

EFL Learners' Perceptions of Applying Webtoon as a Digital Learning Medium Integrated with Deep Learning Principles in Reading Skills

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated EFL learners' perceptions of using Webtoon as a digital learning medium integrated with deep learning principles in reading activities at Islamic senior high schools in East Lombok. The study involved 33 EFL learners and 11 EFL teachers selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations and analyzed thematically. The findings showed that learners generally perceived Webtoon as an interesting, accessible, and meaningful medium that reduced the pressure associated with conventional reading texts. Its multimodal features, including dialogue, illustrations, facial expressions, and sequential panels, supported contextual vocabulary learning, identification of setting and emotion, inferencing, and comprehension. When combined with prediction, character analysis, conflict evaluation, reflection, and evidence-based discussion, Webtoon also encouraged deeper cognitive engagement and more active classroom participation. Teachers confirmed that learners became more willing to express opinions and discuss alternative interpretations. However, the study also identified several challenges. Learners sometimes relied excessively on images, struggled with slang, idioms, cultural references, and complex analytical questions, and found it difficult to justify interpretations in English. Unequal participation in group work, unstable internet access, limited devices, and digital distraction also affected the learning process. The findings indicate that Webtoon is most effective when used as a supplementary medium supported by appropriate content selection, structured tasks, vocabulary assistance, collaborative roles, and teacher scaffolding. The study concludes that integrating Webtoon with deep learning principles can enhance linguistic, cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of EFL reading, provided that pedagogical and technological conditions are carefully addressed effectively.

Keywords: Webtoon; Reading comprehension; Deep learning principles; Digital learning medium

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INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a fundamental component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it enables learners to obtain information, develop academic knowledge, and participate in communication across educational and social contexts. Reading in a foreign language, however, requires more than recognizing individual words. Learners must simultaneously process vocabulary, grammatical structures, textual organization, cultural references, and relationships between ideas. These demands often make reading difficult, particularly for learners with limited exposure to English. Conventional reading materials may also reduce learners' engagement when their topics, presentation, or linguistic complexity do not correspond to learners' interests and proficiency levels. Therefore, EFL instruction increasingly requires reading materials that are accessible and motivating while supporting both basic

comprehension and higher-order thinking. Digital multimodal texts are relevant to this need because they combine verbal information with visual and interactive resources that may facilitate meaning-making and provide flexible opportunities for language practice (Neva, 2021; Pikhart et al., 2024).

One digital medium with considerable potential for EFL reading instruction is Webtoon, a platform-based graphic narrative generally presented through vertically arranged and episodic stories. Webtoon integrates written dialogue, illustrations, facial expressions, settings, and sequential storytelling, enabling readers to construct meaning from verbal and visual information. Research on comics, manga, and digital graphic narratives indicates that visual cues can support vocabulary recognition, contextual interpretation, setting identification, and inferencing by supplementing information conveyed through written language (Cabrera & Segura, 2023; García, 2020; Sánchez-Morocho et al., 2020; Villa-Castro et al., 2020). Its episodic organization may also maintain curiosity and encourage learners to predict later events, review previous episodes, and establish regular reading routines (García, 2020; Villa-Castro et al., 2020). Furthermore, its availability on smartphones, tablets, and computers allows reading to continue outside the classroom and connects formal instruction with learners' everyday digital practices (Bernal & Martínez, 2021; Morales, 2024; Moreno & Llanes-Medina, 2022). Nevertheless, Webtoon's effectiveness depends on appropriate content selection, purposeful activities, and teacher guidance rather than on the digital platform alone.

Despite these potential benefits, EFL learners frequently experience difficulties in understanding explicit and implicit meanings in texts. Limited vocabulary may prevent them from identifying main ideas and supporting details, whereas insufficient grammatical knowledge may obscure relationships among clauses and concepts. Learners may also have difficulty making inferences, distinguishing facts from opinions, interpreting an author's intention, and evaluating information using textual evidence. Cultural distance and unfamiliar idiomatic expressions can intensify these problems when learners do not possess the background knowledge needed to understand a narrative (Errázuriz et al., 2022; Neva, 2021; Ortiz et al., 2024; Pikhart et al., 2024). Although Webtoon's illustrations can reduce some linguistic barriers, visually dense panels, unfamiliar narrative conventions, and culturally specific references may create cognitive overload if the material is not suited to learners' readiness. Thus, Webtoon cannot be assumed to be automatically comprehensible. Pre-teaching, guided questioning, reading-strategy modeling, and differentiated assistance remain necessary to help learners coordinate verbal and visual information effectively (Perilla, 2022; Soler & Lozoya, 2022).

These difficulties become more significant when reading instruction is intended to promote deep learning. In the present study, deep learning refers to meaningful cognitive engagement through which learners analyze, evaluate, connect, reflect on, and apply information instead of merely memorizing vocabulary, translating sentences, or retrieving literal details. Deep-learning-oriented reading activities may require learners to predict plot developments, explain characters' motivations, evaluate conflicts, compare different perspectives, justify interpretations, and connect narrative themes to prior knowledge or real-life situations. Such activities can promote inferential and critical reading, but they may be challenging for learners who are unfamiliar with reflection, collaborative inquiry, or evidence-based discussion. Previous research suggests that higher-order engagement becomes more manageable when tasks direct learners to textual and visual evidence and when teachers provide models, structured prompts, peer discussion, and formative feedback (Cabrera & Segura, 2023; Errázuriz et al., 2022; García, 2020; Villa-Castro et al., 2020). Webtoon may consequently function not only as an engaging reading text but also as a learning environment in which learners develop

deeper interpretations through the interaction of language, images, sequence, and narrative context.

Learners' perceptions are important when evaluating this pedagogical integration because perceived usefulness, enjoyment, accessibility, and difficulty can influence participation and continued engagement. Previous studies show that learners often respond positively to Webtoon's attractive visuals, relatable narratives, accessible dialogue, and mobile format, which may increase their motivation to read and discuss English texts (Erya & Pustika, 2021; Khadawardi, 2022; Novanti & Suprayogi, 2021; Sorohiti & Kirsan, 2023; Susanto et al., 2024; Tacuri, 2023; Tacuri & Espinosa, 2024). Collaborative and reflective tasks may further enable learners to exchange perspectives, defend their interpretations, and develop confidence in expressing ideas in English. However, positive perceptions cannot be generalized to all learners. Language proficiency, digital literacy, internet access, genre preference, cultural familiarity, and previous experience with higher-order thinking may determine whether Webtoon-based activities are perceived as supportive or demanding (Bernal & Martínez, 2021; Cassany, 2022; Errázuriz et al., 2022; Morales, 2024). Examining learners' perceptions can therefore reveal not only whether they enjoy Webtoon, but also which instructional features make its use meaningful for reading development.

The research context of this study lies at the intersection of digital multimodal reading, EFL reading comprehension, and deep-learning-oriented pedagogy. Existing studies have addressed the use of comics, manga, digital reading environments, and Webtoon for vocabulary learning, comprehension, and motivation. Nevertheless, much of the available evidence examines graphic narratives in general or emphasizes enjoyment and engagement without closely considering how Webtoon can be systematically integrated with deep learning principles. In addition, direct evidence regarding learners' experiences of this specific integration remains limited, and Webtoon-specific learning effects have not been consistently established in the existing literature (Neva, 2021; Pikhart et al., 2024). This limitation indicates the need for research that examines Webtoon as more than an entertaining alternative to printed texts.

The novelty of the present study is its specific examination of EFL learners' perceptions of Webtoon as a digital learning medium deliberately integrated with analytical, collaborative, reflective, and application-oriented reading activities. Rather than focusing exclusively on motivation or surface-level comprehension, the study considers how learners perceive Webtoon's capacity to support deeper interpretation and identifies the factors that may facilitate or hinder this process. Accordingly, the study aims to investigate EFL learners' perceptions of applying Webtoon as a digital learning medium integrated with deep learning principles in reading instruction. It also seeks to identify the perceived benefits and challenges of this integration in relation to engagement, comprehension, critical interpretation, collaboration, autonomy, language proficiency, cognitive demands, and technological access.

The findings are expected to provide practical guidance for selecting suitable Webtoon content, designing scaffolded higher-order reading activities, and aligning digital materials with learners' needs and instructional objectives. The study is guided by the following research questions: *How do EFL learners perceive the application of Webtoon as a digital learning medium integrated with deep learning principles in reading activities? And What benefits and challenges do EFL learners experience when participating in Webtoon-based reading activities designed according to deep learning principles?*

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate EFL learners' perceptions of using Webtoon as a digital learning medium integrated with deep learning principles in reading activities. A qualitative design was selected because the study sought to understand participants' experiences, interpretations, opinions, and responses rather than measure the effectiveness of Webtoon through statistical comparisons. Qualitative research is appropriate when researchers aim to examine how individuals construct meaning from a particular educational experience within its natural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the phenomenon being investigated was the implementation of Webtoon-based reading activities that encouraged learners to understand texts, make inferences, analyze characters and conflicts, connect narratives with prior knowledge, discuss different interpretations, reflect on ideas, and apply their understanding to relevant situations.

The design was particularly suitable for addressing the first research question: "How do EFL learners perceive the application of Webtoon as a digital learning medium integrated with deep learning principles in reading activities?" Learners' perceptions are subjective and may be influenced by their language proficiency, reading habits, digital literacy, interest in Webtoon, classroom experiences, and familiarity with higher-order thinking activities. These perceptions cannot be adequately represented only through numerical scores because participants may interpret the same activity differently. Interviews allowed the researchers to explore how learners described the usefulness, attractiveness, accessibility, difficulty, and relevance of Webtoon-based reading. Classroom observations complemented these accounts by providing evidence of how learners engaged with the activities, interacted with their classmates, responded to teacher guidance, and used textual and visual information during reading.

The qualitative design was also appropriate for answering the second research question: "What benefits and challenges do EFL learners experience when participating in Webtoon-based reading activities designed according to deep learning principles?" The perceived benefits and challenges of the activities could emerge in several forms, including linguistic, cognitive, affective, social, technological, and instructional dimensions. For example, learners might perceive visual illustrations as helpful for understanding vocabulary while simultaneously finding cultural references or analytical questions difficult. A qualitative approach enabled these potentially contrasting experiences to be examined in detail. It also allowed unexpected findings to emerge from the participants' responses instead of restricting the analysis to predetermined variables.

Research Participants

The participants consisted of 44 individuals from Islamic senior high schools in East Lombok, including 33 EFL learners and 11 EFL teachers. The learners constituted the primary participant group because the research questions focused on their perceptions, benefits, and challenges. The teachers were included as supporting informants who could provide additional information about the implementation of Webtoon-based reading activities, learners' classroom responses, instructional challenges, and the role of teacher scaffolding. Their perspectives were used to enrich and contextualize the data obtained from the learners rather than replace the learners' accounts.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the study required participants who had direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. The learner selection criteria were that participants had to be enrolled as students in an Islamic senior high school in East Lombok, be learning English as a foreign language, participate in the Webtoon-based reading activities included in the study, and be willing to share their experiences through

interviews and classroom participation. Learners who did not attend the main learning sessions or had not experienced the complete sequence of Webtoon-based activities were not included in the interview sample because they might not have sufficient information to evaluate the learning process.

The teacher selection criteria required participants to be active English teachers at the selected Islamic senior high schools, have experience teaching reading, and be involved in or familiar with the implementation of the Webtoon-based learning activities. The teachers were expected to understand the learners' reading abilities, classroom behavior, technological readiness, and responses to conventional and digital learning materials. Their involvement enabled the researchers to examine whether the learners' reported experiences were consistent with instructional observations.

The 33 learners represented the population of EFL learners at the participating Islamic senior high schools. Relevant demographic information collected from the learners included age, gender, grade level, previous experience with Webtoon or digital comics, frequency of reading English texts, access to digital devices, and self-reported familiarity with online learning platforms. Information about the learners' English proficiency or recent English achievement was also documented when available. For the teachers, demographic information included gender, educational qualification, length of teaching experience, experience teaching reading comprehension, and previous use of digital learning media. These demographic details were used to describe the participants and interpret differences in their experiences rather than to make statistical comparisons.

Instruments and Data Collection

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed according to the research objectives, research questions, and relevant concepts concerning digital reading, Webtoon, reading comprehension, and deep learning activities. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provided a consistent set of topics while allowing the researchers to ask follow-up questions, request clarification, and explore experiences that were not anticipated during instrument development. This flexibility was necessary for obtaining detailed accounts of the participants' perceptions.

The learner interview guide was organized into several areas. The first area examined learners' previous experiences with reading English texts, digital learning platforms, comics, and Webtoon. The second explored their general perceptions of Webtoon, including its visual appeal, accessibility, relevance, ease of use, and influence on reading motivation. The third investigated perceived learning benefits, such as support for vocabulary understanding, identification of main ideas and details, inferencing, interpretation of characters' emotions, prediction of events, critical thinking, collaboration, and confidence in expressing interpretations. The fourth examined challenges related to language difficulty, unfamiliar expressions, cultural references, internet connectivity, device availability, distraction, visual complexity, and higher-order questions. The final area invited learners to recommend improvements for future Webtoon-based reading activities.

Sample learner questions included: "How did the pictures and dialogue in the Webtoon influence your understanding of the story?"; "Which activities helped you analyze the text more deeply?"; "What difficulties did you experience when making inferences or explaining your interpretation?"; and "How was reading through Webtoon different from reading conventional English texts?" Follow-up prompts such as "Can you provide an example?" and "Why did you feel that way?" were used to obtain richer responses.

A separate interview guide was prepared for the teachers. It addressed their observations of learner engagement, reading comprehension, participation in discussions,

critical responses, collaboration, and difficulties during the activities. Teachers were also asked about content suitability, instructional preparation, classroom management, technological limitations, and the forms of scaffolding required by learners. Although teacher data were supplementary, they provided an additional perspective for interpreting the learners' reported experiences. The interviews were conducted individually or in small groups, depending on participant availability and the school context. Learners were permitted to respond in English, Indonesian, or a combination of both so that limited English-speaking ability would not prevent them from expressing their experiences accurately. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Responses delivered in Indonesian were translated into English for reporting, while the original transcripts were retained for checking meaning and interpretation.

Classroom observation was used to document learners' behavior and interaction during the implementation of Webtoon-based reading activities. An observation sheet was developed from the research questions and the main characteristics of deep learning in reading. The observation focused on visible indicators rather than making assumptions about learners' internal thoughts. The indicators included attention to the Webtoon material, use of textual and visual clues, participation in prediction activities, identification of evidence, interpretation of characters and conflicts, connections with prior knowledge, involvement in peer discussion, justification of answers, reflection, and response to teacher scaffolding.

The observation sheet also included indicators of difficulty, such as dependence on word-for-word translation, inability to interpret implied meanings, confusion about visual sequences, reluctance to participate, off-task digital behavior, technical problems, and excessive dependence on teacher explanations. Descriptive field notes were used to record classroom incidents, participant statements, interaction patterns, and contextual conditions that could not be captured through fixed indicators. The researchers distinguished descriptive notes, which recorded what occurred, from reflective notes, which contained preliminary interpretations and questions for later analysis. The observation was conducted during the main stages of the reading lessons. During pre-reading activities, attention was given to learners' responses to titles, images, background knowledge questions, and predictions. During reading, the researchers observed how learners used visual and verbal information, discussed meanings, and responded to comprehension prompts. During post-reading, the observation focused on analysis, evaluation, reflection, collaborative discussion, and application of the story's ideas to other situations.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data consisted of learner interview transcripts, teacher interview transcripts, observation sheets, and descriptive field notes. The data were analyzed thematically because thematic analysis enables researchers to identify, organize, interpret, and report recurring patterns across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was guided by the two research questions while remaining open to unanticipated themes arising from the participants' experiences.

The first stage involved data preparation and familiarization. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted partly or entirely in Indonesian were translated into English, and the translations were checked against the original recordings and transcripts to preserve meaning. Observation sheets and field notes were typed and organized according to the date, school, learning session, and participant group. The researchers repeatedly read the transcripts and observation records to gain an overall understanding of the data. Initial notes were made concerning

recurring expressions, contrasting experiences, significant classroom events, and possible relationships among the data sources.

The second stage involved initial coding. Meaningful words, sentences, or passages were assigned concise codes representing their main ideas. Coding combined deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive codes were informed by the research questions and included categories such as perceived usefulness, enjoyment, accessibility, visual support, vocabulary assistance, inferencing, critical analysis, collaboration, reflection, technological difficulty, language difficulty, cultural unfamiliarity, and cognitive demand. Inductive codes were generated from issues that emerged directly from the data, including experiences that had not been anticipated during instrument development. During the third stage, related codes were compared and combined into broader candidate themes. For example, codes such as “pictures helped guess vocabulary,” “facial expressions clarified emotions,” and “backgrounds showed the setting” could be grouped under a theme such as “multimodal support for meaning construction.” Codes related to analyzing motives, defending interpretations, connecting stories to life, and evaluating conflicts could form a theme concerning “deeper cognitive engagement.” Statements about difficult idioms, complex questions, unstable internet access, and unequal device availability could be organized into separate challenge-related themes.

In the fourth stage, the candidate themes were reviewed against the complete dataset. The researchers examined whether each theme was supported by sufficient evidence, internally coherent, and distinct from other themes. Themes that substantially overlapped were combined, while broad themes containing unrelated ideas were divided. Contradictory and minority responses were retained because they could reveal important variations associated with proficiency, digital literacy, genre preference, or classroom conditions. Learner and teacher accounts were compared with observation data to identify convergence, complementarity, and inconsistency. For example, learners’ statements that Webtoon increased participation were compared with observational evidence of discussion, task completion, and engagement.

In the fifth stage, the themes were defined and named. Each theme was accompanied by a clear explanation of its central meaning, relationship to the research question, and boundaries. The researchers then selected representative interview excerpts and observation evidence. Quotations were identified using participant codes to preserve anonymity. Teacher perspectives were used to confirm, expand, or question the learner data, but conclusions about learner perceptions remained primarily grounded in the learners’ own accounts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study investigated EFL learners’ perceptions of Webtoon as a digital learning medium integrated with deep learning principles in reading activities. It also examined the benefits and challenges experienced by learners during Webtoon-based reading lessons. Data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 33 EFL learners and 11 EFL teachers, supported by classroom observations conducted during the implementation of the activities. The learners were coded as L1–L33, while the teachers were coded as T1–T11 to maintain confidentiality. The interview and observation data were analyzed thematically. The findings were organized according to the two research questions. The first research question focused on learners’ overall perceptions of the use of Webtoon in reading instruction. The second research question examined the linguistic, cognitive, affective, social, instructional, and technological benefits and challenges experienced by the learners.

Research Question 1: How do EFL learners perceive the application of Webtoon as a digital learning medium integrated with deep learning principles in reading activities?

To answer the first research question, learners were asked about their interest in Webtoon, the usefulness of its visual features, the differences between Webtoon and conventional reading texts, their responses to deep learning activities, and their willingness to use Webtoon in future reading lessons. Teachers were asked parallel questions concerning learners' engagement, participation, comprehension, and reactions during the learning process.

Excerpt 1: Learner's perception of engagement: *"Usually, when I see a long English text, I feel tired before reading it. In Webtoon, the text is divided into small conversations, so I want to continue. I also want to know what happens after the last panel."* L7. This excerpt reflects the affective influence of Webtoon's segmented and episodic format. The learner did not necessarily describe the language as completely easy; rather, the presentation reduced the initial psychological burden of reading. The desire to follow the storyline supported sustained engagement.

Excerpt 2: Learner's use of visual clues: *"Sometimes I did not know the meaning of a word, but I could understand it from the character's face and what happened in the picture. After that, I checked the word, and the meaning was almost the same as my prediction."* L14. The excerpt indicates that the learner used visual information to formulate a tentative interpretation and then verified it. This process shows how Webtoon can encourage contextual inferencing rather than immediate dependence on translation.

Excerpt 3: Teacher's observation of participation: *"Some students who rarely answered questions from the textbook began to give opinions when we discussed the characters. They did not always use correct English, but they were more willing to explain what they thought."* T3. The teacher's statement supports the learners' positive perceptions by showing an observable change in participation. The response also indicates that increased engagement did not automatically eliminate language errors. Webtoon appeared to create more opportunities for expression, while linguistic support remained necessary.

Excerpt 4: Learner's response to deep learning activities: *"The difficult part was explaining why the character made a decision. I understood the story, but I needed time to find the dialogue that supported my opinion. The discussion helped because my friends had different reasons."* L22. This excerpt distinguishes general understanding from deeper analytical reading. The learner could follow the story but experienced difficulty supporting an interpretation with evidence. Peer discussion assisted the learner in considering alternative explanations.

Excerpt 5: Teacher's view of Webtoon as a supplementary medium: *"Webtoon is useful for attracting students and introducing critical questions, but it should not replace all reading materials. Students also need experience with academic and informational texts. The important point is selecting the medium according to the learning objective."* T8. The teacher's response presents a balanced perception. Webtoon was regarded as pedagogically useful, but its value depended on alignment with instructional objectives. The teacher did not recommend using it as the only form of reading material.

Table 1. EFL Learners' and Teachers' Responses Concerning the Webtoon in Reading Activities

No.	Interview question	Summary of EFL learners' responses	Summary of EFL teachers' responses
1	How did you feel about using Webtoon in English reading activities?	Most learners described Webtoon as interesting, enjoyable, and less stressful than conventional reading passages. They stated that the story format encouraged them to continue reading. A small	Teachers observed greater attention and enthusiasm during Webtoon-based lessons than during lessons using ordinary printed passages. They also noted

No.	Interview question	Summary of EFL learners' responses	Summary of EFL teachers' responses
		number of learners initially regarded Webtoon as entertainment rather than an academic resource.	that learners who were normally passive appeared more willing to follow the story and answer questions.
2	How did the pictures, dialogue, facial expressions, and backgrounds affect your understanding?	Learners reported that the visual elements helped them understand characters' emotions, settings, actions, and unfamiliar vocabulary. They often used illustrations to predict meaning before consulting a dictionary. However, some learners said that they occasionally focused more on pictures than on the English text.	Teachers stated that visual information provided contextual support for learners with limited vocabulary. Nevertheless, they emphasized the need to direct learners back to the written dialogue and prevent them from relying solely on images.
3	How was reading through Webtoon different from reading conventional English texts?	Learners perceived Webtoon as shorter, more contextualized, and easier to follow because information was presented sequentially. They also considered the dialogue more natural than the language in some textbooks.	Teachers observed that the episodic structure reduced learners' initial resistance to reading. However, they noted that Webtoon contained informal expressions, shortened forms, and culturally specific language that sometimes required explanation.
4	What did you think about activities such as predicting events, analyzing characters, evaluating conflicts, and relating the story to real life?	Many learners found the activities challenging but meaningful. They stated that these tasks made them think beyond literal meanings and encouraged them to express different interpretations. Some learners experienced difficulty providing textual evidence or explaining their reasoning in English.	Teachers considered the activities valuable for promoting inference, analysis, evaluation, and reflection. They observed that learners needed guiding questions, examples, vocabulary support, and sufficient discussion time to complete the tasks effectively.
5	Would you like Webtoon to be used again in English reading lessons? Why or why not?	Most learners expressed a willingness to use Webtoon again because it made reading more enjoyable and understandable. They recommended selecting stories appropriate to their language level and interests. A few preferred a combination of Webtoon and conventional texts.	Teachers generally supported continued use of Webtoon as a supplementary medium rather than a complete replacement for textbooks. They recommended careful content selection, structured activities, and reliable access to digital devices.

Table 1 demonstrates that the learners generally perceived Webtoon positively as a digital medium for reading instruction. Their responses indicated that Webtoon increased their interest, reduced the pressure associated with reading long English passages, and made narrative information easier to follow. The teachers' observations supported these responses. Several teachers reported that learners who were usually reluctant to participate became more attentive when the reading material was presented through an illustrated and episodic story.

The positive perception was primarily associated with Webtoon's multimodal characteristics. The combination of written dialogue, facial expressions, character movements, and background illustrations helped learners construct meaning from more than one source of information. For learners with limited vocabulary, visual cues functioned as contextual support. They could infer whether a character was angry, surprised, afraid, or confused before fully understanding every word in the dialogue. The backgrounds also helped learners identify where and when events occurred.

However, the data suggested that visual support did not automatically result in careful reading. Some learners admitted that they occasionally looked at the illustrations without paying sufficient attention to the English dialogue. Teachers similarly observed that learners sometimes produced interpretations based only on the images. Therefore, the teachers used follow-up questions such as "Which sentence supports your answer?" and "What expression in the dialogue shows the character's intention?" These prompts encouraged learners to integrate visual and verbal evidence rather than depend on one mode alone.

Learners also perceived Webtoon as different from conventional reading materials because of its episodic structure and dialogue-based presentation. The shorter sections made the text appear more manageable, while the continuation of the storyline created curiosity. Learners wanted to know what would happen in the next episode and were consequently more willing to complete prediction and discussion activities. Nevertheless, the teachers explained that some Webtoon dialogues included slang, shortened forms, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references that were unfamiliar to learners. This finding indicates that Webtoon may improve accessibility at the level of presentation while still creating linguistic challenges at the level of authentic language use.

The activities based on deep learning principles were perceived as more demanding than ordinary comprehension questions. Learners were not only asked to identify facts but also to predict events, examine character motivations, evaluate conflicts, compare viewpoints, and relate the narrative to their own experiences. Most learners viewed these tasks positively because they allowed multiple answers and encouraged discussion. However, less proficient learners sometimes found it difficult to explain their reasoning, particularly when they had to provide evidence in English. Teacher scaffolding was therefore important in helping learners move from basic comprehension to deeper interpretation.

Research Question 2: What benefits and challenges do EFL learners experience when participating in Webtoon-based reading activities designed according to deep learning principles?

The second research question focused on the specific benefits and challenges experienced during the learning activities. Interview questions addressed language comprehension, higher-order thinking, motivation, collaboration, and obstacles related to language, technology, content, and instructional demands. Classroom observations were used to examine whether the reported experiences were visible during the lessons.

Excerpt 1: Vocabulary learning in context: *"I remembered the word 'hesitated' because the character stopped before opening the door. The picture, the action, and the sentence appeared together. It was easier to remember than learning the word from a list."* L5. This excerpt illustrates how verbal and visual information may strengthen contextual vocabulary learning. The learner connected the meaning of the word with a memorable narrative event rather than treating it as an isolated item.

Excerpt 2: Development of analytical reading: *"At first, I only thought the character was wrong. After the teacher asked us to look at the previous panels, I understood why she made that choice. I still disagreed with her, but I could explain the reason and evidence."* L18. The

learner's response demonstrates movement from an immediate judgment to a more evidence-based interpretation. The activity did not require the learner to change the opinion completely; instead, it encouraged a more informed evaluation of the character's decision.

Excerpt 3: Benefit and limitation of group discussion: *"The discussion helped me because my friend understood one expression that I did not know. But sometimes the student with the best English answered everything, so I only listened. I participated more when the teacher gave each member a different question."* L29. This excerpt shows that collaboration could provide linguistic and cognitive support while also producing unequal participation. The learner identified structured role distribution as a strategy that improved involvement.

Excerpt 4: Teacher's observation of cognitive difficulty: *"The students could identify what happened, but many initially struggled to explain why it happened or whether the character made a good decision. They needed sentence starters such as 'I believe this because...' and 'The evidence can be seen in....'"* T6. The teacher distinguished literal comprehension from analytical interpretation. The use of sentence frames provided both cognitive structure and linguistic support, enabling learners to formulate evidence-based responses.

Excerpt 5: Technological challenge: *"The story was interesting, but my internet connection stopped several times. I missed part of the discussion because the panels did not load. The next meeting was better because the teacher shared screenshots before the lesson."* L31. This excerpt demonstrates that technological problems could directly affect participation. It also shows that relatively simple instructional adjustments, such as distributing screenshots in advance, reduced dependence on real-time connectivity.

Table 2. Benefits and Challenges Experienced in Webtoon-Based Reading Activities

No.	Interview question	Summary of EFL learners' responses	Summary of EFL teachers' responses
1	What language-related benefits did you obtain from the Webtoon-based activities?	Learners reported learning vocabulary in context, understanding conversational expressions, identifying story settings, and making inferences through the combination of text and images. Some also became more confident in summarizing stories and explaining characters' actions.	Teachers observed improvement in contextual guessing, identification of narrative details, and willingness to use new vocabulary. They noted that learners remembered words more easily when the words were associated with specific panels or events.
2	How did the activities influence your thinking and understanding of the story?	Learners stated that prediction, character analysis, conflict evaluation, and reflective questions helped them examine causes, consequences, motives, and alternative actions. They became aware that a story could have more than one reasonable interpretation.	Teachers observed that learners gradually moved from one-word answers to more developed explanations. The strongest responses occurred when learners were given prompts, examples, and time to discuss evidence.
3	How did group discussion affect your learning?	Many learners said that discussion helped them understand difficult scenes, compare answers, obtain vocabulary assistance, and become more confident. Some learners, however, felt that more proficient or dominant classmates controlled the discussion.	Teachers found that collaborative work promoted participation and interpretation, but group composition required careful management. They also noted occasional dependence on one learner or the use of Indonesian without sufficient English practice.

No.	Interview question	Summary of EFL learners' responses	Summary of EFL teachers' responses
4	What difficulties did you experience while reading and completing the activities?	Learners mentioned unfamiliar vocabulary, slang, idioms, culturally specific references, long episodes, difficult analytical questions, and the need to explain answers in English. Some had difficulty distinguishing evidence from personal opinion.	Teachers confirmed that learners needed assistance with authentic expressions, cultural context, inferential questions, and evidence-based responses. Lower-proficiency learners required additional vocabulary and sentence frames.
5	Did you experience any technological or practical challenges?	Some learners experienced weak internet connections, limited mobile data, small screens, device-sharing, and distractions from notifications or other applications. Others had no major difficulties because they were familiar with smartphones.	Teachers identified unequal device access, unstable connectivity, off-task behavior, and time needed to open or scroll through episodes. They recommended downloaded materials, screenshots, printed alternatives, and clearer device-use rules.

Table 2 shows that the benefits of Webtoon-based reading activities occurred across several dimensions. Linguistically, learners benefited from contextual vocabulary learning and the opportunity to interpret conversational language. Cognitively, they practiced prediction, inference, analysis, evaluation, and reflection. Affectively, the narrative and visual format increased motivation and reduced anxiety. Socially, group discussion allowed learners to exchange interpretations and receive support from their peers.

The most frequently reported linguistic benefit was vocabulary learning in context. Learners stated that they could associate unfamiliar words with specific actions, facial expressions, settings, or events. This association helped them remember meanings more effectively than studying isolated word lists. Teachers also observed that learners attempted to use expressions from the Webtoon when summarizing scenes or participating in discussions. Nevertheless, this benefit depended on guided vocabulary work. Without teacher support, learners sometimes misunderstood words based on incomplete visual information.

A second benefit was the development of deeper comprehension. Activities based on deep learning principles required learners to examine why events occurred, what motivated the characters, how conflicts could be resolved, and whether a character's decision was reasonable. The learners reported that these questions encouraged them to reread dialogue and reconsider their first interpretations. Classroom observations similarly indicated that learners gradually began to refer to specific panels or statements when defending their answers.

Collaborative learning represented another important benefit. Many learners stated that group discussion helped them understand scenes they initially found confusing. Different group members often noticed different visual or textual details, allowing the group to construct a fuller interpretation. Discussion also reduced anxiety because learners could prepare ideas with peers before speaking to the whole class. However, collaboration did not benefit all learners equally. In some groups, more proficient learners dominated the conversation, while less confident members accepted answers without contributing. Teachers therefore needed to assign roles, distribute questions, and encourage each learner to provide evidence.

The findings also revealed several challenges. Linguistic difficulty remained significant, particularly when the selected Webtoon contained slang, idioms, shortened

expressions, or culturally specific references. Visual support could clarify actions and emotions but did not always explain figurative or culturally embedded meanings. Learners also had difficulty expressing complex interpretations in English. Some understood a character's motivation but could not formulate a detailed response because of limited vocabulary and grammatical resources.

Discussion

The findings indicate that EFL learners generally perceived Webtoon as an interesting, accessible, and meaningful digital medium for reading activities. Learners reported that its visual presentation, episodic structure, contextualized dialogue, and manageable text segments reduced the pressure commonly associated with long conventional reading passages. Teachers similarly observed increased attention, participation, and willingness to express opinions among learners who were usually passive in textbook-based lessons. These results confirm previous studies showing that Webtoon can create a more engaging reading environment and positively influence learners' motivation, reading habits, and comprehension. Erya and Pustika (2021), for example, found that learners perceived Webtoon positively because it provided an enjoyable and supportive medium for improving reading comprehension. Similarly, Sorohiti and Kirsan (2023) reported that LINE Webtoon contributed to learners' English reading habits and skills by presenting reading material in a format that was appealing and familiar to digitally oriented students. The present findings therefore reinforce the argument that learners' affective responses to reading materials are closely connected to how those materials are presented.

The findings also support Tacuri (2023) and Tacuri and Espinosa (2024), who identified Webtoon as a useful digital reading aid for high school EFL learners. In the present study, learners did not merely describe Webtoon as entertaining; they also regarded it as easier to approach than conventional English texts. This distinction is important because enjoyment alone does not necessarily produce meaningful learning. The learners' positive responses were related to specific instructional affordances, including shorter dialogue units, sequential presentation, visual contextualization, and curiosity about subsequent episodes. These features appeared to lower the initial psychological barrier to reading and encouraged learners to continue engaging with the text. This result is consistent with García's (2020) argument that comics can strengthen engagement in educational settings through their narrative and visual organization. It also corresponds with Villa-Castro et al. (2020), who found that comics could foster reading comprehension by making textual information more concrete and attractive.

A major finding concerned the role of multimodality in supporting meaning construction. Learners stated that pictures, facial expressions, character movements, and background details helped them identify emotions, settings, actions, and unfamiliar vocabulary. In several cases, learners used visual information to predict the meaning of a word before checking it through another source. This finding confirms earlier research suggesting that graphic narratives support comprehension by combining verbal and visual information. Cabrera and Segura (2023) emphasized that manga and similar visual narratives can support literary learning by providing multiple resources for interpretation. Sánchez-Morocho et al. (2020) likewise showed that transmedia narratives may strengthen reading comprehension by encouraging learners to integrate information across different representational modes. The current study extends these findings by showing that visual clues were not only used for general comprehension but also became part of the learners' inferential reading process.

The reported vocabulary benefits also align with Novanti and Suprayogi (2021), who found that Webtoon had potential to enhance EFL learners' vocabulary. In the

present study, learners remembered words more easily when the vocabulary was connected with specific characters, actions, or events. This suggests that vocabulary learning was strengthened through contextual association rather than memorization in isolation. Guacho et al. (2021) similarly found that comic strips could support English learning by placing language in meaningful situations. Nevertheless, the findings also showed that visual support was not always sufficient. Some learners focused excessively on illustrations and ignored the written dialogue, while others made inaccurate assumptions based on incomplete visual information. This partially qualifies the more optimistic conclusions of previous studies. The finding suggests that multimodality does not automatically guarantee comprehension; learners still need to coordinate visual and textual evidence carefully.

This result is consistent with Neva's (2021) review of digital texts and reading comprehension, which indicated that digital formats can support reading but may also create cognitive and attentional demands. Pikhart et al. (2024) similarly concluded that the cognitive influence of digital media on L2 reading comprehension depends on the modality, task design, learner characteristics, and instructional context. The present study confirms this conditional view. Webtoon was beneficial when teachers directed learners to examine both the panels and the dialogue, but it became less effective when learners treated the images as substitutes for reading. Therefore, the findings extend previous Webtoon research by emphasizing the importance of multimodal literacy: learners must be taught not only to read words but also to interpret how words, images, sequence, and visual perspective work together.

Another significant finding was that deep-learning-oriented activities encouraged learners to move beyond literal comprehension. Prediction, character analysis, conflict evaluation, reflection, and real-life connection required learners to examine causes, motives, consequences, and alternative interpretations. Teachers observed that learners gradually progressed from short factual answers to more developed explanations. This finding supports the view that digital narratives can be used for higher-order reading rather than only for vocabulary practice or surface comprehension. Perilla (2022) argued that digital and narrative competencies can be developed through pedagogical activities that integrate interpretation, participation, and production. Similarly, Soler and Lozoya (2022) emphasized that digital reading platforms become educationally valuable when they are accompanied by structured activities that promote active engagement.

The importance of teacher mediation in the findings strongly confirms Errázuriz et al. (2022), who showed that reading mediation by teachers plays a central role in helping learners engage meaningfully with texts. In the present study, teachers used guiding questions, sentence starters, vocabulary explanations, and evidence prompts to support learners' transition from basic understanding to deeper interpretation. Questions such as "Which sentence supports your answer?" encouraged learners to justify their ideas rather than respond impressionistically. This finding also supports Pérez-Benítez and Barreto (2021), who argued that technology-enriched reading environments require appropriate pedagogical design to improve comprehension. Therefore, the effectiveness of Webtoon in this study resulted from the interaction among the digital medium, the teacher's instructional decisions, and the learners' participation.

Collaborative discussion was another important benefit. Learners stated that peer interaction helped them understand difficult scenes, compare interpretations, obtain vocabulary assistance, and gain confidence before speaking to the whole class. This finding supports Cassany's (2022) discussion of informal and socially situated language learning, in which learners develop understanding through shared participation in meaningful literacy practices. Ruiz et al. (2020) similarly demonstrated that popular cultural materials can create opportunities for collaborative language learning. The

current study extends these insights by showing that Webtoon-based discussion can support deep reading when learners are required to negotiate interpretations and provide evidence.

However, collaboration also produced challenges. Some learners reported that more proficient classmates dominated discussions, while less confident participants became passive. Teachers also observed that groups sometimes relied heavily on one learner or used Indonesian without sufficient English practice. These findings qualify the assumption that group work is automatically beneficial. Collaborative learning required structured roles, distributed questions, and active teacher monitoring. Therefore, the value of peer discussion depended on equitable participation rather than merely placing learners in groups.

The study also identified linguistic and cultural difficulties. Learners encountered slang, idioms, shortened expressions, and culturally specific references that were not always explained by the illustrations. This finding supports the caution expressed by Cabrera and Segura (2023) regarding the cultural dimensions of manga and other graphic narratives. It also corresponds with Pikhart et al. (2024), who noted that digital multimodal materials may present additional processing demands when learners must interpret language, culture, and visual information simultaneously. The findings suggest that authentic dialogue can be both an advantage and a challenge. It exposes learners to natural language, but it may also exceed their proficiency unless teachers provide pre-teaching and contextual explanation.

Technological problems further shaped learners' experiences. Weak internet connections, limited mobile data, small screens, device sharing, and digital distractions reduced participation for some learners. These findings align with Bernal and Martínez (2021), who observed that digital reading in blended learning can expand learning opportunities but remains dependent on access, technological readiness, and instructional organization. Moreno and Llanes-Medina (2022) likewise emphasized that successful virtual reading comprehension depends on favorable environmental and technological conditions. The present study confirms that mobile accessibility should not be equated with equal access. Although most learners were familiar with smartphones, familiarity did not eliminate connectivity or resource inequalities.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that EFL learners generally perceived Webtoon as an engaging, accessible, and meaningful digital learning medium when it was integrated with deep learning principles in reading activities. Its combination of written dialogue, illustrations, facial expressions, backgrounds, and sequential panels helped learners construct meaning through both verbal and visual information. These features reduced the psychological pressure commonly associated with lengthy conventional texts and increased learners' willingness to read, predict events, discuss characters, and express interpretations. The episodic structure also sustained curiosity and encouraged continued participation. More importantly, the integration of prediction, inference, character analysis, conflict evaluation, reflection, and real-life connection transformed Webtoon from a source of entertainment into a medium for deeper reading. Learners were encouraged to move beyond identifying factual information and to examine motives, causes, consequences, and alternative perspectives. Teachers' responses and classroom observations supported these perceptions by showing greater attention, participation, and confidence among learners during Webtoon-based activities. Therefore, the educational value of Webtoon was not limited to its visual attractiveness; it also provided a contextual environment in which learners could develop vocabulary, comprehension, critical interpretation, and collaborative communication.

The study further concludes that the effectiveness of Webtoon-based reading activities depends on the interaction among the selected content, task design, teacher mediation, learner readiness, and technological conditions. Although learners experienced linguistic, cognitive, affective, and social benefits, they also encountered unfamiliar vocabulary, slang, idiomatic expressions, cultural references, demanding analytical questions, and difficulty expressing evidence-based interpretations in English. Some learners relied excessively on illustrations without examining the written dialogue, while group discussions occasionally resulted in unequal participation. Internet instability, limited mobile data, device sharing, small screens, and digital distractions also influenced the implementation of the activities. These challenges demonstrate that Webtoon should not be treated as an automatic solution to EFL reading difficulties or as a complete replacement for conventional and academic texts. Instead, it should be used as a carefully selected supplementary medium supported by vocabulary preparation, explicit reading-strategy instruction, structured discussion, sentence frames, differentiated assistance, and alternative access formats.

RECOMMENDATION

English teachers are recommended to select Webtoon stories that correspond to learners' proficiency, age, cultural background, and interests and to integrate them with structured pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities. Teachers should provide vocabulary support, guiding questions, sentence frames, collaborative roles, and prompts that require learners to justify interpretations using textual and visual evidence. Schools should also support implementation by improving internet access and providing downloaded, printed, or low-bandwidth alternatives. Future researchers are encouraged to examine the effectiveness of Webtoon through larger samples, different educational settings, longer implementation periods, and mixed-method or experimental designs that measure changes in reading comprehension and higher-order thinking.

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Declaration of Using AI Tools

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools were used to assist with language refinement, organization, and editorial improvement during the preparation of this manuscript. The authors reviewed, revised, and verified the AI-assisted content and remain fully responsible for the accuracy, interpretation, originality, and final presentation of the study.

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