



EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' INCIDENTAL LEARNING FOR ASSISTING READING SKILLS WITH WEBTOON



NILA KHOIRIYAH
SN. 20522124

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A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Sarjana Pendidikan in English Education



By :

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**ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND TEACHER TRAINING
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2026**

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DAN PENGGUNAAN BANTUAN KECERDASAN ARTIFISIAL**

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Saya menilai bahwa naskah skripsi tersebut sudah dapat diajukan kepada Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Ilmu Keguruan UIN KH. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan untuk diujikan dalam sidang munaqosah.

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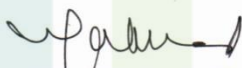
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MOTTO AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

MOTTO

"The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go."

— *Dr. Seuss*

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ABSTRACT

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Keywords: *incidental learning, Webtoon, reading skills, EFL students.*

This study explores how EFL students use Webtoon as an incidental learning tool for assisting English reading skills and the challenges they experience during the reading process. This research employed a qualitative case study involving five EFL students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and journal reflections, then analyzed thematically using Hulstijn’s (2001) incidental learning framework and Chapelle’s (2001) framework of learning challenges in digital environments. The findings show that participants developed incidental learning through elaboration, rehearsal, and automaticity while reading English Webtoons. Participants used contextual clues, visual elements, and repeated exposure to understand unfamiliar vocabulary, improve comprehension, and read more fluently. However, participants also experienced linguistic challenges related to unfamiliar vocabulary and expressions, cognitive and affective challenges involving concentration and motivation, as well as pedagogical and technological challenges such as lack of guidance and distractions from advertisements. Overall, Webtoon can support incidental learning and assist EFL students’ reading skills through engaging and contextual reading experiences.

ABSTRAK

Khoiriyah, Nila. 2026. *Exploring EFL Students' Incidental Learning For Assisting Reading Skills with Webtoon". Skripsi.* Program Studi Tadris Bahasa Inggris. FTIK UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid pekalongan. Pembimbing: Nadia Faradhillah, M.A.

Kata Kunci: *incidental learning, Webtoon, keterampilan membaca, siswa EFL.*

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana siswa EFL menggunakan Webtoon sebagai media incidental learning untuk membantu keterampilan membaca bahasa Inggris serta tantangan yang mereka alami selama proses membaca. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi kasus kualitatif yang melibatkan lima siswa EFL yang dipilih melalui purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan refleksi jurnal, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik menggunakan kerangka incidental learning dari Hulstijn (2001) dan kerangka tantangan pembelajaran dalam lingkungan digital dari Chapelle (2001). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa para partisipan mengembangkan incidental learning melalui elaboration, rehearsal, dan automaticity saat membaca Webtoon berbahasa Inggris. Partisipan menggunakan petunjuk konteks, elemen visual, dan paparan berulang untuk memahami kosakata yang tidak familiar, meningkatkan pemahaman bacaan, serta membaca dengan lebih lancar. Namun, partisipan juga mengalami tantangan linguistik terkait kosakata dan ungkapan yang tidak familiar, tantangan kognitif dan afektif yang melibatkan konsentrasi dan motivasi, serta tantangan pedagogis dan teknologi seperti kurangnya bimbingan dan gangguan dari iklan. Secara keseluruhan, Webtoon dapat mendukung incidental learning dan membantu keterampilan membaca siswa EFL melalui pengalaman membaca yang menarik dan kontekstual.

PREFACE

All praise and sincere gratitude be to Allah SWT for His endless blessings, mercy, and guidance that have enabled me to complete this undergraduate thesis entitled *“Exploring EFL Students’ Incidental Learning for Assisting Reading Skills with Webtoon.”* It is submitted to the English Education Department at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan to fulfill one of the requirements for the Degree of Sarjana Pendidikan in English Education. This thesis study was able to be completed due to a lot of support from several people. Therefore, on this occasion, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to:

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Study

The lack of interest among students in reading English texts remains one of the problems often found in various English language study programs. Many students do not consider reading to be a voluntary activity, so their interaction with English texts tends to be limited (Duran Bautista & Rendon Marulanda, 2018). When interest in reading is low, students usually read only to fulfill assignment requirements or academic requirements, not because of personal needs or desires. This perspective causes reading to lose its intrinsic meaning, greatly reducing students' opportunities to gain broader exposure to the language (Prinsloo, 2018). In addition, previous learning experiences, coursework load, and academic pressure also shape how students perceive reading (Jackson et al., 2022). Students who have encountered difficulties with reading, or who felt compelled to read in the past, generally carry these attitudes into higher education (Andrianatos, 2019). This condition shows that a lack of interest in reading cannot be viewed as an individual weakness, but rather as a phenomenon that reflects the broader and more complex dynamics of language learning.

Although reading is often associated with formal classroom activities, developments in literacy practices demonstrate that reading skills can also develop significantly outside of formal academic contexts. Reading need not always be tied to learning materials, lecturer instructions, or specific lecture schedules (Pressley et al., 2023). In independent learning, students have the freedom to choose the type of reading material and reading environment that suits their preferences, allowing the reading process to occur more naturally and unstructuredly (Gandari & Jaya, 2024). This situation opens up opportunities for incidental learning, where students acquire language understanding indirectly without explicit learning goals. The development of digital technology has also increasingly expanded opportunities for students to engage in

incidental reading activities in various situations (Frank & Castek, 2017). Through devices such as mobile phones and tablets, students can access digital texts anytime and anywhere, including during their free time. This flexible and ongoing digital reading activity allows for repeated and unintentional language exposure, allowing language understanding to develop incidentally through casual but consistent interactions with texts (Astri et al., 2024).

In the context of independent learning that increasingly utilizes technology, digital media that are close to students' daily lives can be more engaging and appropriate alternative reading material (Pramesworo et al., 2023). One popular medium is Webtoon, a digital comic with a vertical format that is easily accessible via mobile devices. Webtoons offer a different reading experience than conventional texts because they harmoniously combine visual and textual elements (Tacuri, 2023). The presence of images helps readers grasp situations, emotions, and storylines more quickly, allowing for a more intuitive and incidental language comprehension process (Brosch, 2018). The multimodal nature of Webtoon also allows students to utilize visual clues to interpret the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary or expressions, allowing language learning to occur naturally without direct explanation. Furthermore, the variety of stories offered, such as romance, comedy, and adventure, generally aligns with students' interests, encouraging them to continue reading without feeling overwhelmed (Gingerich & Adler, 2020). With their light, entertaining, and accessible nature, Webtoons have great potential as an out-of-class reading resource that supports incidental learning while providing meaningful linguistic input for language development (Rohmatulhaq, 2024).

Seeing the potential of Webtoons as a source of language input outside the classroom, it is important to understand the skills that we actually want to develop through reading activities. Reading ability is one of the key components for EFL students because it is directly related to their academic development and language skills (Phillips Galloway & Uccelli, 2019). Understanding a text cannot be

separated from mastery of vocabulary (Aprilia, 2019). If students do not master keywords, the flow of thought in the text will be difficult to follow. In addition to vocabulary mastery, a deeper understanding of word meanings and semantic relationships is also necessary for readers to be able to interpret information appropriately (Laufer & Aviad–Levitzky, 2017). Developing reading skills requires repeated exposure to various types of authentic texts, as this exposure helps readers recognize language patterns more naturally (Nation, 2017). The habit of independent reading also plays an important role in building students' fluency and confidence in understanding increasingly complex English texts.

To gain an initial understanding of this phenomenon, the researcher conducted preliminary interviews with five EFL students who regularly read English-language Webtoons. The interviews revealed that the participants voluntarily engaged with English outside the classroom through Webtoon, despite having limited exposure to English in their daily academic activities. They explained that Webtoon was appealing because it provided entertaining stories, visual support, and easy access through mobile devices, making English reading feel less demanding than conventional texts. Although their primary purpose was entertainment rather than language learning, the participants acknowledged encountering unfamiliar vocabulary and expressions that they gradually understood through repeated reading and contextual clues. These preliminary findings indicate that Webtoon may function as a source of authentic English input that facilitates incidental language learning, highlighting the need for further investigation into this phenomenon.

Building on these preliminary findings, as digital literacy plays a growing role in the lives of EFL students, the use of popular media such as Webtoons has become relevant to study as a reading resource that can support the development of reading skills. Asllani and Paçarizi (2021) stated that digital reading has the potential to facilitate incidental vocabulary learning due to its easy access and use in informal contexts. Miclea (2025) also explained that

multimodal digital comics help readers interpret word meaning through visual support, allowing comprehension to occur more naturally and incidentally without direct instruction. While Hernandez (2023) emphasized that webcomics can be a source of authentic and enjoyable input for language learners. However, research specifically examining how the incidental learning process occurs through the use of Webtoon as independent reading for EFL students is still limited, because most previous studies have focused more on perceptions, motivations, or its use as a structured learning medium. Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of Webtoon as an authentic input source that supports incidental learning in the context of independent reading for EFL students and is expected to enrich the study of digital literacy-based language learning and incidental learning while providing alternative reading sources that are more contextual, enjoyable, and relevant for students in developing their English reading skills sustainably.

1.2. Identification of The Problem

Based on the description of the background of the problem above, research problems can be identified, including the following:

1. There is a lack of interest in reading English texts among EFL students, resulting in limited language exposure and hindering the development of their reading skills.
2. There is still limited understanding of how incidental learning occurs through digital media such as Webtoon, especially in supporting the development of EFL students' reading skills.

1.3. Limitation of The Problem

Based on the description of the background of the problem above, research problems can be identified, including the following:

1. This study is limited to exploring incidental learning through Webtoon as a medium for developing reading skills among EFL students and does not examine other language skills such as speaking, writing, or listening, nor compare Webtoon with other digital learning media.
2. This study focuses only on a small group of EFL students in one university in Pekalongan who use Webtoon for independent

reading, so the findings are context-specific and cannot be generalized to all EFL learners or different educational settings.

1.4. Formulation of The Problem

Based on the background that has been explained, this research is designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do EFL students use Webtoon as an incidental learning tool for assisting English reading skills?
2. What are the challenges faced by the EFL students in using Webtoon for Incidental learning in reading?

1.5. Operational Definitions

To avoid misunderstanding various terms in this study, the researcher provides several definitions related to research as follows:

1. EFL Student : Students who study English as a foreign language in an environment where English is not the primary language (Desselle & Shane, 2019).
2. Incidental Learning : The process of language acquisition that occurs unintentionally through natural engagement with English-language materials, without any explicit goal of learning (Singer, 2022).
3. Reading skills : Refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and evaluate written texts in English according to context (Sari et al., 2024).
4. Webtoon : Digital comics based on visual stories that are accessed through online platforms and used as entertainment and interesting learning media for students (Khotimah et al., 2022).

1.6. Aims of The Research

According to the formulation of the problem above, this research aims to find out :

1. To explore how EFL students experience the incidental learning process in developing their English reading skills through Webtoon.
2. To identify the challenges faced by EFL students during the incidental learning process through Webtoon in developing their reading skills.

1.7. Significance of The Research

1. Theoretical : This research contributes to the development of theories by Hulstijn (2001) about incidental learning in the context of learning to read English through visual-based digital media such as Webtoon.
2. Practical : This research provides benefits for educators as a reference in utilizing Webtoon to create more interesting and natural reading learning for EFL students.
3. Empirical : This research forms the basis for further studies on the application of digital media in facilitating the incidental learning process in English language learning.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This chapter presents the conclusion of the study based on the findings and discussion discussed in the previous chapter. The conclusion summarizes the answers to the research questions regarding how EFL students use Webtoon as an incidental learning tool for assisting English reading skills and the challenges they experience during the process. This section also highlights the role of Webtoon in supporting incidental language learning through meaningful and contextual reading experiences.

5.1 Conclusion

This study explored how EFL students use Webtoon as an incidental learning tool for assisting English reading skills. Based on the findings, participants experienced incidental learning through elaboration, rehearsal, and automaticity while reading English Webtoons. In the elaboration stage, participants used storyline, context, character interactions, and visual elements to understand unfamiliar vocabulary and maintain reading comprehension. These findings support Hulstijn's (2001) theory that incidental learning occurs through meaningful cognitive processing during language exposure.

The findings also showed that rehearsal occurred through repeated exposure to vocabulary and expressions across different chapters. Participants gradually became more familiar with recurring words and understood their meanings more easily while reading. This repeated exposure helped participants strengthen vocabulary recognition and improve reading fluency naturally. These findings support Nation's (2017) argument that frequent exposure to meaningful language input supports vocabulary retention and reading development.

Furthermore, participants demonstrated automaticity as they became faster and more efficient in recognizing familiar vocabulary and understanding the storyline. Participants reported that they no longer needed to spend too much time guessing

meanings and could comprehend texts more fluently without relying on word-by-word translation. This finding supports Hulstijn's (2001) explanation that repeated exposure can develop more automatic language processing and support reading fluency.

However, participants also experienced several challenges during Webtoon reading activities. Linguistic challenges included unfamiliar vocabulary, slang, idioms, and figurative expressions, while cognitive and affective challenges involved difficulties in maintaining focus, processing information, and managing motivation during reading. In addition, pedagogical and technological challenges emerged due to limited instructional guidance and distractions from advertisements or platform limitations. These findings support Chapelle's (2001) view that both cognitive and technological factors influence learners' ability to process digital language input effectively.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Webtoon can support incidental learning and assist EFL students' English reading skills through contextual, multimodal, and engaging reading experiences. Through repeated exposure and contextual understanding, participants gradually developed vocabulary comprehension, reading fluency, and confidence while reading English texts.

5.2 Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed. First, EFL students are encouraged to use English Webtoons consistently as an alternative reading medium to increase language exposure and support incidental vocabulary learning. Students are also advised to balance enjoyment and language awareness by paying attention to unfamiliar vocabulary, repeated expressions, and contextual meanings during reading activities.

Second, English teachers and lecturers are recommended to integrate Webtoon into reading activities or extensive reading

programs as a supportive and engaging learning medium. Teachers may also provide simple guidance, vocabulary reflection activities, or contextual discussion tasks to help students maximize incidental learning and improve reading comprehension without reducing the enjoyable aspect of Webtoon reading.

Third, educational practitioners should consider the importance of supportive digital learning environments when using Webtoon or similar digital media. Reducing distractions and helping students develop effective reading strategies may support better focus and more meaningful language processing during reading activities.

Finally, future researchers are recommended to explore incidental learning through Webtoon in broader contexts, such as different proficiency levels, larger participant groups, or other language skills such as listening, writing, or speaking. Further studies may also investigate the long-term impact of Webtoon reading on vocabulary retention, reading fluency, and overall English proficiency.

