

VISUAL NOVELS IN ENGLISH READING INSTRUCTION: A NARRATIVE THEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRAK

Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menyelidiki kemampuan novel visual sebagai sarana belajar digital yang dapat membantu keterampilan membaca bahasa Inggris pada mahasiswa program bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing di perguruan tinggi. Banyak mahasiswa masih merasa kesulitan saat memahami teks bacaan dan menunjukkan partisipasi yang rendah saat belajar menggunakan materi tradisional. Untuk memecahkan masalah ini, novel visual dianggap sebagai alternatif pembelajaran yang menggabungkan elemen teks, gambar, dan interaksi. Penelitian ini menggunakan analisis literatur tematik naratif dengan mengkaji artikel ilmiah yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2020 sampai 2024 mengenai pembelajaran berbasis permainan digital, pembelajaran multimedia, dan keterampilan membaca dalam kondisi EFL. Data yang dikumpulkan diolah untuk menemukan tema-tema utama yang berkaitan dengan pemahaman membaca dan motivasi belajar. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa novel visual bisa meningkatkan keterlibatan mahasiswa, membantu pemahaman membaca dengan menggunakan gambar dan konteks, serta memberikan pengalaman membaca yang lebih berkesan. Sebagai kesimpulan, novel visual menunjukkan potensi yang besar sebagai alat inovatif dan relevan untuk mengajarkan keterampilan membaca bahasa Inggris di perguruan tinggi.

Kata kunci: novel visual, pemahaman membaca, pembelajaran digital, EFL

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the ability of visual novels as a digital learning tool that can help improve English reading skills among students enrolled in English as a foreign language programs at universities. Many students still find it difficult to understand reading texts and show low participation when learning using traditional materials. To solve this problem, visual novels are considered an alternative learning method that combines elements of text, images, and interaction. This study uses narrative thematic literature analysis by reviewing scientific articles published between 2020 and 2024 on digital game-based learning, multimedia learning, and reading skills in EFL conditions. The collected data was processed to find the main themes related to reading comprehension and learning motivation. The findings show that visual novels can increase student engagement, aid reading comprehension by using images and context, and provide a more memorable reading experience. In conclusion, visual novels show great potential as an innovative and relevant tool for teaching English reading skills in higher education.

Keyword: visual novels, reading comprehension, digital learning, EFL

INTRODUCTION

English plays a very significant role in today's digitally connected world. This is especially evident in higher education, where many academic resources, research journals, and professional interactions are presented in this language. For university students in Indonesia, English is not just a subject that must be studied but also an important skill for accessing academic materials,

participating in international discussions, and preparing for future careers. Although English is very important, a number of students in Indonesia still find it difficult to improve their English skills, especially when reading academic texts. Reading assignments are often considered difficult, boring, and irrelevant to students' personal interests, which can negatively affect their motivation and

participation (Siregar & Dongoran, 2021; Yundayani et al., 2022).

Understanding texts in English requires not only knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structure; it also requires critical thinking skills such as interpreting meaning, drawing conclusions, and connecting ideas between texts. However, research shows that English reading instruction in Indonesian universities still relies heavily on textbooks and teachers, resulting in very few opportunities for actual interaction or engagement with the text (Astuti & Lestari, 2020; Nurmala & Rahman, 2023). As a result, many students become passive readers, focusing more on completing assignments than on deepening their actual understanding and critical reading skills.

Today, college students are part of a generation that is highly connected to technology and frequently uses multimedia and interactive platforms. This change in learning styles highlights the importance of teaching methods that are in line with students' digital habits and learning styles. Recent research reveals that digital-based learning environments can increase student participation and understanding if they are interactive, relevant, and student-centered (Bond et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2022). In line with this, research on digital reading platforms such as Wattpad also shows positive results on students' reading motivation, enjoyment, and engagement in learning English as a foreign language (Djamdjuri et al., 2022). Therefore, incorporating digital media into English language learning is not just an innovation, but also a very important necessity in higher education today.

One form of digital media that is increasingly being considered in educational research is visual novels. Visual novels are digital stories that focus on the plot, combining text with visual elements, music, and interactive choices. Unlike traditional reading texts, visual novels give learners the opportunity to actively engage with the story through choices that affect the outcome of the story. Recent research shows that narrative-based digital media can support language learning by providing context, increasing emotional engagement, and maintaining students' attention longer while reading (Sato & Suzukida, 2020; Kim & Park, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, the use of visual novels in the language learning process can

be linked both classical and contemporary learning theories. Krashen's Input Theory suggests that a person can master a language when they receive input that is understandable and meaningful, slightly above their current ability. In addition, Mayer's Multimedia Learning Theory states that individuals can understand information better when verbal and visual elements are presented simultaneously. Although these theories have been around for a long time, recent research continues to confirm the importance of these theories in digital learning environments, especially in language teaching that uses multimedia (Mayer, 2020; Al-Azawi et al., 2021).

Although many recent studies have investigated learning with digital games and multimedia, the main focus of these studies is often on vocabulary acquisition, grammar exercises, or gamification strategies in general. Several studies on digital reading platforms, such as narrative-based applications, have shown positive results on student motivation and participation in reading activities; however, these platforms are usually linear and offer little interactivity (Djamdjuri et al., 2022). Even so, there is still very little research exploring the use of visual novels to support English reading skills at the university level, especially in the context of EFL in Indonesia. This gap indicates the need for further exploration of how interactive digital narratives can be used effectively in college reading instruction to support comprehension and engagement (Putri & Amin, 2022; Rahmawati et al., 2024).

Considering these factors, the purpose of this study is to investigate the use of visual novels as a learning tool that can help university students develop their English reading skills. This study will analyze students' experiences, participation, and views during reading activities focused on visual novels. In this way, this study aims to provide an understanding of how interactive narratives can transform reading from a passive academic task into a more meaningful and motivating learning experience.

METHOD

This article employs a narrative thematic literature review as the research design. This approach is used to analyze and synthesize findings from previous studies related to the use of visual novels and interactive digital narratives in supporting

English reading skills. A narrative review is suitable for identifying research trends, key themes, and existing gaps within the literature, particularly in educational and language learning contexts (Snyder, 2019).

In this study, the research instrument consists of selected journal articles and research publications related to visual novels, digital game-based learning, and English reading instruction. These articles function as the primary data sources for analysis. The literature is obtained from academic databases such as Google Scholar and ScienceDirect, focusing on peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2024.

The analysis focuses on thematic problem-solving analysis, in which the selected studies are examined to identify how visual novels are used to address common problems in English reading instruction, such as low motivation, limited engagement, and reading comprehension difficulties. The analysis process involves categorizing findings into major themes, comparing results across studies, and interpreting how interactive narrative media contribute to potential solutions in EFL reading contexts. This analytical process allows for an objective discussion of how visual novels may function as an alternative learning medium in higher education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on a thematic analysis of several selected studies, there are a number of key themes related to the use of visual novels and interactive digital narratives to support English reading skills among students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). This discussion is divided into three main themes: student participation, improvement of reading comprehension, and the pedagogical function of interactive narratives in higher education.

Visual Novels and Learner Engagement

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Visual Novels and Reading Comprehension

Another important finding from the study relates to the function of visual novels in aiding reading comprehension. Visual novels present language in meaningful contexts, allowing students to understand vocabulary and sentence structure through stories rather than through separate exercises. Visual aids, such as characters' facial expressions and backgrounds, enable learners to draw conclusions about meaning and connect ideas within the text. Several studies show that this contextual input promotes deeper comprehension and helps students remember information better (Huang et al., 2022; Al-Azawi et al., 2021). In addition, the branching narrative structure in visual novels encourages readers to predict outcomes, make inferences, and consider the consequences of their choices. This process is closely related to higher-order reading skills, such as critical thinking and interpretation. As students explore different story paths, they need to interact cognitively with the text, which contributes to better comprehension and more active engagement in reading. These findings support previous claims that interactive narratives can serve as effective reading material in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, especially at the university level.

Pedagogical Implications of Interactive Narrative Media

The research discussed also shows the possibility of using visual novels as an alternative learning tool in higher education. Visual novels can connect students' digital habits with academic reading needs, as they present language in a format that is attractive and familiar to students. If carefully incorporated into learning, visual novels can complement traditional reading books without

completely replacing them. Teachers can use visual novels as pre-reading activities, additional reading sources, or triggers for discussion, which support understanding and interaction in the learning process. However, there are also opinions in the literature that state that the success of visual novels depends on how they are used. Educators must select visual novels that are linguistically appropriate and relevant to learning objectives. Without proper guidance, the use of visual novels may cause students to focus more on entertainment than on the learning process. Therefore, educational planning and instructional support are essential to maximize the educational benefits of visual novels in English reading instruction.

CONCLUSION

This literature review discusses the possibility of visual novels as a digital alternative to help develop English reading skills among students enrolled in English as a foreign language programs at universities. The research reviewed as a whole shows that visual novels can increase student interest by offering reading material in an interactive, story-based format that suits their digital habits. The combination of text, images, and choice-based narratives in visual novels encourages students to actively engage and maintain focus during reading activities. In the context of reading comprehension, visual novels provide contextual language input that can help students understand meaning, draw conclusions, and connect ideas better. In addition, the interactive nature of branching storylines also facilitates higher-order reading skills, such as prediction and reflection, which are important in developing critical reading skills in higher education settings. The results of the study show that visual novels are not just a medium of entertainment, but also valuable narrative texts that can contribute to language learning if used with clear objectives. From an educational perspective, this review suggests that visual novels can serve as a bridge between academic reading requirements and students' everyday digital experiences. However, their effectiveness is highly dependent on good instructional design, appropriate text selection, and clear learning objectives. Teachers are encouraged to use visual novels as supplementary reading material rather than as a substitute for classic texts. Further research is needed to investigate long-term

reading progress and student learning experiences through the use of visual novels in various English as a foreign language higher education settings.

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