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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GRAPHIC NOVELS IN IMPROVING PRIMARY SCHOOL ESL PUPILS' READING SKILLS

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Abstract:

In 2022, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) reported that Malaysia scored 388 in the reading domain, with less than 50% of the primary school pupils reaching the minimum level (Level 2). This shows that the proficiency level among primary school English as a Second Language (ESL) pupils in Malaysia is alarming. The problem that stands behind this issue is that the pupils are struggling and reluctant to read as advanced technologies and gadgets have surrounded them since they were born. Hence, an initiative to incorporate graphic novels has been carried out by the authors to overcome this problem. By employing the true experimental research design, this study is to investigate the effectiveness of graphic novels in improving primary school ESL pupils' reading skills. This study employed a quantitative research methodology to gather data for this study. Data were collected from the pretest and post-test and were analyzed using descriptive statistics via the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Wilcoxon tests. There were 30 of Year 3 primary school ESL pupils from one of the prominent government primary schools in Selangor were chosen to participate in this study. According to the findings of the present study, 15 participants of the experimental group who had studied reading through graphic novels did better on the post-test, demonstrating the value of the medium in teaching the reading domain. This study would benefit ESL teachers in planning an effective, interactive, and fun reading lesson to pique the pupils' interest in reading. It also offers valuable insights for the researchers and policymakers of incorporating graphic novels in reading practices.

Keywords:

Graphic Novels, English As A Second Language (ESL), Primary School, Pupils, Reading Skills

Introduction

Along with the Industry Revolution (IR 4.0), English is an obligatory language for every pupil in the world because English serves as an international language. This is agreed by Davidas & Morena (2023), Korea, China, Thailand, Japan, and other countries have incorporated a variety of policies and practices into their existing English education system paradigm and curricula due to globalization and competitiveness in the global market. Therefore, the Ministry of Education (MoE) recognized English as a second language (ESL), in which English is a compulsory subject in existing Malaysia's education system praxis. According to Thirusanka. J et al. (2014), (as cited in Asmah, 1997), English served as both an official language and a second language, with secondary significance in Malaysia's language hierarchy.

Reading is one of the prominent and essential cores that an English language learner must acquaint with to become a competent English language user. There are two primary cores for a literate person, namely reading and writing (Aziz, 2023; Walsh, 2017). In addition, Robbani (2021) stated that reading is one of the important skills in the English teaching and learning process. Besides, reading is an activity to get informed, increase perception through written text, and interpret and analyse text (Newnue, 2010). Hence, the importance of reading skills in English cannot be overstated. However, nowadays, ESL pupils in primary school find learning reading skills difficult and boring as they do not see any significance of learning the reading domain in their daily lives because they were born and raised in an era where advanced technologies and gadgets concur with their lives. As a result, these primary school ESL pupils are struggling to read and master reading skills. These pupils are struggling to demonstrate and comprehend the underlying meanings of different types of texts, especially long passages such as novels (Bret, 2018; Woodford, 2016).

Therefore, discovering innovative and effective pedagogy methods to teach reading skills is beneficial for ESL pupils to pique their interest in reading and master the reading domain. Over the past few decades, graphic novels have been introduced and proactively practiced in ESL classrooms to teach English language skills, particularly reading. Graphic novels, often known as picture books, are a type of writing style that combines words and pictures. According to Seranifi (2011), graphic novels are one type of multimodal literature that has long been widely used in elementary school classrooms is graphic novels, also referred to as picture books. In today's visually oriented culture, ESL primary pupils are among the primary audiences exposed to these kinds of information sources (Yusof et al., 2017). This visual style and detail can provide a good learning base for an English learner to better understand colloquial English and learn cultural lessons, at the same time enhancing their language learning experiences to help them maintain focus and motivation to continue learning.

Hence, this experimental study is to explore the acquisition of reading skills through graphic novels, which will benefit policymakers, ESL researchers for future research in this field, ESL educators, and ESL pupils. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of using graphic novels to improve primary school ESL pupils' reading skills. This study aims to answer the following research question:

1. How effective is the use of graphic novels in improving primary school ESL pupils' reading skills?

Literature Review

The literature review will comprehensively cover and meticulously discuss various aspects relevant to the present study. It aims to provide a thorough understanding of the existing knowledge base, theory, and prior research findings, thereby laying a solid foundation for the present study.

Definitions of Graphic Novels

Several fundamental concepts underpin the study, each of which requires a clear and precise definition to ensure the coherence and validity of the study.

According to Aziz (2023), the term “graphic novel” was introduced by Richard Kyle in 1964. However, the validity of the statement is argued by Kunka in their review paper (2015) that this statement may not be accurate. Despite this, several researchers believe that the term “graphic novel” is derived from the term “comics” or “comics book.” According to Murray (2023), graphic novels are essentially derived from comic books, except the term is usually used to describe a whole tale published as a book instead of a magazine. The author also described the term graphic novels as contentious. Similarly, Seelow (2012) used the term “long extended, self-contained comic book” (p.57) to define graphic novels. Since the 1970s, when comic studies were just beginning to gain traction as a legitimate academic area, researchers have tried to explain the term “comic books” and provide a critical vocabulary that makes sense for such a definition. This complicated position is discussed in the controversy surrounding so-called graphic novels. Therefore, it is believed that the evolution of graphic novels is strongly tied to the history of comics.

In addition, Serafini (2012) described graphic novels incorporating a wide range of media, including words, images, colours, and page arrangement. It is a book that tells a story sequentially across its page using a combination of text and pictures, which often features complex narratives, characters, development, and thematic depth, making graphic novels suitable for a wide range of readers. Besides, according to Eisner (1985), a graphic book is a work of fiction or dramatization that combines words and images to tell a story. Likewise, Carter (2007) defines a graphic novel as a sequential art story that is presented in a book format with a collection of comic art drawn in the style of an anthology.

Dual Coding Theory (DCT)

Human cognition is thought to function through two separate but related systems: a verbal system for language and a non-verbal system for images. Allan Paivio developed the Dual Coding Theory (DCT), which is described in his book “Mind and Its Evolution: A Dual Coding Theoretical Approach.” According to this hypothesis, when both verbal and non-verbal systems are functioning, information is processed and stored in both ways, improving retention and comprehension (2007).

- Verbal System: This system deals with linguistic information. Words and sentences are processed, stored, and retrieved as verbal representations.
- Non-verbal System: This system handles imagery. Visual and spatial information is processed and stored as images.
- Interconnected Systems: The two systems are not isolated; they interact and support each other. The information encoded in both verbal and non-verbal forms can be more easily recalled and understood because the dual coding creates multiple retrieval paths.

When applying this theory, the correlation becomes evident. Graphic novels inherently combine text (verbal system) and images (non-verbal system), making them an ideal medium for engaging both cognitive systems simultaneously. This dual engagement enhances comprehension, as the visuals provide context and cues that aid in decoding the text, especially for struggling readers. Overall, graphic novels align with the principles of dual coding theory, making them a valuable tool for enhancing pupils' reading skills in educational settings like ESL classrooms.

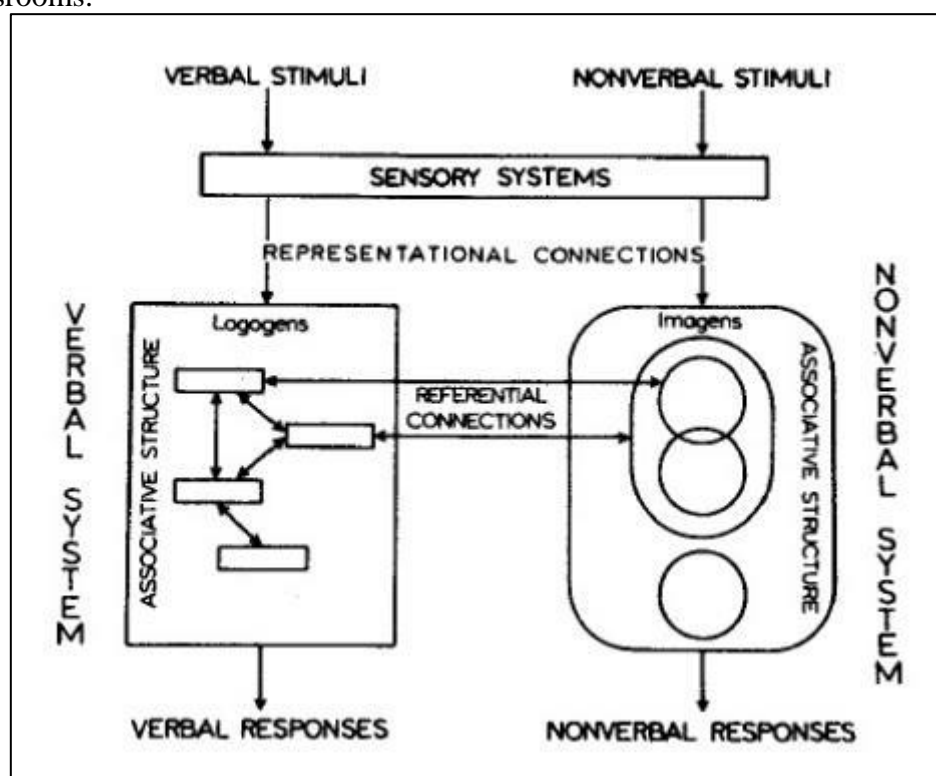


Figure 1: Structure of Dual Coding Theory (DCT)

The Benefits of Using Graphic Novels in Learning Reading Skills

Graphic novels offer unique benefits for ESL pupils by combining visual and textual elements. First and foremost, the visual context provided by graphic novels helps pupils understand and infer the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases, reducing the cognitive load typically associated with second language acquisition (Cary, 2004). In addition, Mayer (2009) suggested that pupils learn better with words and graphics than from words without companion of graphics.

Besides, graphic novels are known to increase pupils' engagement and motivation. Liu (2004) found that pupils are more likely to be more engaging and complete reading assignments when graphic novels are involved. This is partly due to the appealing visual format and relatable storylines that resonate with pupils. "The balance between visual imagery and written words" (Martin, 2009, p.30) can help pupils resonate with the passages by looking at the visuals. Azizah (2023) posited in the findings of her literature review that there are numerous researchers agreed that graphic novels can increase pupils' engagement and enhance pupils' reading motivation.

Furthermore, research indicates that graphic novels can support the development of essential reading skills. A study by Chun (2009) revealed that graphic novels help improve ESL pupils' reading comprehension and inferencing skills. Similarly, Krashen also mentioned that texts accompanied by visuals can provide clues on the definition of an unknown word or grammatical structure (Krashen, 1989). The combination of images and text provides contextual clues that facilitate understanding and promote active reading strategies.

Last but not least, graphic novels also enhance vocabulary acquisition. Lee (2020) observed that the repetitive and contextual use of vocabulary in graphic novels helps ESL pupils better retain new words. Visual cues assist in the comprehension and retention of complex vocabulary, making it easier for pupils to remember and use new words in context.

Past Studies on The Use of Graphic Novels

Previous studies showed that graphic novels are a successful teaching aid to improve pupils' reading skills. Yusof et al. (2017) identified that graphic novels proved a positive result in helping pupils in reading. From the findings, pupils who were reluctant and struggling to read showed a significant improvement after the implementation of graphic novels in the ESL classroom. In addition, in the research carried out by Pishol and Kaur (2015), the findings revealed that the reading lesson was more exciting, fun, and engaging because of the usage of the graphic novel and the multiliteracies method. Graphic novels can be imaginatively used to teach vocabulary in addition to the great results of earlier studies. Furthermore, Kim and Lee (2019) conducted a study showing that graphic novels significantly improved vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension among ESL pupils. Besides, Hansen (2012) also suggested that English teachers can use graphic novels to introduce new vocabulary, model reading strategies, and facilitate discussions about themes and characters. Incorporating graphic novels into reading lessons can also provide a scaffolded learning experience, gradually increasing text complexity as pupils' reading skills develop.

There have been numerous studies to investigate the use of graphic novels in reading. For example, the effectiveness of graphic novels in language practises to improve reading comprehension (Yusof et al., 2017), comprehension and cognitive abilities (Yusof et al., 2017; Sabbah et al., 2013; Maderazo, 2010), vocabulary enrichment (Basal et al., 2016; Connors, 2011), and teachers' perceptions towards the use of graphic novels in ESL classrooms (Yusof et al., 2017; Pishol and Kaur, 2015; Yunus et al., 2012) have also been the subject of numerous comparable studies. The results of these studies demonstrated a favourable relationship between reading proficiency and graphic novels used in ESL classrooms. It can be summarised that graphic novels are enticing to readers due to their graphics and/or drawings, employing them in language classes may have a similar effect on reluctant readers and pupils' enthusiasm to read.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a true experimental research design since this research design met the development of this study. Creswell highlights a true experimental design as a robust method for determining causal relationships due to its structured framework and methodology. According to Creswell, the control group is essential as it provides a baseline against which the effects of the experimental treatment can be measured. This group does not receive experimental intervention, which reduces potential bias in comparing outcomes. By having a control group, researchers can isolate the effect of the independent variable and ensure factors.

As Creswell discussed, the experimental group is the group that receives the intervention or treatment. This group is critical for assessing the efficacy of the experimental manipulation. The outcomes observed in the experimental group are compared to those in the control group to measure the impact of the intervention. This comparative analysis is fundamental to determining causality.

Here is an image of a diagram illustrating the true experimental design with an experimental group and control group, showing random assignment, interventions, and outcomes:

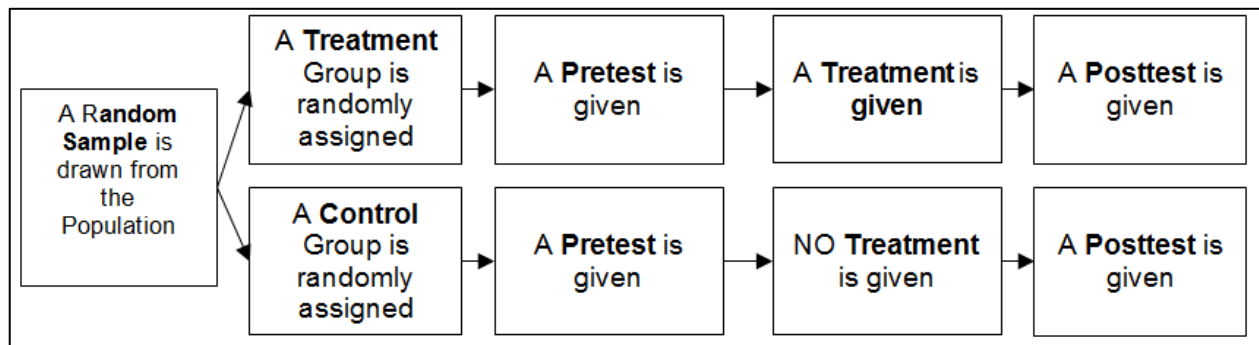


Figure 2: Structure of True Experimental Design

A total of 30 primary school ESL pupils from one of the government primary schools in Selangor, were chosen to take part in this action research study. 15 ESL pupils with lower average proficiency levels (*Performance Level 3*) were chosen to join the experimental group of this study. Additionally, participants gave their permission to be included in this study and to be published in academic journals. All of the participants were nine-year-old Malaysian primary school pupils with comparable educational backgrounds. They achieved performance level 3 in the pretest, indicating an average, or B1, for their reading skills under the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR).

The demographic makeup of the pupils varied concerning both gender and race. For the experimental group of the fifteen pupils, seven (46.67%) were boys, and eight (53.33%) were girls. Chinese made up almost 80% of the participants, followed by Malay (13.33%) and Indian (6.67%). As for the control group of the fifteen pupils, eight (53.33%) were boys, and seven (46.67%) were girls. The Chinese population is still the majority, which made up almost 80% of the participants, followed by Indian (13.33%) and Malay (6.67%).

Quantitative research methodology was employed in this study to gather the data to answer the research question. According to John W. Creswell, in his 2012 book "Educational Research", quantitative research methodology entails a methodical examination of phenomena by obtaining quantifiable data and applying statistical, mathematical, or computer methods. This methodology is characterised by its emphasis on objective measurements and the analysis of data collected through structured tools such as surveys, questionnaires, and tests. Therefore, the pretest and post-test were chosen as the research instruments and were analyzed using descriptive statistics via the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Wilcoxon tests to investigate the effectiveness of graphic novels in improving primary school ESL pupils' reading skills.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The first phase of experimental research design is the planning phase. In this phase, analysis was done to determine the issue and come up with a plan of action to solve it. Therefore, a pretest was conducted for data collection. There were 30 ESL pupils from one of the selected government primary schools in Selangor were chosen to participate in the present study. The participants are Year 3 pupils with lower average English proficiency levels who obtain performance level 3. In the pretest, participants were required to answer a set of papers consisting of several reading comprehension questions.

Next is the action phase. In this phase, the authors concentrated on data gathering to track and record the plan's implementation. Fifteen pupils who were chosen to join the experimental group will undergo four reading sessions. Throughout these reading sessions, "Fatimah's Kampung," a graphic novel, was picked to integrate into the sessions.

After completing the workshops, the participants in the experimental group were required to sit for a post-test in the observation phase. The data from the pretest and post-test from the experimental group and control group were methodically documented and examined in this phase, too.

Lastly, it is the reflection phase. In this phase, the data was analysed, and conclusions were made based on the findings. The results of the pretest and post-test from the experimental group and control group will be analysed through descriptive statistics via Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Wilcoxon tests to determine the distinguishing value and ascertain whether there have been any statistically significant gains in participants' post-test scores of the experimental group and the control group. This quantitative data will demonstrate the effectiveness of graphic novels in improving primary school pupils' reading skills.

Findings

The research question of this study was gauged through both pretest and post-test using *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) to illustrate the patterns of responses. The data were summarized in the following descriptive statistics figures.

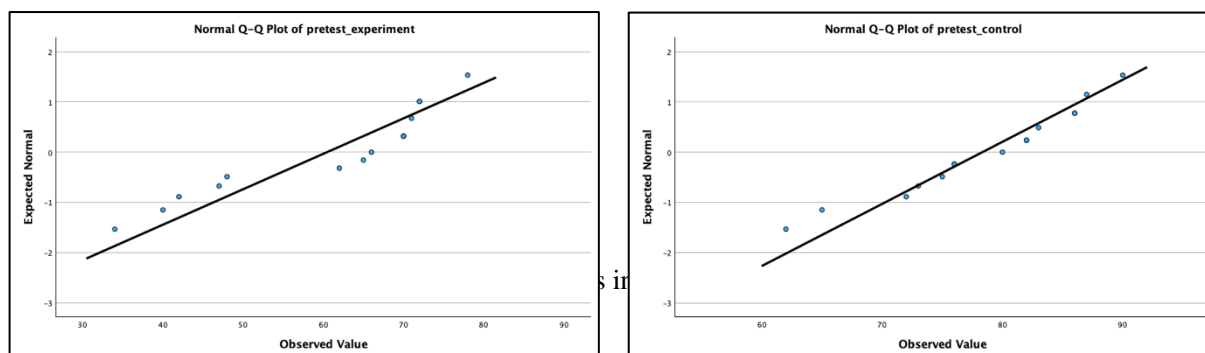


Figure 3: Distribution of Pretest Scores in Control and Experimental Groups

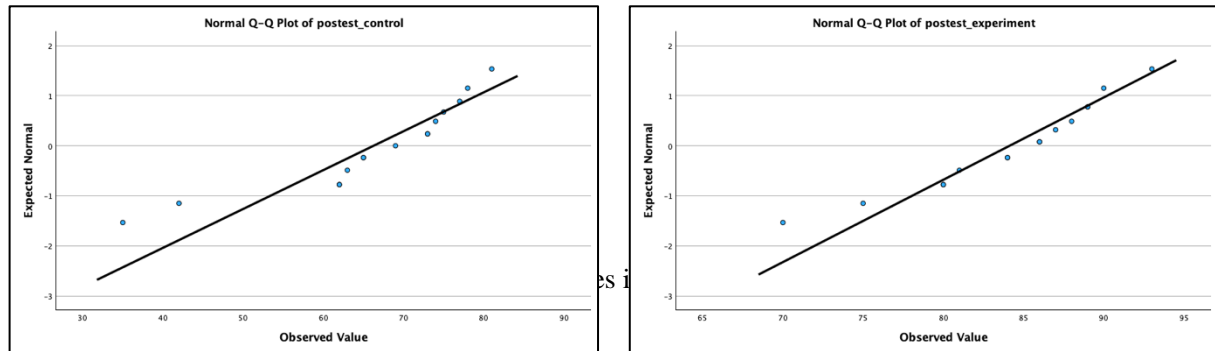


Figure 4: Distribution of Post-test Scores in Control and Experimental Groups

This study assessed the normality of the distribution in the control and experimental groups using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The scatterplot diagram in Figures 3 and 4 shows that the control and experimental groups' pretest and post-test results followed a normal distribution.

Table 1 Results of Descriptive Statistics

		N	Mean	Std.Deviation
Pretest	Control	15	78.33	8.09
	Experimental	15	60.47	14.17
	Total	30	72.0	14.52
Post-test	Control	15	66.27	12.88
	Experimental	15	84.13	6.08
	Total	30	77.5	13.43

According to Table 1, there were 15 participants in the experimental group and 15 in the control group. The experimental group scored 15, 60.47 ± 14.17 on the pretest, while the control group scored 15, 78.33 ± 8.09 . The experimental group scored 15, 84.13 ± 6.08 on the post-test, while the control group scored 15, 66.27 ± 12.88 .

Table 2 Comparison Of Pretest Scores Of Control And Experimental Group

		N	Mean	Std.Deviation	z	p
Pretest	Control	15	78.33	8.09	-2.626	.009
	Experimental	15	60.47	14.17		
	Total	30	72.0	14.52		

According to Table 2, the experimental group's and control group's pretest results were $z = -2.626$; $p < 0.009$. The statistics showed that the experimental group's mean pretest score was 60.47, whereas the control group's mean was 78.33. The experimental and control groups' pretest results differed by -17.86 points. The experimental group members received lower pretest scores than the control group members, as shown by the negative sign.

Table 3 Comparison Of Post-Test Scores Of Control And Experimental Group

		N	Mean	Std.Deviation	z	p
Post-test	Control	15	66.27	12.88	-3.17	.002
	Experiment	15	84.13	6.08		
	Total	30	77.5	13.43		

According to Table 3, the experimental and control groups' post-test results were $z = -3.17$; $p < 0.002$. According to the findings, the experimental group's mean post-test scores were 84.13, over 18 points higher than the control group's mean of 66.27. This suggests that those in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group in terms of post-test results.

Table 4 Comparison Of Pre- And Post-Test Scores Of Control And Experimental Group

		N	Mean	Std.Deviation	z	p
Control	Pretest	15	78.33	8.09	-2.626	.009
	Post-test	15	66.27	12.88		
Experiment	Pretest	15	60.47	14.17	-3.410	.001
	Post-test	15	84.13	6.08		

Prior to comparison, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to check for normality in the pretest and posttest scores of both groups. The significant difference between the control and experimental groups' pretest and posttest scores was assessed using the Wilcoxon test. According to Table 4, the experimental group's pretest and post-test scores were $z = -3.410$; $p < 0.00$, whereas the control group's were $z = -2.626$; $p < 0.009$. According to the information above, the experimental group's pretest and post-test scores differed by around 24 points, whereas the control group's scores differed by about 12 points. This indicates that the experimental group's post-test scores increased dramatically, and the control group's scores only marginally improved. The experimental group outperformed the control group in the post-test, comparing the gains of the two groups. This suggests that graphic novels are a useful tool for enhancing the reading abilities of ESL pupils.

Discussion

Based on the findings, a significant gain in the post-test scores in the experimental group that control has highlighted the effectiveness of graphic novels in improving the pupils' reading skills. As demonstrated by the analysis of data gathered from pre-and post-tests in both experimental and control groups, the impact of graphic novels is proven to be significant and

highly beneficial towards improving the reading skills of primary school ESL pupils with lower average (*correspondence to B1 according to CEFR*) English proficiency level in reading. The results observed in this study can be explained through Dual Coding Theory (DCT) by Allan Paivio (2006), which suggests that learning is enhanced when both verbal and visual information are processed in parallel.

With the incorporation of interactive and attractive visual elements, graphic novels pique the interest of the pupils to learn the reading domain. Pupils were able to comprehend and recognise underlying meanings and intended messages in diverse texts. Besides, graphic novels employ meaningful and use language that aligns with the real-world contexts to practice reading skills. The selective participants in the treatment group have undergone four reading workshops. In these workshops, they have learned reading skills by using graphic novels. The participants get motivated and engaged while learning reading skills through graphic novels. They were willing to try harder in the workshops because they got to visualize the storyline by looking at the visuals. Thus, graphic novels will be a valuable resource for pupils with different learning styles to improve their reading skills (Sanfilippo et al., 2022).

Graphic novels also create a suitable environment for interaction and meaning negotiation in the ESL teaching and learning process. Using words and visuals can improve communication and emphasise using and practicing the target language skills. Graphic novels create an environment where pupils can prompt more questions and enhance their reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Kheider et al., 2020). Additionally, pupil's reading skills are improved by the self-motivation sparked by the visuals that are portrayed in the graphic novel (Surayatika, 2018). This is complemented by the aspect of multimedia integration, creating a more immersive and memorable reading experience among pupils as they are guided by the insertion of visuals that are related to the text.

According to Kheider et al. (2020), given the profound impact of motivation on pupils' psychological states, graphic novels have long been seen as an important teaching aid in the ESL field. This recognition stems from their effectiveness in addressing key challenges encountered by pupils, such as boredom, pressure, anxiety, and shyness. Graphic novels help pupils to get rid of these emotions in the ESL classroom. The improvement of pupils' cognitive status in ESL classrooms is greatly dependent on their motivation. Hence, it is critical to integrate graphic novels in ESL classrooms.

In conclusion, it is important to make ESL classrooms a fun and interactive learning experience for the pupils. This will help the pupils to maintain focus and motivation to continue learning. This learning experience is achievable through the use of tools such as reading materials that are simple to comprehend, easy to read, and can still provide an interesting storyline, which is graphic novels.

Implications

From a practical standpoint, this paper suggests that the Ministry of Education (MoE) offers specialised professional training for primary school ESL teachers to incorporate graphic novels in their ESL classrooms. Furthermore, the District Education Office (PPD) plays an important role as a mediator in gathering all ESL teachers in their districts to hold Professional Learning Community (PLC) discussion sessions. In the PLC sessions, they can exchange ideas among the teachers to plan activities that can be carried out by incorporating graphic novels in their

ESL classrooms to teach reading and other language skills. Hence, ESL teachers can employ graphic novels as teaching aids in their ESL classrooms to make their lessons fun, interactive, and engaging in piquing the interest of primary school ESL pupils to learn all four main language domains.

Limitations

This study has two notable limitations, which include the insufficient sample size and the narrow focus on a single language domain. Firstly, the sample size of this study was relatively small, specific, and constrained, comprising only 30 participants. The limited number of participants reduces the diversity of the sample, making it challenging to generalize the findings to a broader population.

Furthermore, all participants were selected from a single primary school located in Selangor, further narrowing the scope of the study and potentially introducing contextual biases specific to the school or region. Secondly, the study exclusively focused on one particular language domain—reading. While reading is an essential component of language learning, it represents only a fraction of the broader spectrum of language skills, such as listening, speaking, writing, and grammar. This limited focus means that the study's findings may not fully reflect the complexities and challenges encountered in other language domains. Together, the constraints of sample size and the singular language domain focus may reduce the external validity and generalizability of the results, underscoring the need for more inclusive research designs in future investigations.

Recommendations for Future Studies

To address these limitations and strengthen future research, several recommendations are proposed. First, future studies should consider expanding the sample size significantly to include a larger and more diverse group of participants. Recruiting participants from multiple schools, districts, and states across various demographic backgrounds would contribute to more holistic and representative findings. By encompassing a wider range of contexts and learners, researchers can ensure that the results are more generalizable and reflective of the diverse needs of ESL learners.

Second, it is recommended that future studies broaden the scope to include additional language domains beyond reading. Exploring other critical areas such as listening, speaking, writing, vocabulary acquisition, and grammar proficiency would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by ESL pupils. Such an inclusive approach would also cater to a wider range of linguistic issues, enabling educators and policymakers to develop more effective and multifaceted language teaching strategies. Ultimately, these improvements would enhance the reliability, applicability, and impact of future research in the field of ESL education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrated that graphic novels are effective in improving primary school ESL pupils' reading skills. Graphic novels are also practical and highly usable teaching aids in the education field to create an effective, interactive, and fun classroom for teaching reading. Moreover, the initiative to integrate graphic novels in ESL classrooms aligns closely with Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2013-2025, emphasizing pupils' English proficiency. To sum up, the integration of graphic novels in ESL classrooms

can enhance ESL pupils' learning experiences, foster their deeper understanding, and ultimately support the holistic development of ESL pupils' language competency in reading and other language domains.

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