comprehension*

The second theme consists of strategies that emerged from participants' personal ways of overcoming comprehension difficulties and supporting their reading process. These include re-reading, using translation tools, seeking external information, note-taking, and social sharing.

Re-reading was commonly used when participants felt they had missed information or failed to fully understand a scene. One participant explained that she often returned to earlier panels after translating unknown vocabulary to

reconstruct the storyline with a clearer understanding. Another shared that sometimes the connection between events only became clear in later chapters, prompting her to go back and re-read for coherence.

Another strategy is using translation tools such as Google Translate or DeepL. These tools were used when the participants encountered unfamiliar vocabulary. As stated by P1:

"...Since it's English, we're still kind of, you know, lacking in vocabulary, so there are some sentences or words that we find difficult to understand. So, we deal with it by translating them. That way, we can both learn new vocabulary and understand the story being told." (P1)

This not only helped students comprehend the story but also contributed to vocabulary acquisition. Another noted that translation supported the general understanding of the storyline, especially when faced with more complex English structures.

Another strategy to support reading comprehension is external information seeking. This involved looking beyond the comic itself for clarification. P2 described that she was using social media and reading other readers' comments to gain different interpretations of the story. She admitted that through this, she sometimes realized she had misunderstood the plot, highlighting the benefit of engaging with reader communities.

Another strategy is note-taking. This is used both to record new vocabulary they have learn and to track reading progress. P5 explained:

"Also, the reason I read a lot in English is, first, to improve my vocabulary. Like, 'Oh, what does this word mean?' Then usually I write it down or try to remember it, 'Oh, it means this', so that if it shows up again in this comic or another one, I already know what it means." (P5)

This statement reflects the participant's active engagement in the process of reading digital comics. This strategy is also used by maintaining a list of titles and chapters students read on their phone to help them pick up where they left off, especially when reading multiple comics concurrently.

The last strategy to help their reading comprehension is social sharing. This allowed participants to engage in discussions and reviews with fellow readers, typically via platforms like Twitter. This strategy helped them exchange opinions, discover new recommendations, and reflect more deeply on their reading

experience. For one student, sharing comments and reading others' reactions served not only as validation but also as motivation to continue exploring digital comics.

These findings indicate that students employ a variety of adaptive strategies beyond theoretical frameworks. Such strategies reflect their autonomy, resourcefulness, and digital literacy in navigating challenges and enhancing their comprehension during digital comic reading.

## **Discussion**

### ***EFL Students' Engagement with Digital Comics to Support Their Reading Comprehension***

This study found that EFL students engage with digital comics through three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. These findings align with the engagement framework by Fredricks et al. (2004), which categorizes student engagement into behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components.

Behavioral engagement was reflected in students' frequent and persistent reading habits. Most participants reported reading digital comics daily, especially at night during their free time. This is in line with Lee et al. (2021), who associated behavioral engagement with reading frequency, duration, and persistence. Participants also took initiative in selecting reading materials that matched their genre preferences and accessed content across both official and unofficial platforms. Such behaviors reflect active engagement and autonomy in navigating their reading interests.

Emotionally, students were drawn to digital comics through visual appeal and engaging narratives. Illustrations, character expressions, and art styles enhanced reading enjoyment, supporting findings by Yanto & Umah (2023) and Sorohiti & Kirsan (2023), who identified visuals and storylines as key motivational factors. However, this study also uncovered emotional barriers rarely addressed in prior research. Overly complex plots, unattractive visuals, and awkward translations occasionally reduced students' reading interest. These findings suggest that emotional engagement is influenced not only by positive elements but also by hindrances that can disrupt reading flow.

Cognitive engagement was observed in students' strategic efforts to comprehend the text. They employed re-reading, translation tools, visual interpretation, and even consulted external sources like comment sections.

These behaviors are consistent with Guthrie et al. (2012), who define cognitive engagement as mental effort directed toward understanding. Similar to Hidayah (2023), this study found that translation tools helped overcome vocabulary barriers, while visuals supported narrative comprehension. In addition to processing content, students reported cognitive gains such as improved vocabulary, grammar awareness, and imagination—echoing findings from Robbani & Khoirotunnisa (2021) and Permatasari (2023).

In sum, students' engagement with digital comics is multidimensional. Behavioral patterns show consistency and autonomy; emotional responses reflect both enjoyment and frustration; and cognitive engagement is demonstrated through strategic processing and perceived learning benefits. These findings comprehensively answer the first research question, affirming that digital comics foster engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains in the EFL reading context.

### ***Reading Strategies Used by Students When Reading Digital Comics***

This study found that EFL students applied both theoretically established and practical strategies while reading digital comics. Referring to Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), four key strategies were identified: making inferences, visualizing, predicting, and comprehension monitoring. These were complemented by problem-solving and support strategies, including re-reading, using translation tools, external information seeking, note-taking, and social sharing.

Students used inference-making by combining text and visual cues to interpret ambiguous meanings, which aligns with Bruggink et al. (2022). Visualization was supported by the graphic nature of digital comics, enabling students to imagine scenes more clearly, in line with Küçükoğlu (2013). Prediction occurred when students used visual patterns to anticipate character roles or plot development, consistent with Ristian (2023). Furthermore, comprehension monitoring was evident through students' awareness of their difficulties and their responsive strategies, such as re-reading or translating vocabulary.

Beyond these theoretical strategies, students employed problem-solving approaches like re-reading to reconstruct meaning and resolve confusion, supporting findings by Ristian (2023). Translation tools such as Google Translate

and DeepL were used extensively, confirming observations from Hidayah (2023), Robbani & Khoirotunnisa (2021), and Permatasari (2023) that EFL readers rely on digital aids for comprehension. Students also took notes for vocabulary retention (Tunga, 2020) and engaged in external information seeking—often through comment sections or social media—to clarify narrative meanings. Some even shared their reading experiences with peers online, enhancing comprehension through collaborative exchange.

These findings suggest that students approached digital comics not passively, but with a high level of metacognitive awareness and autonomy. The variety of strategies used indicates flexibility and active engagement in managing reading challenges, reinforcing the potential of digital comics as a medium for strategic and meaningful reading in EFL contexts.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

This study investigated EFL students' engagement with digital comics and the reading strategies they employed to support their comprehension. The findings revealed that students engaged behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively with digital comics. They showed frequent and flexible reading habits, strong emotional responses to visual and narrative elements, and active mental efforts to comprehend the texts. These dimensions align with established theories of student engagement and highlight the capacity of digital comics to foster motivation and sustained reading behavior in EFL contexts.

Moreover, the study identified that students employed both theoretical and practical reading strategies. Theoretical strategies included making inferences, visualizing, predicting, and monitoring comprehension. In addition, students demonstrated problem-solving and support strategies, such as re-reading, using translation tools, seeking external information, note-taking, and engaging in social sharing. These strategies reflected students' autonomy, resourcefulness, and digital literacy in navigating comprehension challenges.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that digital comics are a valuable medium for fostering reading engagement and strategic reading in EFL contexts. Their visual appeal and accessibility support students' motivation to read, while their narrative structure encourages the development of reading strategies and language skills. Therefore, students are encouraged to use digital comics as a tool for independent language learning. Educators may also consider

integrating digital comics into classroom practices to enhance engagement and comprehension. Future studies could further investigate the impact of digital comics across different genres, platforms, or educational levels using varied research methodologies to strengthen the empirical support for their pedagogical use.

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