

Comics as a Medium for Teaching Writing at the 7th Grade of SMP Negeri 5 Mrebet, Purbalingga

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KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

Article

History:

Submitted:

19 May 2025

Accepted:

29 Dec 2025

Published:

31 Dec 2025

This study explores the implementation of comics as a medium for teaching writing at the 7th grade of SMP Negeri 5 Mrebet, Purbalingga. The research employs a qualitative approach involving observation, interviews, and documentation. The subjects include one English teacher and three students who participated in comic-based writing lessons. The teacher implemented three stages of learning: exploration, elaboration, and confirmation. Comics were used to enhance students' engagement and creativity in writing, particularly in creating dialogues and introductory expressions. The study found that while comics are effective in supporting writing instruction, several challenges arose, such as students' difficulty in constructing coherent narratives, balancing text with visuals, and teachers' limited visual literacy. Despite these challenges, comics served as a beneficial medium to promote student motivation and provide teachers with deeper insight into students' learning obstacles.

Keywords: comics; instructional media; teaching writing; EFL; visual learning.

APA 7th Citation:

Mu'alifah, Anggun Fifi, Wahidiyati, Irra. (2025). Comics as a Medium for Teaching Writing at the 7th Grade of SMP Negeri 5 Mrebet, Purbalingga. *Jurnal Vokasia*, Vol5(2), 58-69

DOI: 10.20884/1.vokasia.2025.5.2.16089

Introduction

Among the four English language skills, writing is considered the most demanding for junior high school students learning English as a foreign language. Many students experience difficulties in generating ideas, organizing texts, and applying grammatical structures accurately. These problems are frequently found in Indonesian EFL classrooms, where students often lack motivation and confidence in writing activities (Renandya & Widodo, 2016). It requires the simultaneous mastery of grammar, vocabulary, coherence, organization, and audience awareness, which can be particularly difficult for early-stage learners (Harmer, 2007; Hyland, 2003).

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In typical classroom settings, writing is frequently taught using conventional approaches such as translation exercises, sentence rearrangement, or textbook-based composition prompts. While these methods may help students understand structure and form, they often lack the contextual engagement and creativity that motivate students to express their ideas meaningfully. Moreover, students are often asked to write without sufficient scaffolding or visual stimuli, which limits their ability to generate and organize ideas (Al-Sharqi & Abbasi, 2020). As a result, writing activities are often perceived as tedious or burdensome by students, leading to low motivation, poor performance, and limited progress (Cahyono & Rahayu, 2020).

To address these challenges, recent trends in English language teaching have emphasized the importance of media integration as a way to enhance student engagement, comprehension, and output. One such promising form of instructional media is the use of comics a visual storytelling format that blends images and text to convey meaning in an accessible and entertaining way. Comics provide multimodal input that is highly contextual, culturally relevant, and visually stimulating, making them particularly effective in encouraging student participation and improving their narrative understanding (Eisner, 1985; Nor Aziz & Abdul Aziz, 2023). In writing instruction, comics can serve as a scaffold for idea generation, sentence construction, and discourse organization, allowing students to practice writing in a meaningful, structured, and interactive manner (Bimawati Rumapea et al., 2025).

The integration of comics into language instruction also supports student-centered learning, where learners are given the autonomy to construct knowledge through exploration and creativity. Studies by Syma & Weiner (2013) have shown that when students create their own comics either manually or digitally they become more engaged in the writing process, more aware of structure and audience, and more confident in expressing themselves. In the Indonesian context, particularly in junior high schools located in less urbanized areas, this approach offers a refreshing alternative to textbook-based writing instruction. It encourages the use of local contexts, imagination, and collaboration, while also accommodating diverse student abilities and learning styles.

Despite its potential, the use of comics as instructional media in Indonesian classrooms remains underutilized, especially in the writing domain. While teachers are often encouraged to adopt creative teaching methods, limitations such as lack of training, limited resources, and rigid curriculum structures inhibit their ability to explore innovative strategies like comics. As Aziz & Aziz (2023) note, one of the key obstacles in using comics in education is the lack of visual literacy training among teachers, which makes it difficult for them to guide students in understanding and producing multimodal texts. Furthermore, teachers often struggle to align comic-based learning with syllabus goals, assessment demands, and time constraints (Muyassacroh et al., 2019). These barriers highlight the need for more practical research that explores how comics are actually implemented in real classrooms and how both teachers and students respond to their use.

Additionally, many studies on comics in English language teaching tend to focus on reading comprehension or motivational aspects, while fewer studies examine the specific application of comics in writing instruction particularly from a qualitative perspective. For example, Amrizal (2022) examined the effectiveness of comic strips in enhancing writing skills through a quantitative design involving university students. Although the study showed a positive effect on students' writing performance, it did not explore how the instructional process unfolded or what challenges teachers faced. Similarly, the study by Saputri et al., (2021) which focused on digital comics in ESL teaching, gathered teacher perceptions via survey but did not observe classroom practices or analyze student work.

This situation reveals a research gap in terms of understanding how comics are used as instructional media in the actual process of teaching writing especially in Indonesian junior high schools, and even more specifically in rural school contexts where students often face different socio-cultural and educational realities. Most existing research has focused on digital comics or commercially produced materials, while few studies have explored the integration of manually created comics drawn by students themselves as tools for expression, collaboration, and learning (Valeiras-Jurado, 2020). Moreover, there is a need to understand not only the benefits but also the challenges that emerge during implementation, such as student difficulties in narrative construction, teacher preparedness, and classroom management (Cohn, 2020).

In light of these considerations, this study seeks to fill the gap by conducting an in-depth qualitative investigation into the use of comics as media for teaching writing in a 7th-grade English classroom at SMP Negeri 5 Mrebet, a rural junior high school in Purbalingga, Central Java. This school was selected based on its prior experience in using comics in English instruction, particularly with younger students. The research focused on how the teacher implemented comic-based instruction in alignment with pedagogical stages such as exploration, elaboration, and confirmation, and how students engaged with and responded to the comic writing activities (Putri & Shafira, 2025).

Furthermore, this study also investigated the problems and challenges encountered by both the teacher and students during the process. This study was exploratory in nature, aiming to uncover perceptions and emergent issues rather than test predetermined hypotheses. These included students' difficulties in developing coherent narratives, balancing visual and textual elements, and expressing ideas creatively (Höfler et al., 2022). On the teacher's side, this exploratory investigation identified challenges such as time constraints, lack of professional development in visual pedagogy, and limited access to digital tools for comic creation. By exploring these dimensions, the study aimed to provide practical insights for teachers, school administrators, and education policymakers who wish to adopt creative media like comics in writing instruction.

In addition to addressing the practical gap, the study also aimed to contribute to the theoretical discourse on visual literacy, multimodal composition, and student-centered

pedagogy in EFL contexts. It highlights how comics, as a form of narrative media, can support the development of writing skills through scaffolding, visualization, collaboration, and reflection. It also suggests how the integration of comics can align with national curriculum standards through stages of exploration, elaboration, and confirmation (Permendiknas No. 41/2007), making it a feasible and impactful strategy within the Indonesian educational system.

Based on the rationale above, this research has two main objectives to explore how the teacher implements comics as media for teaching writing at the 7th grade of SMP N 5 Mrebet, Purbalingga. This includes identifying the strategies, stages, and tools used in comic-based instruction, as well as student activities and outputs. To identify the problems or challenges encountered in the implementation of comics as media for teaching writing. This includes analyzing student difficulties, teacher constraints, and systemic factors that influence the success of comic-based instruction.

By achieving these objectives, the study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of English language teaching, especially in the area of writing instruction using creative media. It will help clarify how visual storytelling tools like comics can be effectively integrated into real classroom settings, while also acknowledging and addressing the limitations that teachers and students face. Furthermore, it will serve as a foundation for further research on multimodal learning, rural EFL practices, and media-based pedagogy in the Indonesian context.

Method

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the implementation of comics as instructional media for teaching writing and to explore the challenges encountered during the process. A qualitative method was chosen because it enables a deep and contextualized understanding of educational phenomena by focusing on participants' perspectives, behaviors, and experiences in a natural setting. According to Miles & Huberman (2014), qualitative research seeks to capture the richness of social interactions through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, allowing researchers to describe complex realities in detail.

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 5 Mrebet, a public junior high school located in Purbalingga, Central Java. The site was selected purposively based on its use of comics in English writing instruction and its unique rural context. The research took place over several sessions in January 2025 and focused on one English teacher and three students from the 7th grade. The teacher, referred to as PR, had over 14 years of experience teaching English and had been using comics for approximately five years. Her experience and consistent use of both traditional and digital comics in the classroom made her a valuable subject for this study. Meanwhile, the three student participants were selected based on their active involvement in comic-based activities and were recommended by the teacher as suitable informants. They had varying levels of English proficiency and contributed to the research by sharing their experiences and

participating in the comic-writing tasks.

The research procedure followed a sequence of planning, field data collection, and analysis. During the planning phase, the researcher designed observation instruments, interview guides, and prepared consent forms. The field data collection phase included classroom observations, interviews with participants, and the collection of relevant documentation. Data were analyzed progressively throughout and after the collection process to allow for ongoing interpretation and triangulation.

To gather data, the researcher used three main techniques: observation, interview, and documentation. Observations were carried out during four classroom sessions. The aim was to observe how comics were used in teaching writing, how students responded to the activities, and how the teacher facilitated instruction. The researcher used a semi-structured observation approach, allowing for both guided and open-ended note-taking. Field notes captured teaching strategies, student interactions, instructional materials, and the overall classroom environment. Observations included scenes where students worked in groups to analyze comic stories, created their own comic panels, and presented their work to the class.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher and three students to gain deeper insights into their perceptions, challenges, and experiences related to comic-based instruction. The interviews followed a pre-designed question guide but allowed flexibility to probe further based on participants' responses. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes and was conducted in a quiet space within the school. The teacher discussed her motivation for using comics, how she planned her lessons, and what difficulties she encountered. The students, on the other hand, reflected on their enjoyment of using comics, the ease or difficulty of writing, and the tools they used to create comic stories.

In addition to observation and interviews, documentation was used to support and enrich the data. The researcher collected lesson plans, student-created comics (both hand-drawn and digital), writing drafts, and classroom photographs. These documents served as tangible evidence of the instructional process and students' written output. By analyzing these materials, the researcher could verify whether the activities observed and discussed during interviews aligned with what was planned and produced in the classroom.

The data collected were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (2014), which includes three components: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data condensation stage, the researcher reduced and selected the most relevant parts of the data related to the implementation of comics and emerging challenges. Themes such as teaching strategies, student creativity, classroom interaction, narrative structure, and technical difficulties were coded and categorized. In the data display stage, the categorized data were organized into matrices, summaries, and descriptive narratives to allow patterns and relationships to emerge. In the final stage, the researcher interpreted the meaning of these patterns to draw conclusions and verify

them through cross-checking with different sources.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this research employed methodological triangulation. Data were collected from multiple sources (teacher and students), using different techniques (observation, interview, and documentation), and over multiple sessions. This combination allowed the researcher to validate the consistency and accuracy of the data. Member checking was also conducted by sharing key findings with the teacher participant to confirm the accuracy of interpretation. In addition, peer consultation with the thesis supervisor was carried out during the analysis process to provide further critical insight and reduce potential bias.

In conclusion, the research method applied in this study allowed for a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of how comics were integrated into the writing instruction process at a rural junior high school. By combining in-depth observations, participant interviews, and the analysis of authentic learning materials, the researcher was able to capture the richness of classroom practices and the practical realities of using visual media to support students' writing development.

Results

This section presents the detailed findings of the study along with an in-depth discussion of how comics were implemented as a medium for teaching writing to 7th-grade students at SMP N 5 Mrebet, Purbalingga. The results are based on data collected through classroom observations, interviews with the teacher and students, and analysis of student-created comics. The discussion elaborates on the stages of comic integration, student engagement, and the benefits observed in writing skill development. Additionally, it addresses the challenges and limitations faced by both the teacher and students during the instructional process. Insights from relevant literature are also incorporated to contextualize the findings within broader educational perspectives.

The Implementation of Comics in Teaching Writing

The findings revealed that the use of comics as a medium for teaching writing in the 7th grade of SMP N 5 Mrebet followed three core stages: exploration, elaboration, and confirmation (Valeiras-Jurado, 2020). This structured sequence supported student-centered learning while integrating both textual and visual literacy into writing instruction.

Exploration Stage

At the beginning of the learning process, the teacher introduced comics as learning media by distributing printed comic worksheets and showcasing digital examples. Students were invited to analyze the structure and content of simple dialogues and introductory expressions in the comics. They identified greeting expressions, understood character intentions, and discussed the storyline in. This classroom activity was supported by observation data, which showed that students actively discussed the storyline in small groups while referring to the comic panels. Several students were

observed pointing to dialogue bubbles to identify greeting expressions and discuss character intentions during the task. This was also reflected in student interview data. One student stated, “The pictures in the comic helped me understand how to start the dialogue and what to say in the story” (Student Interview). According to the teacher, “Comics help students recognize dialogue patterns and greeting expressions more easily before they start writing their own texts” (Teacher Interview).

This activity aligns with the concept of active exploration, where learners construct knowledge by engaging with meaningful materials (Valeiras-Jurado, 2020). It also mirrors the idea of schema activation, in which students relate new content to prior knowledge (Meylani, 2024). The visual nature of comics provided a concrete context, making abstract writing tasks more accessible for young learners. Furthermore, multimodal input helped students decode language and narrative simultaneously. As Clark, (2017) explains, comics combine visual sequencing and textual cues, allowing learners to build language competence through contextually rich input.

Elaboration Stage

Following the exploration, students proceeded to analyze comic scripts and create their own short comics, either manually or digitally. In small groups, they worked on identifying character roles, constructing suitable dialogue, arranging panels, and ensuring logical story progression. The teacher encouraged collaboration by assigning group tasks that required brainstorming, drafting, and peer revision. Classroom observation indicated that students actively discussed ideas within their groups, negotiated dialogue choices, and revised their comic drafts based on peer feedback during the activity.

This approach mirrors the process writing model Barrett & Pack, (2023), which emphasizes prewriting, drafting, feedback, and revision. The use of comics in this stage fostered creativity while also addressing structural aspects of writing, such as coherence, text organization, and the use of appropriate expressions.

As supported by Chen & Hapgood, (2021), collaborative writing enhances students' capacity to negotiate meaning and develop a shared understanding of writing conventions. In this study, the group work dynamic enabled less confident students to express ideas visually while stronger writers contributed to textual clarity.

Moreover, the elaboration stage also supported genre awareness. As Hyland (2003) points out, teaching writing in context requires attention to genre, audience, and purpose. This view is supported by more recent studies which emphasize that genre-based writing instruction helps learners understand communicative purposes and audience expectations more effectively (Pabon, 2025). Students had to consider these elements when creating their comics, ensuring their dialogues matched communicative purposes like introducing oneself or starting a conversation.

Confirmation Stage

In the final stage, students presented their comic projects to their peers. The teacher provided oral feedback, clarifying linguistic errors, offering praise for creativity, and suggesting improvements. Students also reflected on their peers' comics and revised their work based on input. This stage aligns with formative assessment practices, as described by Black and Wiliam (1998), where feedback is used as a tool for learning. By engaging in reflective and interactive activities, students internalized both language structure and narrative flow (Lui & Andrade, 2022). Vygotsky (1978) also emphasized the role of social interaction in learning. Through class discussions and teacher guidance, students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) was expanded, allowing them to perform writing tasks that may have been beyond their individual capabilities (Sadia Irshad, 2021). In summary, the implementation of comics enriched the writing instruction process by making it interactive, visual, collaborative, and creative. This approach encouraged students to produce meaningful texts within structured learning sequences.

Challenges in Using Comics for Teaching Writing

Despite its benefits, the use of comics as media in the writing classroom presented several challenges for both teachers and students. These challenges must be addressed to ensure effective implementation.

Students' Difficulty in Narrative Coherence

Many EFL students experience difficulties in constructing narratives with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Based on classroom observations and analysis of students' comic-based writing tasks, several students produced stories with fragmented events, unclear plot development, or weak connections between panels, resulting in limited narrative coherence. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies, which indicate that EFL learners often struggle to organize ideas logically when composing narratives, particularly in multimodal texts that combine images and written language (Lee et al., 2021)

In the context of comics-based writing, some students tended to focus more on visual elements than on narrative clarity, leading to stories that were visually appealing but textually underdeveloped. Research on multimodal composing suggests that without explicit guidance, learners may prioritize images over linguistic meaning, which can negatively affect coherence and overall story development (Yum et al., 2021). Therefore, these findings highlight the need for instructional support that helps students integrate visual and textual elements meaningfully in narrative writing.

Teachers must therefore scaffold narrative planning by teaching students how to outline their story structures before designing the visuals. Introducing storyboarding techniques and teaching plot elements (orientation, complication, resolution) can help students improve their narrative flow.

Imbalance Between Visual and Textual Elements

Another recurring issue identified through classroom observation and analysis of students' comic-based writing tasks was the imbalance between images and text. Several students produced comics with excessive visual elements accompanied by minimal written explanation, while others relied heavily on text with underdeveloped or unclear visual representations. As a result, the intended messages were often fragmented or incompletely conveyed across panels, indicating difficulties in coordinating visual and textual meaning. Aziz and Aziz (2023) describe this as a visual-textual coordination challenge, where students lack the skills to harmonize multimodal elements. Addressing this requires explicit instruction in visual literacy, teaching students how visuals support meaning, how to interpret images, and how to plan image-text integration. Moreover, students need exposure to model comics that exemplify this balance. Teacher-led analysis of such models can guide students to critically assess how images and words function together.

Limited Teacher Training in Visual Pedagogy

Based on teacher interview data and classroom observations, although the teacher had several years of experience using comics in writing instruction, she reported difficulties in evaluating students' visual storytelling elements and acknowledged the absence of formal training in visual literacy pedagogy. During instructional feedback sessions, the teacher predominantly focused on linguistic aspects such as grammar and vocabulary, while providing limited guidance on layout, panel sequencing, and visual clarity.

This condition reflects a broader issue identified in recent studies, which suggests that many language teachers are not sufficiently prepared to address multimodal aspects of student texts, despite the increasing use of visual media in classrooms (Jiang & Hafner, 2025). Without adequate pedagogical knowledge of visual and multimodal communication, teachers may find it challenging to fully support students in integrating visual and textual elements meaningfully in comics-based writing tasks. Therefore, professional development programs need to incorporate training in multimodal composition, visual narrative structure, and comic design principles to better equip teachers working in visually intensive learning environments.

Time Constraints and Access Limitations

Based on teacher interview data and classroom observations, the time required to plan, produce, and present comic-based writing projects was perceived as considerably longer than that needed for conventional writing activities. The teacher reported difficulties in integrating comics-based instruction within a rigid curriculum schedule, particularly due to limited instructional time allocated for writing lessons.

Furthermore, analysis of classroom implementation and student task completion indicated disparities in students' access to comic creation tools and digital devices outside the

classroom. Several students relied exclusively on manual drawing during class time, while others had access to digital applications at home. This uneven access affected the pacing of activities and constrained opportunities for extended practice beyond the classroom. These constraints are consistent with the findings of Muyassarroh et al. (2019), who argue that while comics can enhance engagement, their use is often constrained by logistical and technological limitations. To address this, schools could provide structured comic templates, encourage group work to optimize resources, and adopt hybrid approaches combining manual comic creation with minimal digital processing, which reduces technological barriers while maintaining creative engagement.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

The study's findings highlight that comics are not merely decorative media but can serve as effective instructional tools that foster writing fluency, creativity, and collaboration. For students who often experience anxiety or disinterest in writing tasks, comics offer a low-pressure, high-interest entry point into language production.

However, successful implementation requires more than just media introduction; it involves teacher readiness, curriculum flexibility, and explicit instruction in both writing and visual composition. With adequate support and scaffolding, comic-based instruction can transform writing classrooms into dynamic, student-centered learning environments. Moreover, this study contributes to the growing recognition of visual and multimodal literacies as core competencies in 21st-century language education. As Clark & Mayer (2016) suggest, media-rich learning environments improve retention and motivation, especially when designed with pedagogical intent.

Conclusions

This study examined the implementation of comics as instructional media for teaching writing at the 7th grade of SMP N 5 Mrebet, Purbalingga. The findings revealed that comics were effectively integrated into the classroom through three pedagogical stages: exploration, elaboration, and confirmation. Students engaged actively in analyzing, creating, and presenting comics, which helped them develop ideas, organize narratives, and enhance motivation in writing tasks. The combination of visual and textual elements allowed students to express themselves more creatively and confidently.

However, several challenges were also identified. Students often struggled to maintain narrative coherence and to balance visuals with appropriate textual content. Additionally, the teacher faced limitations due to a lack of training in visual literacy and time constraints within the curriculum. These challenges highlight the importance of providing professional development and adequate instructional time when integrating creative media like comics into writing instruction.

Despite these limitations, the use of comics proved to be a promising strategy for enriching writing instruction in EFL contexts, particularly in rural schools. Comics

supported student-centered learning, encouraged collaboration, and made writing more engaging and meaningful. It is recommended that future studies expand on these findings by exploring digital comic tools, involving more participants, and measuring long-term impacts on writing performance. Comics hold significant potential to transform traditional writing instruction into an interactive, multimodal learning experience that resonates with the interests and needs of 21st-century learners.

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