

The Development of Comics as a Media to Improve Japanese Writing Skill

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ABSTRACT

Students often find it difficult to develop ideas, determine appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure, formulate sentences with the right order, and describe non-text images when they are in the process of writing in Japanese during a lesson. One of the proposed media that can be utilized to overcome these difficulties is comics. Words in comics may take form of guiding sentences containing vocabularies and sentence structures related to the writing theme, while serial images may assist students in formulating an orderly narration. This study discusses the development process of comics as a teaching media for Japanese writing lesson. The method used in this current study is Reeves-model Design Based Research (DBR) consisting of four phases. Phase 1 is the identification of difficulties in learning Japanese writing through a series of interviews. Phase 2 is the development and formulation of comics according to the Japanese writing lesson subject. Meanwhile, Phase 3 is the testing of the previously developed comics to 25 second-semester students of Japanese Language Education Department at a public university. Based on the first testing's result, the developed comics required improvement in terms of writing appearance aspect. In Phase 4, the development of final comics design was conducted based on the result of analysis in Phase 3. Research findings have shown that comics' media can be utilized to improve Japanese writing skill. Comics' media development is not only applicable in writing lesson, but also in other Japanese language lessons such as speaking and reading.

Keywords: Comics, teaching media, Japanese writing, design-based research

1. INTRODUCTION

Japanese language study, as any other study of foreign languages, comprises lessons on four language skills namely speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Nakamura (2019) argued that a special attention should be given to writing skill. Despite mastering speaking and listening skills, students will experience some difficulties in writing because there are differences between *hanashikotoba* (conversational language) and *kakikotoba* (written language) for most vocabularies in Japanese language (Nakamura, 2019). In addition, students often face challenges in finding ideas, selecting appropriate vocabularies, and forming sentences into a good writing (Okuda, 2019; Spence & Kite, 2017; Tanaka, 2007). Provision of instructions through writing steps and image description in writing lessons may overcome those challenges (Kuiper, Smit, Wachter, & Jan Elen, 2017). Combination of writing steps instruction and image description can be provided through media such as comics.

This research will develop comics media expected to improve Japanese writing skill at higher education level. In university-level Japanese language study, a creative writing lesson called *Sakubun* is available. The learning process in this subject does not only demand writing skill, but also mastery of vocabulary, language structure, and idea formulation (Maulia, 2017). The research was conducted at Japanese Language Education Department at a public university where the use of comics as teaching media is still unfamiliar. Result of interviews has shown that students often meet several difficulties in Japanese writing process such as developing ideas, determining appropriate sentence structures and vocabularies, formulating orderly sentences, and describing non-text images during their lessons. Words in comics are written in the form of guiding sentences containing vocabularies and sentence structures related to a particular writing theme, while serial images are expected to assist students in formulating well-structured writing. When utilized in Japanese writing lesson, the whole content of comics may describe writing steps so that students can write better stories.

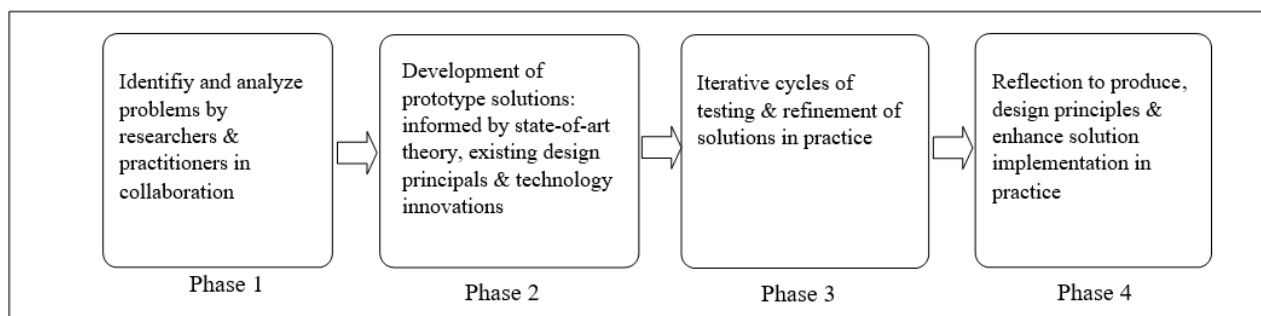


Figure 1 Four phases of DBR.

Comic development phases and analysis result from the testing on students are elaborated in this research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Learning Media

Language learning requires creativity from teachers to execute effective learning activities (Richards & Cotterall, 2016). Creativity in developing teaching material and media can improve learning motivation (Kohnke, 2018), the use of visual creative media such as icon, illustration, and comics may support the delivery of learning material in language studies. Zagkotas (2018) explained in their research that visualization such as images can ease the process of material delivery, while at the same time make the learning process more interesting. The use of images as teaching media can be developed into a more interesting teaching material such as comics.

2.2. Comics

Comics are visual media in the form of combination of words and illustration structured in an order according to the story plot to attract readers' interest (Fenwick, 1977). The wide spread of comic enthusiasts from children, teenagers, to adults, has made comics recognized as effective media for information delivery because it is attractively packaged and can ease the delivery, understanding, and storage of information (Farinella, 2018). It is not surprising that many practitioners, teachers, and researchers in education field utilize comics as teaching media or material in a lesson (Vassilikopoulou, Retalis, Nezi, & Boloudakis, 2011).

2.3. Comics in Language Teaching

Together with the increased utilization of comics in teaching, its use in language teaching has also increased. Comics are easy to use as learning media, they are culturally relevant, and can be customized according to any topic from textbooks and other learning activities (Liu, 2004). Csabay (2006) argued that comics are an original and valid media to use in language teaching and

learning. Not only to teach reading, comics can also be used to teach the other three language skills, including writing.

There are a lot of research on comics as language learning material or media (Wallner, 2019). Research findings have shown that comics are an effective media to improve language skills such as composition and creative writing, as well as to improve critical thinking in reading and writing lesson (Issa, 2017; Krusemark, 2017; Vassilikopoulou, Retalis, Nezi, & Boloudakis, 2011). In this research concerning Japanese language study at higher education level, comics were used for linguistics and *Sakubun* (Japanese writing). Through Japanese humor comics, linguistics phenomenon contained in the comics are made as material to teach language structures (Saifudin, 2017). Meanwhile, findings from an experimental study on *sakubun*, students have indicated writing skill improvement by using comics as media (Nursyaban, 2013). Other relevant research has used existing comics or published comics. Taking comics from different sources with different illustration style has made the quality of the produced teaching media to be not uniformed. There are also potential copyright issues to be considered. Thus, the current research opted to use self-developed comics for Japanese writing lesson. Uniformed illustration style of the developed comics leads to a more consistent teaching media quality. Adjustment to teaching material will also be more accurate because the comics were created based on specific teaching material content.

3. METHOD

This research used Reeves DBR (Design Based Research) model. Wang and Hannafin (in Bergroth & Seppala, 2012) defines DBR as a systematic but flexible methodology aimed at improving education practices through iterative analysis, design, development, and implementation. DBR comprises four phases, as illustrated by Reeves (2006) in Plomp (2010) through the diagram as shown in Figure 1. Specifically, the implementation of DBR phases adopted in this research is presented in the diagram as shown in Figure 2 (Herrington, McKenney, Reeves & Oliver, 2007 in Stemberger, 2016).

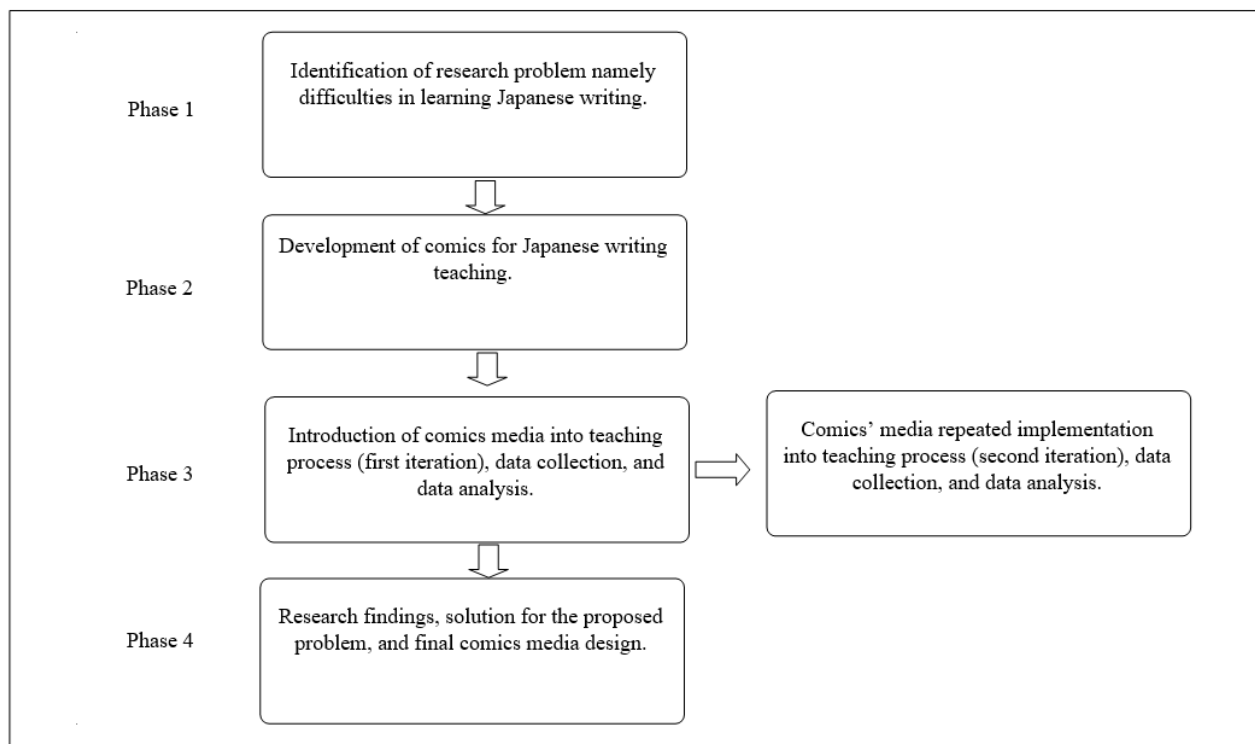


Figure 2 The implementation of DBR phases adopted in this research.

In Phase 1, problem identification was conducted through interviews using Google form to 20 second-semester students at a Japanese Language Education Department who undertake *Shokyu Sakubun 1* subject. Each interview comprised of three questions concerning student's opinion on *Shokyu Sakubun 1* subject, difficulties they encounter in the learning process, and teaching media or material that they think are required for the lesson.

Subsequently, in Phase 2, comics illustration style and theme adaption according to *Shokyu Sakubun 1* subject learning material were determined by gathering references from a number of comics and textbooks. Comics' development was also conducted in this phase. Comics were digitally drawn using Adobe Photoshop C6 software. The drawings were then saved in JPEG format and structured according to the teaching material theme. Then, validation from material and media experts was performed to identify possible weaknesses of the comics or necessary improvement before they are used for testing process.

Table 1. Score categories

Score	Description
3.4-4.0	Very High
2.6-3.3	High
1.9-2.5	Moderate
1-1.8	Low

In Phase 3, comics were tested in a limited scale experiment to 20 students by adopting two themes that are usually taught in class. Students were also provided with questionnaires to obtain their responses concerning the comics. The second testing were done after comics were revised based on students' input from the first testing. The questionnaire used in the first testing was modified from the ones used in Huda, Hikmah, and Rima (2017) and Mamolo (2019)'s researches to evaluate language and writing appearance aspect, image appearance aspect, and material aspect in the comics. Students were asked to provide their opinion on each item in the questionnaire by selecting an appropriate number among 1 to 4 scale. Score categories presented in Table 1 would be used as references in analysing questionnaire data in order to determine whether the comics are feasible to be used to overcome difficulties identified in the problem identification phase.

In Phase 4, the comics' final design process was conducted based on the result of analysis in Phase 3. The testing result would show parts of the comics that require improvement and revision. After the comics were revised, from lesson 1 to lesson 7, the final phase of comics' media development was complete.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Findings

Identifying Difficulties in Japanese Writing Lesson

Problem identification was conducted through interviews with students to discuss the types of teaching media or material required in Japanese writing lesson. Interviews were conducted to 20 second-semester students of Japanese Language Education Department by using Google form. Content of the interviews is related to students' opinion regarding *Shokyu Sakubun 1* subject and teaching media that they perceive as ideal to assist them in improving their Japanese writing skill. Based on the interview results, it is known that students perceive *Shokyu Sakubun 1* subject as an interesting yet challenging subject with a moderately high difficulty level. It is because of existing difficulties in finding ideas, selecting vocabularies, using sentence's structures, describing non-text images, and combining sentences into a good writing. Interviews result also showed that all students expect the teaching media to be visual based using images, text images, and comics.

Based on interviews result, this research would then develop a teaching media that comprises a combination of texts and images in the form of comics, which was expected to overcome difficulties in *Shokyu Sakubun 1* mentioned by students during the interviews. Comics as a narrative and visual art can be used as a tool to understand certain themes. When images and text support each other, information obtained through comics can be processed and stored in the memory for a longer period (Zagkotas, 2018; Delgado-Algara, 2017). Advantages of comics as media to deliver information have made many practitioners, teachers, and researchers in the education field to utilize comics as teaching media or material during lessons (Vassilikopoulou, Retalis, Nezi, & Boloudakis, 2011). Based on research findings from Issa (2017), Krusemark (2017), and Vassilikopoulou, Retalis, Nezi, and Boloudakis (2011), comics are proven to be an effective media in improving language skill, including in reading and writing lessons.

Development of Comics Media to Teach Japanese Writing

The first step to do before creating illustration for comics was to fit the theme and material according to the writing lesson. The Table 2 presents the list of comic titles that were already adjusted to the lesson 1 to 7 of *Shokyu Sakubun 1*.

Table 2. Comic title adjustment to textbook material theme

No	Textbook Material Themes	Comic Theme/Title
1	<i>Ichinichi no Seikatsu</i> (Daily Activities)	<i>Watashi no Ichinichi</i>
2	<i>Ichiban Suki na Koto</i> (Hobby and Interest)	<i>Eiga</i>
3	<i>Chiisai Toki no Omoide</i> (Childhood Memories)	<i>Kodomo no Toki no Omoide</i>
4	<i>~ga Attara,~</i> (If I Have~)	<i>100 Oku Rupia ga Attara</i>
5	<i>Watashi no Yume</i> (Dreams and Ideals)	<i>Shourai</i>
6	<i>Ryokou</i> (Trip)	<i>Bali</i>
7	<i>Dokuritsu Kinenbi</i> (Independence Day)	<i>Dokuritsu Kinenbi</i>

After determining comic themes based on lesson materials, comics illustration style was determined by gathering references from Japanese and Indonesian comics as well as comics available in Japanese language study reference books. Comics and books used as references are presented in Figure 3.

After reviewing illustration style of all gathered references, it was decided to use the common style found in most Japanese comics with simplification on eye and hair illustrations. Examples of the illustration style used in this research are presented in Figure 4. For comics' story telling style, this research used a "4-panel comics" type namely comics which only use 4 panels to deliver the whole story plot. The "4-panel comics" was chosen because it would provide convenience for students to understand the order of story content, thus students could write a good writing based on those order.



Figure 3 Comics and books for comics' illustration style reference.



Figure 4 Illustration style for comics.

Comics' development process started after the illustration style was determined. At the initial stage, comics were drawn as manual rough sketch by using paper and pencil. Rough sketch drawing as shown in Figure 5 was still unseparated and had yet to be presented in the format of 4 panel comics. The rough sketch on paper was scanned using a scanner and saved in JPEG format. The scanning process was conducted so that clean sketches can be drawn using a computer software. Clean sketch drawing and inking (uncoloured comics) process using Paint tool SAI software are presented in Figure 6.



Figure 5 Illustration rough sketch



Figure 6 Clean sketch drawing and inking process using Paint tool SAI.

Meanwhile, Adobe Photoshop software was used for colouring and adding dialogues, as well as formatting into 4-panel comics. Figure 7 shows the fully coloured comics illustration with dialogue balloons, and Figure 8 shows illustration in 4-panel comic format.



Figure 7 Fully coloured illustration.



Figure 8 4-panel comics.



Figure 9 Comics in MS Word.

Seven copies of the completed comics were then structured using MS Word by adding explanation regarding themes for each comic. The final structured comics are presented in Figure 9. The list of new vocabularies was also added to the MS Word file to enrich students' vocabulary.

Prior to testing, the completed comics were validated first by material and media experts. Validation was conducted through Google form completion. Based on validation result, the comics would be ready to use for testing after several revisions according to inputs from the experts. The material expert perceived the comics to be aligned with *Shokyu Sakubun 1*'s textbook material, but revisions were necessary because

dialogue's font size was too small, and the Kanjis used in the comics were too advanced for second-semester students. Meanwhile, according to the media expert, the comics were visually attractive but composition balance between comics and dialogue balloons should be rearranged to make it less stacked onto one another.

Introduction and Implementation of Comics Media in Teaching Japanese Writing

After revising comics based on validation result from material and media experts, comics were tested on a limited scale to 20 second-semester students of Japanese Language Education Department by using two themes that are usually delivered in class, namely Lesson 4 and Lesson 7. Testing were to be conducted in two stages. At the first testing, students were previously provided with Google form questionnaires to obtain their responses concerning the comics used as teaching material. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions that were distinguished into 3 aspects, namely language and writing appearance, image appearance, and material aspects. Students were asked to provide their opinions on each item in the questionnaire by selecting appropriate number among 1 to 4 scale with description for each number namely 1=Does not agree, 2=Not quite agree, 3=Agree, 4=Very much agree.

The analysis result of questionnaire data from the first trial has shown scores of 70.8 with mean of 3.5 for language and writing appearance aspect, 74 with mean of 3.7 for image appearance aspect, and 74.8 with mean of 3.7 for material aspect. For language and writing appearance aspect, the congruence between the comics' title and story content obtained the best response, while font size for dialogue balloons received a poor response. For image appearance aspect, illustration style and character design, comics' story, as well as image and dialogue coherence obtained the best response, while image and text size received a poor response. For material aspect, many favourable responses were received concerning the statement that this particular learning media can improve imagination in writing a story. Meanwhile, vocabulary suitability in the comics with the learning material theme obtained a poor response.

Result from the first testing shows that all aspects obtained good responses and categorized as "very high", thus comics can be used as teaching media to improve Japanese writing skill. However, language and writing appearance aspect obtained lower mean score compared to the other two aspects. It is because there are several items which obtained less favourable responses namely concerning font size in the dialogue balloons, comics' colour combination, and balance of image and text's sizes. Based on the three items, the comics underwent another revision process.



Figure 11 Comics' initial design.

After revision, the comics were re-tested to students. Final design for the comics is based on the second testing result.

The second testing obtained similar result as the first testing. The analysis result of questionnaire data from the second trial has shown scores of 71.3 with mean of 3.6 for language and writing appearance aspect, 74 with mean of 3.7 for image appearance aspect, and 74.5 with mean of 3.7 for material aspect. For language and writing appearance aspect, similar to the first trial, the congruence between the comics' title and story content still obtained the best response, while font size for the dialogue balloons received a poor response. For image appearance aspect, illustration style and character design, comics' story, as well as image and dialogue coherence obtained the best response, while image and text size received a poor response. Similar to the first trial, there were many favourable responses for material aspect related to the statement that the learning media can improve imagination in writing a story. Meanwhile, vocabulary suitability in the comics with the learning material theme obtained a poor response. All aspects are categorized as "very high". Similar with the first testing result. Language and writing appearance aspect still obtained lowest mean score. At the second testing, an item about critics and advices from students was added.

Most critics and advices were related to comics' font size, vocabulary, and sentence pattern.

Comics Media Final Design

The final revision of the comics was aimed to improve the aspect with lowest score from the questionnaires, namely language and writing aspect. First correction step was to make font size used in the dialogue balloons bigger. Next, vocabularies used in the comics were also replaced with vocabularies that are more suitable to the skill level of second-semester students. The last correction step was to adjust sentence structures in the dialogues. Sentence structures that must be used are structures that are delivered and taught in each chapter of *Shokyū Sakubun 1* textbook. The comparison of comics' initial design and final design is presented in Figure 11.

4.2. Discussion

This research developed comics to overcome several difficulties faced by students in Japanese writing lesson, such as finding ideas, selecting vocabularies, using sentence structures, and formulating sentences. After comics development process using DBR's 4 stages, the research result shows that, aligned with arguments and findings of previous researches, comics can be utilized

as a teaching media to improve Japanese writing skill because comics are categorized as “very good” based on analysis of the testing result. Findings from previous researches that were made as reference are Issa (2017), Krusemark (2017), Nursyaban (2013), and Vassilikopoulou, Retalis, Nezi, and Boloudakis (2011) which have found that comics can be used as an effective media to improve students’ skill in reading lessons. The mentioned research findings are aligned with the argument that comics as a media that combines words and images can provide convenience in the delivery and receiving of information in language studies (Fenwick, 1977; Farinella, 2018).

Comics’ final design that was developed by considering inputs from the analysis result can be utilized as a supplementary teaching media or teaching material to the textbooks used in a lesson. Based on data analysis of the testing which shows that comics are feasible to use as media to improve Japanese writing skill, comics can also be tested in other Japanese language lessons such as reading and speaking.

5. CONCLUSION

Comics that were developed using DBR’s 4 stages in this research have been proven to be feasible to use to improve Japanese writing skill. Result of analysis on the data from two tests has shown that comics are categorized as “very good”. However, due to the limited scale of the test namely only to second-semester students of a university, this research findings only indicate that comics can improve basic Japanese writing skill. Further research and testing are necessary concerning the use of comics in medium and advanced Japanese writing lesson. Besides for Japanese writing lesson, the development of comics as teaching media can also be conducted to improve other language skills such as reading and speaking.

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