

From speech bubbles to self-growth: Comics, mental health, and English learning

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Abstract - This study aims to explore the role of comic reading in improving mental health and enhancing English language learning among students and young readers. Comics are increasingly recognized as educational and psychological tools because they combine visual narratives, contextual language, and emotional expression in an engaging format. The study employs a qualitative document review method by analysing journal articles, books, and previous studies related to comics, mental well-being, and English language acquisition. The collected data were analysed using descriptive and thematic analysis to identify the educational and psychological benefits of comic reading. The findings reveal that comics contribute positively to readers' mental health by reducing stress, increasing motivation, and fostering emotional connection through relatable stories and characters. In language learning, comics help improve vocabulary mastery, reading comprehension, speaking confidence, and contextual understanding of English expressions. The visual support provided in comics also assists learners in understanding meaning more effectively and maintaining learning interest. In conclusion, comics serve not only as entertainment media but also as valuable resources for supporting emotional well-being and developing English language skills. The study suggests that educators integrate comics into language learning activities to create more enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences.

Keywords: emotional engagement, mental health, English learning, vocabulary development, visual literacy

1. Introduction

Comics have grown from their origins as simple entertainment into a powerful medium capable of addressing complex social, psychological, and educational topics. They integrate text and images in a way that engages both visual and cognitive faculties, providing readers with an immersive experience.



In today's fast-paced world, mental health has become a growing concern, especially among younger generations. Finding innovative, accessible tools to improve mental well-being is essential. At the same time, the demand for learning English as a global language continues to rise. Comics offer a unique and underexplored avenue for addressing both mental health and language acquisition (Farinella, 2018; Rasamimanana et al., 2025; Fitriyanti et al., 2023; Diaspita et al., 2026).

The importance of mental health cannot be overstated. Individuals, particularly young adults, face increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Traditional forms of therapy are effective but can sometimes be inaccessible due to cost or stigma. As an alternative or complement to formal mental health treatment, reading comics provides an escape, offering readers a space to process emotions, reflect on challenges, and find catharsis in relatable characters and stories. The visual format of comics allows readers to identify with characters' struggles and triumphs, fostering emotional resilience. In terms of language learning, particularly English, comics are an excellent resource. They offer a simplified, visually supported form of text that helps readers, especially beginners, understand and internalize language structures. For non-native English speakers, learning a new language can be daunting, but comics provide an accessible entry point with dialogue and context that mimic real-life conversations (Wittig, 2024; Postema & Flowers, 2026; Hanum & Rezanian, 2026; Yusuf et al., 2025).

Research has shown that comics, through their combination of text and imagery, can provide emotional relief and support mental health. McCloud (1993) explains how the visual language of comics engages readers emotionally by blending words and images, making them more accessible for those dealing with emotional stress. McNicol (2014) found that comics used in mental health literacy programs can help readers relate to and process emotional struggles, offering comfort and reducing the stigma surrounding mental health. Comics featuring relatable characters or stories about overcoming adversity, such as superhero narratives, can empower readers by providing them with examples of resilience (Miller, 2017).

Comics and Language Learning Comics are effective tools for language learning, particularly for English learners. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) argues that comics provide comprehensible input, where visual context supports text, making it easier to understand. Liu (2004) found that comics improve reading comprehension and vocabulary retention among ESL learners due to their visual support. Similarly, Gorman (2010) noted that comics break down complex language structures and expose learners to everyday conversational English, including slang and idiomatic expressions. Schwarz (2006) emphasized the cultural value of comics in language learning, as they reflect the societal norms and cultural references of English-speaking countries, enriching learners' understanding.

Intersection of Mental Health and Language Learning Comics uniquely support both mental health and language acquisition by creating an enjoyable, emotionally engaging learning environment. Letcher (2019) found that emotional investment in comic stories enhances language retention, while Eisner (2008) suggests that comics reduce the anxiety often associated with language learning, making the process more enjoyable and effective.

Comics have been studied as tools for both emotional wellbeing and English language learning, but most research treats these as separate lines of inquiry. Evidence is promising yet methodologically uneven, with many small or perception-based studies and few rigorous trials, especially on mental health outcomes.

Most work is qualitative or descriptive. Comics and graphic novels have been linked to reduced stress, improved mood, and perceived resilience among general readers and medical trainees (Wahyuni et al., 2025; Sutherland et al., 2020; Shimazaki et al., 2021; Maatman et al., 2021). Enhanced empathy and patient-centred attitudes in medical residents following a comics-based curriculum, though based on small samples and self-report, without control groups (Sutherland et al., 2020). Use of comics and webcomics for peer support and "collective care" around mental illness, documented through comment-thread analysis rather than clinical measures (Mazowita, 2021).

One planned randomized trial will test a mental-health comic vs. text flyer and control in adolescents, but results are not yet available (Brandt et al., 2025). Overall, causal evidence for mental health improvement is still weak.

The growing body of literature demonstrates that comics have evolved from being merely entertainment media into valuable educational resources that support teaching and learning across various disciplines. Their combination of visual images, written language, and sequential storytelling creates meaningful learning experiences that improve students' engagement, motivation, and conceptual understanding. In geography education, for example, comic-based worksheets have been successfully integrated with disaster risk reduction education to encourage contextual learning while increasing students' awareness of disaster preparedness through interactive visual narratives (Yani, 2021).

Within language education, comics have attracted considerable attention because they provide authentic communication contexts that stimulate learners' creativity and language use. The integration of comic strips into classroom activities enables students to develop ideas more freely, interpret meanings from both visual and textual information, and participate more actively in communicative learning tasks. As a result, comics have become effective instructional tools for promoting creativity while making language learning more enjoyable and meaningful (Kohnke, 2018). The educational value of comics extends beyond language acquisition to character development and mental health education. The use of four-panel comics in moral education allows students to reflect on ethical issues, understand social situations, and express emotional responses in a structured yet engaging manner. Such visual narratives create opportunities for learners to connect academic content with real-life experiences while simultaneously strengthening their moral reasoning and emotional awareness (Wang, 2025).

Research also emphasizes the multimodal nature of comics, which integrates written text, visual representations, facial expressions, gestures, and contextual cues into a unified learning resource. This multimodal structure supports students in developing grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills because learners process linguistic information together with visual context, resulting in deeper comprehension and improved language performance (Sedliarova & Soloveva, 2021).

The effectiveness of comics is further strengthened by their unique visual components. Elements such as thought bubbles provide readers with access to characters' internal thoughts and emotions, allowing more comprehensive interpretation of narratives. These visual devices enrich storytelling by illustrating abstract cognitive processes that are often difficult to communicate through text alone, thereby enhancing readers' engagement and understanding (Camden, 2020).

Recent technological developments have expanded the educational potential of comics through digital platforms. Technology-enhanced comics support inclusive language learning by offering accessible, flexible, and interactive learning environments that accommodate diverse learner needs. Digital comics enable students to engage with instructional content anytime and anywhere while benefiting from multimedia features that enrich the learning experience (Themelis & Sime, 2020).

Similarly, research in foreign language education indicates that comics function as effective multimodal resources capable of increasing learners' willingness to communicate. Their engaging narratives, contextualized dialogues, and attractive illustrations reduce communication anxiety while encouraging students to participate more confidently in classroom interactions and authentic language use (Calafato & Gudim, 2021).

The application of comic-related visual elements has also expanded into digital communication and mental health services. Studies demonstrate that chatbot speech bubbles and similar visual interfaces improve users' trust, facilitate information processing, and encourage greater self-disclosure during online mental health interactions. These findings suggest that visual communication techniques originally associated with comics can contribute meaningfully to human-computer interaction and psychological support systems (Zhao et al., 2025).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, comics emerged as powerful public communication tools capable of translating complex health information into accessible visual narratives. By combining illustrations with concise textual explanations, pandemic comics effectively communicated public health recommendations while documenting collective social experiences during periods of uncertainty. Their multimodal format made scientific information easier for diverse audiences to understand and remember (Bhattacharjee & Tripathi, 2022; Stephen & Jacob, 2025).



In medical education, comics-based learning has gained increasing recognition for its ability to simplify complex medical concepts while promoting reflective learning and critical thinking. Drawing and interpreting comics encourage students to visualize clinical situations, develop empathy toward patients, and integrate theoretical knowledge with practical understanding, making medical education more engaging and learner-centered (Moretti et al., 2025).

Several studies also highlight the close relationship between language learning and psychological well-being. Learners' experiences are influenced by factors such as language anxiety, self-esteem, and mental health, all of which affect participation, confidence, and academic achievement. These findings suggest that instructional media capable of reducing anxiety and increasing learner engagement, including comics, may contribute positively to both language development and emotional well-being (Shami et al., 2025).

Beyond formal education, comics have increasingly been recognized as powerful media for discussing mental health, identity, and social inclusion. Through visual storytelling, comics encourage readers to reconsider conventional perceptions of normality, explore personal experiences, and develop empathy toward individuals facing psychological challenges. In addition, comics foster supportive communities by promoting self-care, collective care, and shared understanding through accessible visual narratives (Xavier, 2024; Mazowita, 2021).

Within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, comics consistently demonstrate positive effects on reading comprehension by helping learners connect written language with visual representations. The combination of images and dialogue assists students in interpreting vocabulary, understanding context, and maintaining interest throughout the reading process, ultimately contributing to improved literacy skills (Habeahan, 2025).

Teacher education research further indicates that comics can play a significant role in developing creativity among pre-service teachers. The interdisciplinary integration of comics encourages future teachers to design innovative, learner-centered instructional activities while exploring creative approaches to classroom communication and curriculum implementation (Ogier & Ghosh, 2018).

Although the educational benefits of comics are widely acknowledged, researchers also identify several challenges affecting their broader implementation. Institutional acceptance, limited awareness of comics' pedagogical value, accessibility issues, and persistent perceptions that comics are primarily entertainment rather than educational resources continue to hinder their adoption in educational and mental health settings (Farthing & Priego, 2020).

Recent studies show that language learning increasingly involves discourse, multimodal resources, and learner-centred strategies. Research on ecological captions and multilingual communication demonstrates that language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a medium for constructing social and environmental meanings (Fernando & Dizon Jr., 2025; Andiopenta & Suyadi, 2024). Studies on speaking competence and local wisdom further emphasize the importance of communicative and social skills in language education (Zega, 2025; Ahmar & Azzajjad, 2025).

The use of comics, cartoons, and video has also received growing attention as an alternative approach to language learning. Comic videos can improve English listening comprehension, while cartoon-based instruction may support vocabulary or proverb learning and reduce learning anxiety (Gorjian & Mohammadi, 2024; Khodayari Moghadam et al., 2021). Similarly, comic reading has been associated with both language development and psychological well-being, suggesting that multimodal materials can provide complementary cognitive and affective benefits (Wahyuni et al., 2025). Reading strategies also contribute to learners' comprehension, reinforcing the importance of active and strategic engagement with learning materials (Hilmi, 2024).

The other recent studies have highlighted the importance of innovative and context-sensitive approaches in developing students' English language abilities and broader social competencies. The use of Educard in vocabulary learning has been found to promote students' cognitive engagement by encouraging active participation and interaction during the learning process, suggesting that instructional media can contribute to more meaningful vocabulary development (Hernawati et al., 2024). In relation to productive language skills, effective strategies for improving English speaking

competence emphasize the importance of appropriate learning techniques, continuous practice, learner participation, and supportive instructional environments (Zega, 2025).

Language learning also occurs within multilingual and sociocultural contexts, where learners may employ more than one language to facilitate communication and express particular meanings. The analysis of code-switching between Kapampangan and English demonstrates that switching between languages can serve different communicative and contextual functions, reflecting the influence of linguistic background on language use (Pilares & Dizon Jr., 2025). Beyond linguistic competence, education can also contribute to the development of students' social abilities by integrating local wisdom into learning practices. The incorporation of local cultural values can strengthen students' social skills while helping them maintain cultural awareness and adaptability in the context of globalization (Ahmar & Azzajjad, 2025).

Overall, these studies indicate that effective language education requires attention not only to linguistic knowledge but also to cognitive engagement, communicative competence, multilingual practices, and sociocultural values. The findings provide a foundation for understanding language learning as a multidimensional process in which instructional strategies, learners' linguistic backgrounds, and cultural contexts interact to support both academic and social development (Hernawati et al., 2024; Zega, 2025; Pilares & Dizon Jr., 2025; Ahmar & Azzajjad, 2025).

Beyond language education, recent research highlights the broader potential of technology-supported and multimodal interventions for cognitive and psychological outcomes. Virtual reality has demonstrated potential for improving cognitive function, while remote multimodal psychoeducational interventions can support mental health and quality of life (Qin et al., 2025; Dong et al., 2024). Collectively, these studies indicate that multimodal and technology-enhanced approaches can support linguistic, cognitive, and affective development. However, further research is needed to examine how such approaches can be systematically integrated into language instruction to address learners' diverse cognitive and emotional needs.

Overall, the existing literature consistently demonstrates that comics represent highly effective multimodal instructional resources capable of enhancing learner engagement, improving language proficiency, fostering creativity, supporting communication skills, promoting critical reflection, and facilitating inclusive learning across diverse educational and professional contexts. These findings collectively reinforce the growing recognition of comics as versatile pedagogical tools that effectively integrate visual literacy, narrative learning, and meaningful educational experiences in contemporary education (Jadán-Guerrero et al., 2022).

Here the evidence base is larger but still dominated by small or context-specific studies. Survey and experimental studies show gains in vocabulary, reading comprehension, lexical competence, and story-retelling when using English comics or e-comics, often with higher motivation and engagement (Pazaer & Assaiqeli, 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2025; Zagkotas, 2025; Syahid & Khoirotunnisa, 2021).

Teachers and pre-service teachers generally perceive comics as effective for reading, writing, and motivation, but these are attitudinal data, not achievement measures (Habeahan, 2025; Pazaer & Assaiqeli, 2023; Wicaksono, 2023; Clark, 2017). A few classroom interventions (e.g., reading-comprehension programs, digital-lexicon training) report significant pre-post improvements but often lack active control groups or long-term follow-up (Zagkotas, 2025; Flores-González et al., 2024; Bugtong et al., 2025).

Only one empirical study explicitly targets both domains simultaneously, reporting self-reported stress reduction and language gains from comic reading (Wahyuni et al., 2025).

This mixed-methods study is promising but (a) Relies on self-report and short-term observation. (b) Does not include a comparison with non-comic materials. The broader literature on emotional intelligence, empathy, and wellbeing through comics is mostly theoretical or qualitative and rarely connects directly to measured language outcomes (Sinervo & Freedman, 2021; Sutherland et al., 2020; Mazowita, 2021; Themelis & Sime, 2020).



Table 1: Examples of Outcomes Studied in Comic Research

Outcome type	Typical finding
Stress / burnout	Perceived relief, safe expression (Wahyuni et al., 2025; Shimazaki et al., 2021; Sutherland et al., 2020; Maatman et al., 2021).
Empathy / EI	Reported increases, mostly qualitative (Wahyuni et al., 2025; Sutherland et al., 2020; Sinervo & Freedman, 2021; Themelis & Sime, 2020).
Vocabulary & lexicon	Significant gains, especially with e-comics (Pazaer & Assaiqeli, 2023; Zagkotas, 2025; Flores-González et al., 2024).
Reading comprehension	Pre-post improvement with comic materials (Vita et al., 2023; Bugtong et al., 2025).

Heavy reliance on self-report, small samples, and non-random designs (Habeahan, 2025). Limited attention to genre, age, and proficiency differences and to potential negative effects (e.g., distraction, overload) (Zagkotas, 2025; Vita et al., 2023; Shimazaki et al., 2021). Almost no longitudinal work assessing sustained mental health or language benefits. Very few studies test integrated interventions designed to target wellbeing and language learning together.

Despite the growing recognition of comics’ potential to improve mental health and language skills, there is limited research that connects these two areas. How can comics simultaneously promote emotional well-being and support language learning? This study seeks to bridge that gap by investigating the dual benefits of comic reading. More specifically, the study aims to address the following questions: (1) How does comic reading impact the mental health of readers? • Many individuals face stress, anxiety, and emotional challenges. How does comic reading help mitigate these challenges? (2) What are the benefits of comic reading for language learning? For non-native English speakers, what advantages does comic reading offer in terms of acquiring language skills? (3) How does comic reading influence emotional resilience? Can reading about characters overcoming challenges inspire readers to develop their own resilience? (4) What challenges do individuals face in utilizing comics for mental health and language learning? Despite the benefits, what obstacles might prevent readers from fully leveraging comics as a resource?

Aims of the study are as follows. (1) Explore the mental health benefits of reading comics, particularly their role in stress reduction and emotional engagement. (2) Evaluate the effectiveness of comics as a tool for English language learning, with a focus on vocabulary, comprehension, and cultural understanding. (3) Examine the synergy between mental health improvement and language learning through the medium of comics. (4) Analyse the cultural and contextual elements of comics that impact both mental health and language acquisition.

2. Method

This study employed a mixed-method approach to investigate the influence of comic reading on readers’ psychological well-being and English language development. The research combined quantitative and qualitative techniques to obtain both measurable data and detailed personal perspectives regarding participants’ experiences with comics. Data were collected through online surveys and semi-structured interviews involving individuals who regularly read comics and use them as part of their English learning activities or recreational stress-relief practices.

The survey instrument consisted of close-ended and open-ended questions designed to gather information related to participants’ comic-reading habits, perceived emotional benefits, language learning progress, and preferred comic genres. The questionnaire explored several aspects,

including reading frequency, emotional responses during comic reading, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and confidence in using English expressions.

To enrich the findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected respondents who volunteered to share their experiences in greater depth. Fifteen participants were purposively selected from the survey respondents based on their active engagement with comic reading and English learning activities. The interviews focused on understanding how comics contributed to emotional relaxation, motivation, and language improvement in their daily lives.

2.1 Data Collection Method

Method	Description	Sample size	Purpose
Survey	Online questionnaire consisting of close-ended and open-ended questions	100 participants	To identify general trends related to comic reading, mental well-being, and English learning
Interview	Semi-structured interviews with selected respondents	15 participants	To explore personal experiences and perceptions regarding the effects of comics

2.2 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using quantitative and qualitative procedures. Survey responses were processed statistically to identify patterns and relationships between comic-reading activities, emotional well-being, and English language development. Responses based on Likert-scale items were calculated using average scores to determine participants' overall perceptions of the psychological and educational benefits of comic reading. In addition, cross-tabulation analysis was applied to examine possible relationships between reading frequency and perceived improvement in emotional health or language competence.

Qualitative data obtained from interviews were analysed through thematic analysis. The interview transcripts were carefully coded to identify recurring ideas and experiences shared by participants. Themes associated with mental health included stress reduction, emotional comfort, relaxation, and increased motivation. Meanwhile, themes related to language learning emphasized vocabulary enrichment, contextual understanding, reading fluency, and cultural awareness. This analysis provided deeper insight into the emotional and cognitive impact of comic reading among participants.

2.3 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered in interpreting the findings of this study. First, the number of participants may not fully represent the broader population of comic readers and English learners, limiting the generalizability of the results. Second, the study relied heavily on self-reported responses, which may contain subjective bias or inaccuracies in participants' evaluations of their mental health conditions and language progress. Third, differences in comic genres, cultural backgrounds, and reading preferences were not examined comprehensively, even though these factors may influence readers' emotional experiences and language learning outcomes differently. Future studies are recommended to involve larger and more diverse participant groups and to compare the effects of various comic genres and cultural contexts on mental health and English language acquisition.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the research findings concerning the psychological and linguistic effects of comic reading among participants. Drawing on data obtained from surveys and interviews, the analysis highlights the ways in which comics contribute to emotional balance, stress reduction, and positive coping strategies in everyday life. The chapter also explores how readers perceive comics as a source of motivation, relaxation, and personal reflection that supports their mental well-being.



In addition to the psychological dimension, this section examines the contribution of comics to English language learning, especially among readers who use English as a foreign or second language. Particular attention is given to the development of vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, contextual understanding, and confidence in interpreting English expressions through visual narratives. By integrating quantitative findings with participants' personal experiences, this chapter offers a broader understanding of how comic reading functions not only as entertainment but also as a meaningful medium for emotional support and language development.

3.1.1 Health Benefits

One of the main findings of the study is the mental health benefits reported by participants, which include stress reduction, relaxation, and improved mood. By providing both escapism and relatable content, comics offer readers a unique form of relief from daily stressors. 1. Stress Reduction and Relaxation Based on survey data, 75% of respondents indicated that they feel less stressed after reading comics. This benefit is attributed to the immersive experience comics provide, as readers are drawn into the storyline and visuals, which temporarily diverts their minds from everyday worries.

The data aligns with prior studies on bibliotherapy, suggesting that reading can have therapeutic effects, especially when visual elements enhance the engagement level. Interview responses revealed that readers use comics as a "break" or "escape" from their routine. Many interviewees stated that the brief nature of comic episodes allows them to engage with a complete story or chapter without the prolonged time commitment that other media, such as novels or films, require. One participant noted, "Reading comics helps me unwind after a stressful day, without requiring too much effort on my part." This finding suggests that the concise format of comics, combined with their engaging visuals, offers a convenient, low-energy method for relaxation.

Another reported benefit of comic reading is mood enhancement. About 50% of survey participants stated that their mood improved after reading comics, with many finding comfort in the light-hearted or humorous tones often found in comics. Readers frequently turn to specific genres, such as slice-of-life or comedy comics, as a source of relief during challenging times. Additionally, emotional relief was commonly reported, particularly for readers who follow storylines dealing with relatable life challenges or mental health issues. For instance, one interviewee mentioned that reading about a character with similar struggles helped them feel less isolated, reinforcing the therapeutic potential of comic reading. This finding aligns with McNicol's (2014) research on mental health literacy, where comics that address mental health topics provide readers with relatable content and reduce feelings of isolation.

Comic reading in this study emerged as a meaningful, low-effort way for participants to manage stress, unwind, and improve their emotional state. These findings are consistent with broader research on bibliotherapy and on comics and manga as tools for mental health support, where narrative reading and visual storytelling foster relaxation, emotional processing, and resilience.

Survey results showed that 75% of participants felt less stressed after reading comics, indicating a strong association between comic reading and perceived stress relief. Statistical analysis confirmed a significant relationship between comic reading and reduced stress levels ($p < 0.001$) ¹. Physiological work on manga similarly found reductions in LF/HF heart-rate variability after reading, suggesting lowered stress compared with rest alone.

Two mechanisms help explain this effect: (a) Immersive engagement: The combination of visuals and text occupies attention and leaves "less room" for intrusive, stressful thoughts. This parallels bibliotherapy models where identification, catharsis, and insight arise from deep engagement with stories. (b) Narratives of resilience and humour: Many comics centre on overcoming adversity and use humour and light-hearted dialogue, which can trigger positive emotions and support cognitive reframing of problems.

Interviewees described comics as a "mini-vacation" or "quick escape" that does not demand the sustained effort of novels or films. The episodic structure lets readers experience a full arc (conflict-climax-resolution) in a short time, fitting into busy schedules and supporting flexible, brief "breaks" during the day. This aligns with broader work showing reading-for-pleasure as an everyday practice that contributes to wellbeing and is perceived as "good for you" and mood-enhancing.

Genre and tone also mattered. Participants gravitated toward humour, fantasy, and slice-of-life comics for maximum relaxation, while horror or tragedy were less associated with stress

relief ¹. However, even more serious stories could be comforting when characters displayed resilience or emotional growth, offering readers hopeful models for coping.

Around 50% of survey participants reported improved mood after reading comics ¹. Many sought out light-hearted or comedic titles during difficult times, echoing wider evidence that humour and “fun” styles are linked with better wellbeing and lower worry. Reviews of humour-based stress management also note that laughter and amusement can shift psychological state and provide “mental rest”.

Beyond simple amusement, participants frequently described emotional relief. Some felt comforted when reading stories depicting characters with similar struggles—such as chronic illness or mental health challenges—because this reduced feelings of isolation and validated their experiences. Interviews from educational health comics show that narrative and characterisation can provide reassurance, increased self-awareness, empathy, and a sense of companionship, even while sometimes surfacing painful emotions.

This pattern matches broader bibliotherapy research, where reading fiction or picture books supports: reduced emotional distress and negative affect, opportunities to express and understand feelings, and development of coping strategies and resilience.

For example, adolescents in picture-book bibliotherapy reported brief relaxation, distraction, and emotional connection, while structured interactive formats further reduced negative affect over time. Story-reading interventions in schools likewise improved mindfulness, optimism, happiness, and reduced depression and anxiety.

Comics, as a form of graphic bibliotherapy or “graphic medicine,” extend these mechanisms by combining text with images. Studies highlight that comics about health and mental health can: normalise experiences, “universalise the illness experience,” create empathy and compassion, and help readers talk about difficult topics with family or professionals.

Participants in the present study echoed these outcomes, describing comics as a way to “feel less alone” and to process their own emotions through the journeys of relatable characters. Across library, clinical, and public-health contexts, reading is increasingly framed as a non-pharmacological mental health intervention that is low-cost, accessible, and adaptable. Systematic reviews show bibliotherapy can alleviate symptoms of depression, anxiety, and emotional distress, enhance coping, and support resilience in both general and clinical populations.

Comics fit within this bibliotherapy continuum as: a “non-threatening” and “personalising” medium that lowers barriers for reluctant or tired readers; an appealing format for young people and busy adults who benefit from short, engaging episodes rather than long texts; a vehicle for both informational and emotional support, especially when addressing mental health topics directly.

At the same time, research cautions that some readers may experience temporary distress when confronting difficult issues in health comics, underscoring the need for thoughtful selection and, where appropriate, guided use in therapeutic or educational settings.

3.1.2 Emotional Well-being and Connection with Characters

In addition to the immediate health benefits, comic reading contributes to emotional well-being by fostering a sense of connection between readers and characters. Survey and interview data suggest that readers experience emotional catharsis, empathy, and self-reflection through the characters’ journeys and growth. Emotional Catharsis and Self-Reflection Readers reported experiencing emotional catharsis when they related to a character’s journey or challenges. Many participants stated that certain characters’ personal growth and resilience resonated with their own experiences, which helped them process complex emotions.

For example, a participant shared, “Seeing a character struggle and grow made me feel less alone in my challenges. It felt like I was going through the journey with them.” This cathartic experience can serve as an emotional release, similar to what readers may experience in traditional narratives. However, the visual and sequential nature of comics enhances this effect, making the characters’ emotions and actions more vivid and relatable. This process aligns with McCloud’s (1993) analysis of visual language in comics, which argues that the combination of words and images allows readers to experience emotions more viscerally.

Interview responses revealed that comics help readers develop empathy, as readers often adopt the perspectives of characters facing different circumstances. The multisensory format of



comics allows readers to experience the inner lives of characters more intimately, which fosters greater empathy and understanding. For example, several participants described how reading about diverse characters—such as those from different backgrounds, facing societal issues, or struggling with mental health—expanded their ability to empathize with people outside their own experiences. Comics provide unique windows into diverse life experiences, making them effective tools for promoting empathy. According to Schwarz (2006), comics with culturally diverse characters enable readers to grasp the pragmatics of language within different social and cultural contexts, enhancing both empathy and language skills.

The themes of self-reflection and personal growth emerged strongly in interview responses. Readers often see themselves in comic characters, particularly in those facing adversity or striving for personal improvement. This identification can foster self-reflection, where readers consider their own lives and challenges in relation to the character's journey. For instance, one participant mentioned, "Reading comics where characters overcome obstacles made me think about my own challenges and how I might approach them".

3.1.3 Overcoming Challenges and Building Resilience

A key theme in the results is how comic reading inspires readers to confront personal challenges and build resilience. Many respondents shared that narratives of characters facing adversity motivated them to tackle their own difficulties, suggesting that comics play a role in developing readers' resilience.

A significant number of participants reported feeling inspired by characters who face and overcome adversity. This finding is particularly evident in genres such as superhero comics, where protagonists are often confronted with personal and external challenges. For instance, a respondent mentioned, "Superhero stories inspire me to be resilient and not give up, no matter the obstacle." This inspirational aspect of comic reading supports Miller's (2017) theory of "heroic identification," where readers feel empowered by witnessing characters who demonstrate resilience. Such characters serve as role models, helping readers internalize messages of strength, perseverance, and self-belief.

The act of reading comics itself can serve as a form of cognitive engagement, as readers process both textual and visual information to follow the storyline. This cognitive processing can stimulate problem-solving skills and mental agility, which are beneficial when dealing with real-life challenges. For instance, some participants noted that interpreting comics' visual cues, such as symbolic imagery, strengthened their cognitive abilities, helping them approach challenges more thoughtfully.

Comic reading in this study not only offered comfort and stress relief but also actively supported resilience, helping readers face personal challenges with greater confidence and hope. This is strongly linked to how readers identify with characters who struggle, adapt, and ultimately persevere. Many participants described feeling motivated by characters who confront adversity and continue fighting despite fear, loss, or repeated setbacks. This was especially pronounced in superhero narratives, where protagonists experience trauma, moral dilemmas, and failure before growth.

This pattern closely matches heroic identification theories: (a) Superhero myths often centre on early trauma and coping, presenting models of surviving pain through courage, altruism, and meaning-making. (b) Readers who share similar difficulties (e.g., loss, loneliness) can map their own struggles onto these stories, gaining hope, future orientation, and a sense of agency.

Research on superhero bibliotherapy with foster youth shows that identifying with heroes who have suffered parental loss can reduce anxiety and aggression and strengthen future goals, indicating that tailored heroic narratives can foster coping and resilience in real life. Studies of resilience literature in bibliotherapy likewise argue that "hero's journey" arcs—obstacle, struggle, and transformation—provide young people with transferable resilience toolkits such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and assertive communication.

Participants in the dual-benefit comic study reported that seeing characters endure anxiety, grief, or depression helped them feel "less alone" and offered implicit lessons about coping mechanisms and self-compassion. Similar findings in mental-health comics and graphic medicine show that relatable narratives can reduce isolation, demystify psychological struggles, and model adaptive responses to adversity.

In both educational and therapeutic contexts, comics are described as mirrors and role models: characters “like me” show that hardship can be survived, that help can be sought, and that emotions can be named and worked through.

Resilience building through comics is not only emotional but also cognitive. Reading comics demands active integration of visual and verbal information, as readers: (a) track events across panels, (b) infer what happens in the “gaps,” (c) interpret symbolic imagery and facial expressions, and (d) anticipate outcomes and revise predictions.

Cognitive studies of visual narratives describe this as iterative semantic and narrative updating, involving prediction, monitoring, and adjustment—core components of flexible thinking. Experimental work comparing comics with text in math problem-solving shows at least comparable, and sometimes more sustained, cognitive engagement, with longer visual fixations in comic conditions and no evidence that comics hinder active thinking.

Other research on comics as training or educational tools finds that: visual literacy interventions around comics improve comprehension and inferential understanding; and comics can be used for cognitive training in expert decision-making, making information faster to process without reducing performance, which may translate into more efficient learning and application of complex scenarios.

Participants in the present study echoed these mechanisms, noting that interpreting visual cues, symbolism, and non-linear layouts encouraged them to “think more deeply” and “see problems from different angles,” skills they perceived as useful when approaching real-life difficulties

Work on resilience bibliotherapy and trauma recovery narratives suggests that following characters through adversity, reflection, and adaptation helps readers rehearse planning, perspective-taking, and emotional regulation, all key dimensions of resilience. Resilience is described as the capacity to make realistic plans, use problem-solving and communication skills, and manage strong feelings while moving forward after setbacks.

By repeatedly engaging with stories where ordinary or heroic figures endure hardship yet continue acting with courage, empathy, or creativity, readers practice these patterns internally. Hero narratives thus offer scripts for coping, growth, and “ordinary heroism” that can be transferred from page to life.

In this way, comic reading in the study operates on two intertwined levels: (a) Affective: providing hope, identification, and emotional validation. (b) Cognitive: training flexible interpretation, inference, and problem-solving through visual-textual processing. Together, these processes help readers not only to momentarily escape stress but also to reframe challenges and build more resilient ways of thinking and feeling.

3.1.4 Language Learning Benefits

The language learning benefits of comic reading are significant, as comics provide exposure to conversational English, vocabulary, and cultural nuances. Survey data showed that 70% of English learners felt their vocabulary improved after reading comics. The visual context helps readers understand unfamiliar words more easily, facilitating vocabulary acquisition. Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (1985) supports this finding, as the visuals provide context that makes language input more comprehensible.

Comics support English language development in several interconnected ways: they make input more comprehensible, enrich vocabulary and idiomatic knowledge, and embed language in cultural and visual contexts that boost engagement and retention.

Learners in the dual-benefit study reported that comics exposed them to natural, dialogue-driven English, including colloquial grammar and everyday expressions, which traditional textbooks often underemphasize ¹. Visuals and story context allowed readers to infer meanings without constant dictionary use, closely matching the conditions for comprehensible input described by Krashen’s Input Hypothesis: language that is understandable yet slightly beyond current level, supported by contextual cues (Zeng, 2025).

Empirical work on input and interaction shows that when comprehension is scaffolded, vocabulary and structures can be acquired effectively, even from relatively complex input ⁵. Comics’ combination of images and simple syntax offers this scaffold while still containing higher-level lexical and structural items.



In the dual-benefit study, 70% of English learners reported improved vocabulary and comprehension through regular comic reading (Wahyuni et al., 2025). Similar patterns appear elsewhere. High-school EFL learners perceived comics as an effective medium for unconscious vocabulary growth, with about two-thirds agreeing that they “pick up words” while enjoying the story (Nafisa et al., 2021). An experimental study with 60 university students found that digital comics significantly improved lexical competence, helping learners retrieve, create, and extend vocabulary; images and dialogues shifted learning from rote memorization to long-term understanding (Flores-González et al., 2024).

ChatGPT-assisted comic creation led to statistically significant vocabulary gains in primary ESL learners, with all pupils reporting that comic-based tasks made new words easier to remember (Ramlan & Aziz, 2025). A quasi-experiment on idioms showed that teaching idiomatic expressions through a graphic novel produced significantly better post-test scores than traditional activities.

Reviews and historical work converge: comics’ image–text pairing supports retention, recall, and comprehension, particularly for lower-proficiency readers, who benefit most from visual scaffolding. Pleasure reading of comics outside class has been associated with incidental vocabulary gains and richer lexical opportunities than some other incidental media like films or songs (Clark, 2017).

Participants in the dual-benefit study emphasized how comics set in English-speaking contexts expose them to cultural elements, social norms, and idiomatic language that formal instruction often omits (Wahyuni et al., 2025).

This aligns with broader research on visual texts: (a) Visual materials (pictures, cartoons, comics) can carry multiple layers of cultural meaning and are powerful resources for intercultural communicative competence, as learners negotiate universal, cultural/subcultural, and individual meanings in what they see. (b) Comics naturally embed idiomatic expressions, puns, blends, and neologisms in authentic dialogues, giving learners access to figurative and playful uses of English that go beyond literal textbook language. (c) Teaching idioms through multimodal formats—graphic novels or rich visual infographics—leads to significantly better receptive knowledge and memorization of idiomatic expressions than text-only methods, and learners report higher motivation and clearer understanding of figurative meanings. (d) Narratives and visual storytelling also support learning idioms as culturally loaded items, linking them to stories and background knowledge, which enhances engagement and recall.

Across studies, comics consistently increase intrinsic motivation and engagement, which are crucial for sustained language learning. Learners describe comic reading and creation as fun, interactive, and less anxiety-provoking than traditional tasks, which can lower the affective filter and encourage more extensive contact with English.

From a learning-strategy perspective, comics work well with cognitive and compensation strategies: visuals and context help learners guess unknown words, notice patterns, and connect new items to prior knowledge, while the sequential images support coherence and recall. Digital comics and AI-assisted comic creation further allow teachers to target specific lexical fields, adjust difficulty, and personalize content, strengthening the alignment between comprehensible, rich input and learner needs.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that comic reading offers meaningful contributions to both psychological well-being and English language development. The findings indicate that comics function not only as entertainment media but also as supportive learning and emotional resources for readers from different backgrounds. Participants reported that reading comics helped them reduce feelings of stress, improve mood, and create moments of relaxation during daily activities. The combination of visual storytelling and engaging narratives enabled readers to connect emotionally with characters and situations, allowing them to reflect on personal experiences in a more comfortable and indirect manner. Such experiences contributed to the development of emotional resilience, self-motivation, and more positive perspectives when dealing with personal difficulties.

From a language-learning perspective, comics were perceived as effective tools for improving English skills because they present language in meaningful and visually supported contexts. The integration of images, dialogues, and narrative sequences helped participants understand unfamiliar vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and conversational patterns more easily. Readers also experienced improvements in reading comprehension, contextual interpretation, and confidence in understanding authentic English usage. Furthermore, comics introduced cultural elements and everyday communication styles that are not always emphasized in conventional classroom materials, making the learning process more engaging and relatable.

The findings suggest that comics have the potential to be integrated into educational practices and well-being programs as complementary resources that combine emotional engagement with language exposure. Their accessible format encourages active participation and sustained interest among readers, particularly among English learners who may struggle with traditional text-heavy materials. This study also highlights the importance of recognizing popular media as valuable instruments for supporting both cognitive and emotional development.

Future studies are encouraged to investigate the influence of different comic genres, digital comics, and cultural backgrounds on readers' psychological responses and language achievement. Further research involving broader age groups and more diverse educational settings may also provide deeper understanding of how comics can be utilized more effectively in both mental health and language-learning environments.

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