Webtoons as Pedagogical Tools: Foundation TESL Students' Perceptions in Enhancing Interest in Reading

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.30880/ahcs.2025.06.01.004

Abstract

Webtoons, digital comics originating in South Korea, have been translated into English and are characterised by visually appealing images and vertical scroll formats. In recent years, webtoons have gained popularity as an interactive and engaging reading medium. This study investigates the perceptions of 50 students from Foundation for B.ED TESL programme in a private university in Selangor towards the use of English webtoons to increase their interest and motivation in reading English. The data was collected using structured questionnaires and analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. This study shows that English webtoons significantly increase ESL students' reading interest and skills. The visual appeal of webtoons is a key factor in this positive outcome, highlighting the value of using engaging materials in ESL instruction.

1. Introduction

Reading is crucial in English, not only in helping learners master the language, but also stimulate curiosity and engagement in the language. In English, there is a vast amount of literature and reading materials that can enhance learners' interest in reading. However, English reading materials are not always accessible, especially to students. Nonetheless, with the advancement of technology, many reading platforms that cater to modern learners arise, and these platforms offer quality reading materials that are engaging and relevant to learners. One of the examples of such reading materials are webtoons. Originating in South Korea, webtoon is a digital comic that can be read vertically by scrolling down from devices such as computers and smartphones. Most of the digital comics or webtoons are originated from South Korea and are written in Korean language, but all comics are translated to English language. There are numerous webtoon platforms that offer a variety of interesting and unique comics with a good storyline, writing, and illustrations. These platforms, such as, Manga Plus, Tappytoon, Crunchyroll, Tapas and Webtoon, engage their readers with attractive illustrations and contemporary plots, motivating them to read more, hence using webtoon to read is a good option for those who want to read entertaining and engaging English materials.

According to Widiyarti et al. (2021), webtoons significantly improve students' reading comprehension and motivation. These digital comics have influenced many people of different ages to read in English. Furthermore, webtoon platforms support a communicative environment that allows readers to exchange opinions with other readers, interpreting the storyline and predicting the story. Moreover, these platforms update the webtoons weekly, keeping the readers eager to follow the story and enhancing their interest to keep reading in English. Based on preliminary observation, almost all of the previous studies on webtoons and the relation with interest

in reading English were conducted outside of Malaysia. Therefore, this study is to investigate Foundation TESL students' perception of using English webtoon as a tool to enhance interest in reading English.

There is a population gap regarding webtoon in enhancing interest in reading English in Malaysia. Although this area of study is developing, there is a notable gap in research specific to Malaysia. Webtoon has a significant amount of audience in Malaysia but there is a lack of research exploring webtoon's potential in enhancing students' interest in reading English especially among Foundation TESL students and there are also limited knowledge regarding their perception. Therefore, this study will be addressing the population gap to better understand how Foundation TESL students perceive webtoon in enhancing their reading interest. By exploring their perception, the use of webtoons can be maximised to enhance their interest in reading English.

This study will answer three main objectives. The first objective is to analyse Foundation TESL students' perception of using English webtoons to enhance their interest in reading English. The second objective is to identify the specific features of webtoons that influence students' interest in reading English and the last objective is to evaluate students' perceptions of the impact of English webtoons for their reading interest, engagement and motivation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Perceived benefits and impact of webtoons on English language skills

There have been numerous studies to investigate the perceptions of students towards using Webtoon and the impact on their English language skills. Most of the studies conclude that Webtoon has a positive impact on students' English language skills especially reading comprehension and vocabulary. Based on our preliminary observation, many studies regarding the perceptions and impact are all conducted outside of Malaysia. In this research, the focus is on the perceptions of foundation students in a private university in Selangor, Malaysia. This study will be addressing the population gap that could not be determined.

Ningsih and Mustajib (2021) concluded that the students have a positive perception towards webtoons due to the interesting illustrations that influence them to read more. These illustrations not only catch the students' interest but also motivate them to engage in reading in English. Moreover, the visuals presented in this digital comic platform helped the students make reading in English a fun activity resulting in more exposure to the language. The illustrations and visuals also aid them in understanding the storyline, making it an excellent tool for language learning and vocabulary expansion. This study highlights the potential of webtoons as a useful aid in promoting an engaging learning tool.

The variety of narrative writing styles included in the stories in webtoons also have an impact on the students' narrative writing. For example, S Torres (2021) has provided evidence that after utilising Webtoon Reading Application (WRA) as a teaching aid on senior high school students, the result found that the students' narrative writing ability has significantly improved in the context of organising their thoughts and structuring their writing effectively. The exposure to the diversity of narrative writing in webtoon could encourage students to try writing their own storyline and apply what they have read on webtoon in their own writing.

 Integrating technology in English language teaching is not a new practice as it is necessary to use technology in education environments (Kurt, et.al, 2013). It has been proven that webtoon serves as a valuable tool in language teaching and learning. The combination of text and visuals lead to better understanding of the story and language. This combination is aligned with the multimodal theory which implies that information is more effectively comprehended through multiple modes of communication such as texts, visuals, and audio.

The positive result from integrating Webtoon in English lessons includes reading comprehension, vocabularies, writing skills, and speaking skills. Safitri and Nurnia (2023) suggested that there is a significant effect of using webtoon on the vocabulary achievement and the result for the experimental class was higher compared to regular class. Moreover, Webtoon has been proven helpful in improving students' self confidence in their speaking ability (Tifani et al., 2020). Using storytelling techniques as a teaching tool in English language learning classrooms provides opportunities to speak in English and the students become more comfortable to speak as they practise more. Through implementing webtoon as a teaching tool, the students slowly gained confidence to speak in English and more confident to express themselves.

The way webtoon can be used as a teaching tool is by using it as a reading material for the students. A more comprehensive result can be found in a study conducted by Rafida et al. (2023). The study conducted a pre-test and post-test data collection method of two groups of students, an experimental and controlled group. The experimental group applied a predictive approach using webtoon and the students showed a better improvement than the controlled group. Although the differences between the results of each group were not substantial, this study highlighted the potential benefit of using webtoon as a reading material for English language learning.

2.2 Factors contributing to the effectiveness of webtoons in language learning

Webtoon is a powerful tool to improve English language skills through several ways. One of them is its visual format which combines graphics and text to make reading more exciting. This multimedia approach captures students' attention and makes learning fun. The colourful illustrations and dynamic storytelling in webtoon can make students want to read more and thus improve their reading comprehension and vocabulary and overall English language skills. According to Yuliani and Sari (2023), the combination of graphic and text in webtoon makes students find the story more interesting and thus want to read and learn more.

Additionally, the webtoon content is also relatable. They often reflect current themes, cultural references and relatable characters that students, especially younger audiences can identify with. This connection to the material makes students more engaged with the text and have a positive attitude towards learning English. Erya and Pustika (2021) found that students were highly motivated to learn when using webtoon in a language classroom, because the content was appealing and relevant to their life. When students find the content relatable, they will invest time and effort to understand the language and thus improve their language skills in the long run.

Furthermore, webtoon provides interactive learning experiences. Many webtoon platforms allow readers to comment, share and discuss episodes, creating a community of learners. This interaction can improve language skills through peer discussion and collaborative learning. As stated by Sari et al. (2023), students who discuss webtoon content can practise their writing and speaking skills and thus reinforce their language understanding in social context. This collaborative aspect of webtoon reading makes students express their thoughts and opinions and thus develop their language proficiency.

Moreover, the accessibility of webtoon is crucial to improve English skills. With the widespread use of smartphones and internet access, students can access a lot of the content anytime and anywhere. This convenience provides more flexibility in learning, students can practise their English outside the classroom. According to Sari et al. (2023), the accessibility of webtoon makes it a good tool to improve vocabulary mastery as students can learn at their own pace. Students can also re-read the challenging part and thus improve their comprehension and retention of the language.

In short, teachers can create a more fun and successful language learning environment for students. Webtoons in the curriculum not only align with millennial learners' interests but also a modern way of language teaching that can boost students' motivation and engagement. As the educational landscape changes, adding creative resources like Webtoons will result in better teaching practices and better language outcomes for students. Webtoons in language learning is a way to develop a love for reading in students and improve their English language skills.

2.3 Using webtoons in modern English language classroom

Reading is an important part of learning English since it enhances students' language skills, critical understanding, and cognitive growth. The process of learning is intricately tied to the interaction with different texts, such as digital content, textbooks, and modules, stated by Manalu (2019). This interaction includes all written communication, including digital texts, which are becoming more common in today's educational environment. It is not just restricted to conventional print materials (Indah & Wibowo, 2021). Students must be able to understand and evaluate these materials because reading develops critical thinking skills and improves their educational experience in general (Erya & Pustika, 2021).

The rise of online resources like webtoon in recent years has changed how students approach reading. webtoon is a web-based comic platform that appeals to students because it provides a distinctive fusion of textual interaction and visual narrative. Numerous benefits, such as enhanced motivation and engagement, have been demonstrated when comics are incorporated into language learning (Mitra & Keziah, 2019). The potential of webtoon to improve vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners is further highlighted by Novanti and Suprayogi (2021), since the visual context facilitates comprehension of new words and phrases.

Additionally, since millennials and Gen Z are used to digital media and interactive material, using webtoon in reading activities corresponds with their tastes. According to Rahmat et al. (2018), webtoon and other creative ways can help overcome the reading comprehension difficulties that these younger generations confront. Webtoon's visually engaging format and relatable content not only draw students' attention but also motivate them to go further into the reading material.

In conclusion, webtoon is a useful tool for improving language proficiency and encouraging reading engagement in the setting of EFL. Using online resources like webtoon could help teachers adjust to the evolving nature of language acquisition while also helping students develop a love of reading and understanding.

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach, utilizing a descriptive method to assess Foundation TESL students' perceptions of using webtoons to enhance their interest in reading in English. To ensure participants had a baseline understanding of the medium, a preliminary screening was conducted, confirming students'

awareness of webtoons. This is also to ensure that participants had the necessary context to provide meaningful responses. Subsequently, simple random sampling was implemented to select participants from this population. A total of 50 Foundation TESL students from a private university in Selangor were chosen to participate.

Data collection was conducted through structured questionnaire, adapted from Angelica & Katemba (2023), and administered via Google Forms. The questionnaire is divided into four sections: Section A is the respondents' profile, Section B is for questions related to their reading attitude, enjoyment and motivation while Section C is for questions related to their language learning and confidence. The last section is for questions related to reading habits and the influence on their choice of reading materials. These questionnaires were designed to gather detailed insights into students' perceptions and utilized a 5-point Likert Scale where the options ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The collected data, representing the responses from the participants were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations were calculated to summarize the students' perceptions regarding the use of webtoons in enhancing their reading interest. The following measurement is used to indicate students' agreement towards the statements used in the survey.

Table 1 *Interpretation of Mean Score*

Mean Score	Interpretation
3.67 – 5.00	High
2.34 – 3.66	Moderate
1.00 – 2.33	Low

This study acknowledges several limitations. Firstly, the use of simple random sampling from a pre-screened population restricts the generalizability of the findings to Foundation TESL students with prior webtoon awareness. Secondly, the sample size of 50 respondents, while sufficient for descriptive analysis, may limit the statistical power and ability to detect subtle effects. Additionally, the study relied of self-reported questionnaire, which are susceptible to bias. Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insights into the potential of webtoons for enhancing reading interest in an ESL context and highlights areas for further investigation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Respondents' Profile

This study involves 50 respondents from Foundation TESL in a private university in Selangor, which consist 88% female students and 12% male students. The respondents' age range is also divided into two which is made up of 94% of 18 to 20 years old and the remaining 6% is 21 to 23 years old. The numbers in Figure 1 correlate with the number of students in the particular academic programme where the number of female students exceeds the number of male students. Additionally, since the study involves Foundation TESL students who are in their first year of study in the university, it resulted in a sample with a significantly younger age distribution.
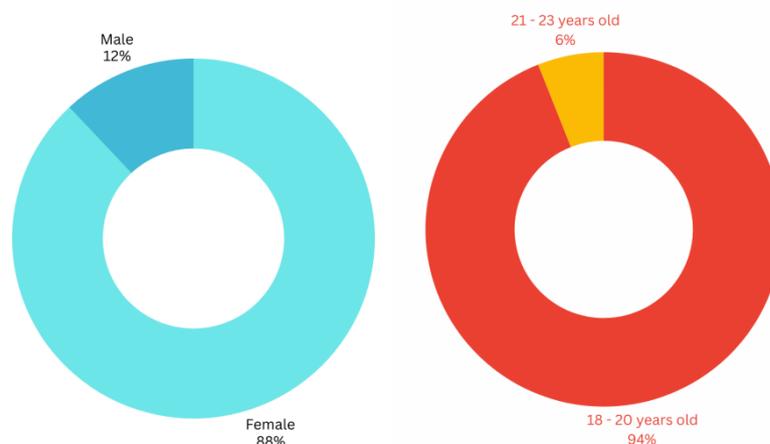

Fig 1 Respondents' Gender and Age

4.2 Foundation TESL Students' Perception on Using Webtoons

The following data in Table 2 summarizes Foundation TESL students' perception on using webtoons, shown as mean scores on a 5-point scale where 1 represents the lowest agreement and 5 represents the highest agreement.

Table 2 *Foundation TESL Students' Perception on Using Webtoons*

Statement	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
I enjoy reading in English	50	3.00	5.00	4.7000	.61445
Webtoon makes reading in English engaging and enjoyable	50	2.00	5.00	4.4200	.85928
Webtoon is an attractive English reading tool	50	1.00	5.00	4.3600	.92051
Webtoon motivates me to spend more time reading in English	50	1.00	5.00	4.2800	.90441
Webtoon is easy to access anytime	50	2.00	5.00	4.3800	.72534

The results show that the respondents are most willing to read in English, as the item "I enjoy reading in English" had the highest mean (4.70) and lowest standard deviation (.61), which indicate high agreement and uniformity. Additionally, the statement "Webtoon makes English reading interesting and enjoyable" recorded the highest mean (4.42), while its even higher standard deviation (.86) suggests a little range of opinions. Similarly, the statement "Webtoon is an engaging English reading aid" recorded 4.36 as its mean but with the largest standard deviation (.92), which describes a larger range of opinions with some of the respondents answering it highly impressive, while the others lower. "Webtoon motivates me to spend more time reading in English" with a mean of 4.28 and standard deviation of .90, which indicates responses were quite wide-ranging. Respondents also agreed on the accessibility of webtoons, as shown by the high mean (4.38) and low standard deviation (.73) for the statement "Webtoon can be accessed anywhere with ease". Overall, the respondents showed positive perception on using webtoons based on the high mean scores on all the statements.

4.3 Analysis of Students' Perceptions Regarding Features in Webtoons that Influences Reading Interest

The following data in Table 3 summarizes Foundation TESL students' perception on using the features in webtoons that influences their reading interest, shown as mean scores on a 5-point scale where 1 represents the lowest agreement and 5 represents the highest agreement.

Table 3 *Features in webtoons that influences reading interest*

Statement	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
The attractive visuals in webtoon makes reading more enjoyable	50	2.00	5.00	4.6400	.63116
The storytelling of webtoon motivates me to read more	50	2.00	5.00	4.4600	.78792
Webtoon's style of weekly episodes keeps me curious and engaged with reading in English	50	1.00	5.00	4.2800	1.05056
The language used in webtoon is easy to understand	50	2.00	5.00	4.5400	.73429
The wide range of webtoon's genre caters to my interest in English reading materials	50	1.00	5.00	4.1600	1.07590
The interactive features in webtoon platforms, such as the comment section, motivates me to read more	50	1.00	5.00	4.2000	1.04978

and interact with other users

    Participants held a positive perception of webtoons as an English reading tool, as evidenced by high mean scores ranging from 4.16 to 4.64 on a 5-point scale. Notably, the statement 'The attractive visuals in webtoon makes reading more enjoyable' recorded the highest mean score (4.64), which indicates that respondents found the graphic essential for an enhanced reading experience. This highlights the effectiveness of attractive visuals in maintaining reader engagement, particularly in digital format. Furthermore, the easy-to-understand language used in webtoons was also highly rated (mean = 4.54) suggesting that clear and intelligible content facilitates comprehension and sustained focus for English language learner. The statement "The storytelling of webtoon motivates me to read more" recorded a mean of 4.46, further supports the suggestion that compelling storytelling contributes to a productive and enjoyable reading experience.

    However, while weekly chapter releases and interactive elements were acknowledged as added value, they were not consistently rated as primary motivators by all participants. This variability is reflected in the relatively high standard deviations for these features: weekly chapter releases (SD = 1.05), interactive elements (SD = 1.04) and genre diversity (SD = 1.07). These figures indicate a wide range of opinions, suggesting that while some respondents found these aspects motivating, others did not. This implies that while these features can enhance the overall reading experience, they are perceived as the main concern in reading engagement compared to other elements such as visual appeal, clear language and compelling narrative.

4.4 Analysis of Students' Perception on Impact of Webtoons that Enhances Reading Interest

Table 4 *Impact of webtoons that enhances reading interest*

Statement	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Reading webtoon helps me improve my English	50	2.00	5.00	4.4200	.81039
The language used in webtoon inspired me to expand my reading knowledge	50	2.00	5.00	4.3400	.82338
I feel more confident in reading other English material after reading webtoon.	50	1.00	5.00	4.3200	.93547
Webtoon encourages me to read other English material (e.g., books, novels, articles).	50	1.00	5.00	4.2400	.95959
Reading webtoon increased my interest in reading English.	50	1.00	5.00	4.3200	.91339
I started to read other English reading materials after engaging with webtoon.	50	1.00	5.00	3.8400	1.13137
I developed a daily habit of reading in English after reading webtoon.	50	1.00	5.00	4.0000	1.19523

The findings highlight that the majority of the respondents strongly agreed that reading webtoons contributes to their improvement in English. This is evidenced by the statement, 'Reading webtoon helps me improve my English', which recorded the highest mean (4.42) with a standard deviation (0.81), which indicates consistent general agreement. This proves that webtoons are perceived as a valuable tool and reading material that could help students improve their English. However, the interest in reading in English does not go beyond reading webtoons for most of the respondents. This is demonstrated by the statement, 'I started to read other English reading materials after engaging with webtoon,' which recorded the lowest mean score (3.84). This result suggests that fewer respondents transitioned to other English materials after reading webtoon.

From the result on the highest and lowest mean, it is evident that the majority of the respondents agreed with the view that reading webtoon improves their English, but the impact is limited, as fewer of them transitioned to other reading materials such as books, novels and articles. However, despite the limitation, the data suggest that webtoons could be integrated as a tool for language learning, and this is supported by the statement, 'The language used in webtoon inspired me to expand my reading knowledge,' which indicated the second highest mean (4.34). The standard deviation for this statement is quite consistent (0.82) thus, the responses are similar. This data suggests that a significant number of the respondents seek reading knowledge after engaging with webtoon, indicating the potential for them to explore the English language.

In conclusion, this study reveals a generally positive perception of webtoons as an English reading tool. Respondents mostly strongly agreed on the perception that webtoons contribute to English improve, inspire increased reading knowledge and bolster confidence and interest in reading English. Key strength identified include webtoons' captivating visual, easy-to-understand language and engaging narration. Overall, this research indicates that webtoons can serve as a valuable resource for promoting English reading and language learning by providing an engaging, accessible and motivating experience. However, future research is recommended to explore the long-term effects of webtoon use on reading behaviour and the potential transition to other forms of English reading.

5. Discussion

The results of this study reveal that webtoons are perceived positively by foundation TESL students as a helpful way to enhance their English reading interest. One of the most significant outcomes is that students reported high enjoyment and motivation while reading webtoons, which had significant implications for language acquisition. This is in line with the principles of Engagement Theory, which claims the importance of interest and involvement in the process of learning. The graphical and interactive format of webtoons will likely be among the aspects that make them popular, so it can be a welcome alternative to more traditional reading material.

Another unexpected but significant effect was the variation observed in the students' scores for webtoons as a good English reading tool and with a significant standard deviation. This means that while many students were interested in webtoons, there are individual differences in perception. Individual differences in perception are due to numerous factors such as reading interest, prior knowledge of webtoons, or language proficiency. This finding resonates with the findings of earlier studies that highlights students' diverse learning styles and interests, validating the idea that media employed in learning should be adapted to meet the various needs of learners.

The positive attitudes towards webtoons signal their potential as an engaging learning tool that can stimulate students' interest in reading English. With the convenience of enjoyment and stimulation that they provide, teachers can also incorporate webtoons into curricular activities. Not only does this enhance students' engagement but also stimulates the acquisition of language in a very stimulating context. In addition, with the integration of various types of reading materials, such as webtoons, teachers can support multiple learning styles, a plus in diverse classrooms.

Furthermore, this research adds to the existing literature calling for the use of multimodal tools in language learning. The findings validate the belief that the blend of visual and textual components makes learning a language more effective based on Multimodal Theory. By demonstrating how webtoons can be used as effective reading material, teachers and curriculum planners can be encouraged to explore other new tools that can improve the learning outcome of languages.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be proposed for future research. It would be useful to conduct a larger study that includes a more representative sample of TESL students from different institutions in order to increase generalizability. Subsequent research might also employ mixed-methods, using quantitative questionnaires in addition to qualitative interviews, to gather deeper insights into students' attitudes and experiences and providing a more comprehensive understanding of students' perception. In addition, assessing the long-term impact of webtoon reading on reading habits and language acquisition would offer a more detailed dataset on its viability as an instructional pedagogical tool.

In addition, educators are encouraged to integrate webtoons into their teaching practices, judging students' responses and participation levels in the long term. This process can further improve the use of webtoons in language learning, eventually tailoring the learning process to optimize the benefits of this developing medium.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aims to identify the perceptions of Foundation TESL students in using webtoons and the perceived impact it has on their English language skills, specifically focusing on reading interest. Aligning with previous research, which demonstrated webtoons' positive impact on motivation, comprehension, vocabulary, and writing/speaking, this study found that students generally held favourable perceptions of webtoons as an English reading tool. Respondents strongly agreed that their perception of the use of webtoons contributed to English improvement, inspired increased reading knowledge and boosted their confidence and interest in reading. The key strength identified, such as captivating visuals, accessible language and engaging narration, reinforce the potential of webtoons as a valuable and modern addition to English language classrooms. This research also suggests that webtoons offer an engaging, accessible and motivating reading experience, thereby promoting English reading and language learning. However, further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of webtoon use on reading behaviour and the potential transition to other forms of English reading.

Acknowledgement

Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **study conception and design:** *Damia Aqmar binti Hisham, Melissa Qristal binti Abdullah;* **data collection:** *Damia Aqmar binti Hisham, Melissa Qristal binti Abdullah;* **analysis and interpretation of results:** *Siti Aisyah bt Roslan;* **draft manuscript preparation:** *Siti Aisyah bt Roslan, Damia Aqmar binti Hisham, Melissa Qristal binti Abdullah. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.*

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