

Research Article

USING DIGITAL BOOKS AND COMICS IN ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

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Abstract.

This paper focuses on the implementation of linguistics theory, particularly in multimodality, to understand various forms of reading materials such as digital books and comics. This paper aimed to gain insights into how practitioners such as school teachers optimise the use of digital books and comics in English teaching and learning activities using well-informed theories. In addition, this study also described the perspectives of creative industry practitioners to contribute to the practice by giving insights into the production of digital books and comics. This research collected data from three sessions of workshop series where discussion results between the stakeholders, namely academicians, researchers, and teachers, were documented in field notes. The findings of this research imply that the multimodal theories and implementation were useful in understanding the use of digital books and comics. The workshop series was particularly effective, as can be seen through how the participants were enthusiastic about participating in this activity. Furthermore, all the participants can understand how theoretical knowledge is needed to support and develop their knowledge on optimally using reading materials in the form of digital books and comics.

Keywords: *multimodal texts, digital books, comics, reading materials.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study explores the opportunity of extending the reach of multimodal theory beyond understanding multimodal texts. This study is a part of a bigger project that involved teachers from different levels of education to discuss and learn about the basic understanding of multimodal texts and how to optimise their use. The specific discussion is focused on the multimodal texts in the form of digital books and comics. The discussion on the topic is built on the theory of Intersemiotic Complementarity (Royce, 1998) regarding the meaning relationship between semiotic modes in the form of visual images and verbal texts. With this basis, the main activity of the project was to process information to use this theory to observe reading materials such as digital books and comics. The overall project was a series of workshop series where academicians


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and researchers provided theoretical information to explain its implementation in the observed reading materials. Then, participants in the workshop were encouraged to share their experiences in carrying out English teaching and learning activities using various reading materials and digital books or comics.

One of the motivations of the project was the fact that the advancement in technological developments has meant that we have to embrace innovations in various fields, including in education. In the world of education, there are many learning media that have been developed to assist English teaching and learning activities. Consequently, this has also added types of teaching materials. For example, digital books and comics are now an acceptable learning medium that are widely used in elementary schools to high schools. This development has proven to be very influential in the world of education because it can provide new opportunities for students to be creative to provide better learning for students. Besides the technological development that provides various sources of reading materials, the willingness of students to develop their reading comprehension should also be considered. The teacher can take a role in encouraging the student's desire to read by providing a class reader as an excellent introduction to the joy of reading (Chang & Renandya, 2017). For parents, it can be conducted by introducing some books starting very early. Of course, it cannot be implemented easier, especially if the book provided is not in their first language. Teachers and parents can use some methods for creating Students Center Learning (SCL) based on the students and children needed (Jacobs & Renandya, 2014). If it is applied properly, over time it will improve the students' willingness to read and can also improve the student's reading comprehension.

The common features of both digital books and comics books used in this research are comics that provide some pictures. This comic aims to improve the children's and student's ability in extensive reading. It will help students become excellent and enthusiastic readers and reap numerous linguistic and non-linguistic benefits, including improved reading skills. Of course, it can make their knowledge about the world broader and deeper (Renandya, 2016). Intensive reading is good, but extensive reading can be more fun for students. The research also showed that students could develop their reading literacy skills by reading exciting books within their current proficiency levels (Renandya, Krashen & Jacobs, 2018). Even if it cannot produce measurable language gains, at least it can result in a more enjoyable language learning experience (Renandya, 2007).

The project was also a response to the pandemic situation which was followed by the emergence of regulations from the government related to the implementation of office

activity restrictions. This is where the rapid development of technology in the world of education is felt by teachers, parents, and children/students. As many schools in Indonesia are carrying out online learning activities, it was only logical for teachers to find ways to deliver materials digitally using the available technology to the students. As an alternative, the online activity utilized various kinds of digital media in its implementation, in this case using digital resources including digital books and comics. Even so, in reality, there are still many education personnel who are still not fluent in the operation and/or use of digital media, so that it becomes an obstacle to the implementation of English teaching and learning activities. To this purpose, the project provided a facilitation for the teachers.

Theoretically, four core concepts are common across multimodal research: mode, semiotic resource, modal affordance and inter-semiotic relations (Jewitt, 2014). Within social semiotics, a mode is understood as an outcome of the cultural shaping of a material through its use in the daily social interaction of people. The semiotic resources of a mode come to display regularities through the ways in which people use them and can be thought of as the connection between representational resources and what people do with them. The term modal affordance refers to the material and the cultural aspects of modes: what it is possible to express and represent easily with a mode (Kress, 2010). It is a concept connected to both the material as well as the cultural and social historical use of a mode. Modal affordance raises the question of what mode is 'best' for what. This raises the concept of inter-semiotic relationships, and how modes are configured in particular contexts. These four concepts provide the starting point for multimodal analysis.

In the project, the theory that became the basis for thinking in the discussion between the research team and participants included the theory of intersemiotic complementarity and translanguaging. Intersemiotic complementarity itself is a theoretical framework proposed by Royce (1998), referring to the implications of the order of visual and verbal modes that support each other in expressing a meaning. This theory plays a major role in understanding various media containing text and images. On the other hand, translanguaging is a theory that evolves into a concept that goes beyond the "two languages of additive bilingualism or interdependence" (García & Wei, 2014); rather, it is a blend of two different cultures as reflected in a language use. So, it can be understood that translanguaging is a language concept to comprehend the ability of language speakers to communicate between two or more languages. These linguistics theories helped structure the flow of a discussion where the main topic relates to the use of digital books and comics in teaching and learning activities, with a focus on

language learning. In this project, the theory helped to examine digital books and comics containing foreign and local languages.

Specific to the current project is the use of comics, hence it is important to discuss the basic understanding of comics. The word comic is a short reference used to refer to a large group of publications that actually consist of various forms, including comic strips and comic books (Ni, 2011). Technically, Kunzle (1973) defines that a comic is a work that consists of a separate sequence of visual images, where visual images usually dominate over verbal texts and contain certain moral messages. The characteristic that distinguishes comics from written forms in general is the different semiotic modes that are combined in one page. Technically, one comic page consists of visual images and verbal texts that are essentially different semiotic modes arranged in such a way that the meaning that appears in the comic comes from both modes. The relationship between these two different modes can be identified using the intersemiotic complementarity framework which states that visual images and verbal texts on one page have a synergistic relationship to form a single meaning. Thus, it is very important to know the meaning arrangement of the two different semiotic modes in comics. Comic books have now become one of the innovative ways to implement a more effective system of English teaching and learning activities. Therefore, understanding the relationship between visual images and verbal texts may not be limited to comic books because meaning augmentation is something that needs to be learned for parents or educators. This is so that they can apply an effective teaching system that suits the students being taught without making them bored.

One motivation that drives this study is the fact that sometimes teachers are not well-informed of the developing theories about the English teaching and learning materials apart from the conventional ones. Several things will be revealed along with the learning of the theory mentioned above. These include the participants' understanding of the use of digital books and/or comics as supporting tools in language learning. With the theories above, it is also hoped that the participants will understand more about learning media and their components so that they can be applied in English teaching and learning activities. This paper aims to gain insights on how practitioners such as school teachers optimise the use of digital books and comics in the English teaching and learning activities using well-informed theories. In addition, the study also describes the perspectives from creative industry practitioners to contribute to the practice by giving insights about the production of digital books and comics.

2. METHOD

Again, the main purpose of this study is to equip teachers with the knowledge of linguistic theories so that they can be applied to various multimodal texts that may appear in various forms of creative products in everyday life. The facilitation was conducted as a workshop series consisting of three parts which include learning theory and learning available data to application to digital books and comics that are relevant to the workshop participants' field of work. The target participants included alumni, school teachers from various levels of education, and the general public.

The study involved participants namely 30 school teachers from various levels of education such as primary, junior and senior secondary schools in the regional Malang, East Java. In addition, some participants were those who worked in the creative industry such as illustrators and writers. The study collected the main data from field notes and observation from the workshop series, which was conducted with the following details:

TABLE 1: Details of Workshop Series Sessions.

No.	Workshop session	series	Description of the workshop activities
1.	Session 1		Studying and using comics in English teaching and learning activities using examples from LDSW comics,
2.	Session 2		Learning to use picture books, ordinary comics, and digital comics in English teaching and learning activities,
3.	Session 3		Participants share their experiences in using various materials with a focus on language and images in English teaching and learning activities.

Then, more in-depth information was obtained from a session of a Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with the participants. By conducting discussions between the research team and participants, training, mentoring and follow up activities can be carried out properly. The research team and participants exchanged ideas regarding linguistic theory in understanding digital books and comics, as well as how to use digital books in English teaching and learning activities.

In terms of materials, the workshop series used reading materials of digital books and comics from various sources. In the first session, a digital book called Little Dim Sum Warriors was used. In the second session, some sample data was collected from Khan Academy, most of which stories from the digital comic series contain a certain moral message. In the third session, a book called We're Going on A Bear Hunt was used to discuss the techniques in storytelling for students. All of the selected data in the project were taken with consideration of the correlation of the visual images and the verbal text, as well as certain meanings contained in them.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It has been the intention of this project to fit the interests from two important stakeholders, namely academicians and researchers and school teachers in different education levels. Throughout the project, the discussion between the research team and the participants tended to show that learning linguistic theory can be a good theoretical basis in helping students and students in using interactive teaching materials that are widely available in the community. For example, participants in the study which consisted of teachers in schools from kindergarten, elementary, junior high and high school levels admitted that they have used picture books either in print or digital books versions. However, they mostly focused on building students' vocabulary in a number of ways including teaching the students to pronounce the wordings with the correct intonation and translating the wordings in the picture books into Indonesian. In the first batch of the workshop series, the participants learned that the visual images in the picture books can be optimized by relating them to the verbal texts or wordings that accompany the visual images on the same page. They were also introduced to the idea of talk-around-text in which the teachers can optimize the use of visual images to talk about the contexts of the story by exploring the visual images starting from the cover, the detailed visual images on each page and the back cover. In this way, the workshop nudged on the theory of translanguaging which described that the elements of cultural contents may be contained in language use, as well as in the visual images (Istighfaroh et al., 2022).

In addition, the observation in the first instalment of the workshop series showed that the discussion and feedback in the sharing session between the research team and the participant were acceptable for the participants to apply in their various teaching contexts. They understood that they needed to adjust and modify the theories to match with their teaching contexts. They were actively involved in the sharing session by giving their opinion in the question-and-answer session at the workshop. The post-activity survey form from the workshop also showed positive appreciation from the session.

The second instalment of the workshop was an expansion of the material from the first session. While the first session was mostly filled with discussion of the theories to understand the meaning relationship between images and writings in one source of reading material, Little Dimsum Warrior, the second one focused on studying and using comics in English teaching and learning activities using examples from various materials. Included in the activity was the learning to comprehend the reading flow in illustrated

comic books. Therefore, the participants were introduced to materials selected by the research team from. Ideas of digital reading materials from the participants were also accepted. Overall, in this session the discussion expanded into learning the use of picture books, ordinary comics, digital books and comics in English teaching and learning activities. This session served as a reinforcement for the basic theoretical understanding of the intersemiotic complementarity theories and its trial application from the first session. It was a great opportunity for the participants to share their experiences and newly-found knowledge about the use of both visual images and verbal texts in various reading materials.

It was noted that some of the participants actually worked as illustrators. The discussion of the meaning resources in the book so far provided them with the important theoretical backgrounds. They admitted that in their creative process, they usually relied on the artistic side of the drawing process. Visual images, in their opinion, were an illustration that accessorised the story in a picture book. They usually worked with a writer who contributed the story in terms of the verbal texts. Now that they had the theoretical information, they could use it as a consideration in their next creative process, namely in producing picture books. Overall, the information obtained in the first and second sessions of the workshop was considered very useful to support their activities as comic or digital book makers.

The final part of the workshop series was a wrap up in which creative industry practitioners were invited to contribute by giving insights about the production of digital books and comics. They were professionals in the field of digital books and comics production. The session was an opportunity for the other stakeholders namely the academicians and researchers as well as teachers to gain information from a different perspective. As professionals, they presented the actual process in the industry to produce digital reading materials. In the process, verbal texts in the digital books and comic productions were created with the consideration of linguistics and translation. Often, investigations had to be done prior to the production.

As an example, the production of *Little Dimsum Warrior* as a digital book was recounted. The book was intended to be used as a reading material to learn English. The book was originally written in both Chinese and English. The professionals in Indonesia were planning to publish the Indonesian-English version. A part of the challenge in this process is to transfer the cultural content from the Chinese background to include Indonesian culture while retaining the intention to teach English. Therefore, considerations should be made in terms of naming characters, selecting content relevant to Indonesian culture and so on. In the final part of the process, parents and children were

invited to trial a reading session using the digital book, to which the book passed the trial making it fit for use in English teaching and learning activities.

In the follow-up session, the participants were invited again to share their experiences in using books with certain cultural content. On this occasion, a participant conveyed their experience in using the mouse deer's book. The cultural content in the book was considered biased, as the book was considered to build wrong ideas about animal characters to the readers, especially if they are early readers. As professionals, the digital book producers were reminded that sometimes fictional characters were better than animal characters for book production. They wanted to avoid sending the wrong message about the character of a particular animal to young readers.

Overall, the workshop series that have been held show that there is high enthusiasm in linguistic knowledge as a theoretical ground for using digital books and comics that present both visual images and verbal texts. In the series of workshops that have been carried out, participants were able to share and gain experiences from resourceful speakers and other participants about their experiences in writing digital books and comics. There was also information on the dynamics of digital books and comics that have been developed in Indonesia.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, this study has shown that theoretical knowledge is needed to support and develop teachers' knowledge in schools on how to optimally use reading materials in the form of digital books and comics. The use of reading materials in the form of digital books and comics is sometimes constrained by the challenges of adjustment for students at various levels of education. Students at educational levels such as junior high and high school may feel that using digital books seems too easy. However, with good delivery and various forms of enrichment, a variety of activities can be carried out. This includes optimizing the use of the visual images and verbal texts contained in digital books and comics. The suggestions we can give are related to the types of English teaching and learning activities by involving students in language learning activities using reading materials in the form of digital books and comics. Students at various levels of education can be invited to create various forms of digital books or comics with various digital applications that are now widely available on the internet.

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