

琉球大学学術リポジトリ

The educational benefits of integrating comics into English language learning

メタデータ	言語: 出版者: 琉球大学法文学部 公開日: 2012-06-28 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Fewell, Norman メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.24564/0002007185

The educational benefits of integrating comics into English language learning

Norman Fewell

Introduction

During the past decade, the growing popularity of comics in the United States has encouraged numerous educators to utilize this reading medium in the classroom. Observations of student reading habits have revealed that significant discrepancies existed between in-class and out-of-class reading materials. One notable difference was the lack of comics in academia, despite their overwhelming popularity among students. As scholars have continued to document and substantiate the potential educational benefits of this reading medium, a redefined role would soon emerge. Textbook publishers would soon follow suit after recognizing these trends in the educational establishment and adapt the comic format for traditional texts to create books designed to be more appealing to students. Increasingly utilized in a wide variety of school subjects, comics have evolved to become a well-established component of the classroom. If similar patterns of success can be duplicated from those found in the United States, the educational benefits would have an enormous impact worldwide. The use of these reading materials in education continues to remain limited outside of the United States. Additionally, the potential benefits of comics for English language learners seem to have gone largely unnoticed. This article examines the results and rationale of integrating comics in education in the United States and the advantages

they may offer language learners throughout the world.

Resistance and Acceptance

The integration of comics into education has, to say the least, been well received by some and strongly resisted by others. The reasons for hesitation to recognize the educational value of comics may lie within a number of 'myths' that have labeled them in a negative tone. In the United States, comics have traditionally been considered substandard to other forms of literature (Varnum & Bibbons, 2001). However, comics should not necessarily be acknowledged as a genre in itself; rather, they should be perceived as a medium with content no less diversified than that found in other forms of literature (Wolk, 2007). It is important to recognize these reading materials as simply a format of written expression independent of association from any singular form of subject matter. Unfortunately, the negative stereotypes associated with comics continue to persist. In many educational institutions, a noticeable gap still exists between the reading preferences of students and the reading materials that are available to them. Awareness of reading preferences is critical for educators to acquire and sustain student interest in reading. The availability of comics in some schools and libraries in the United States, for instance, continues to be limited (Krashen, 2004; Nippold, Buthie, & Larsen, 2005). This exemplifies the fact that resistance to the idea of integrating comics in education is still present. In one study, middle school students have ranked their classrooms as one of the least likely places to find desirable reading materials (Norton, 2003). Forcing students to read books that are uninteresting to them will only have negative consequences (Krashen, 2005; Worthy, Morman, & Turner, 1999). Expanding the use of comics may likely meet opposition, but it is critical

that the educational value be recognized by these 'gatekeepers' in order to improve language learning opportunities.

Visual Literacy

Literacy can no longer be defined from merely a singular perspective. It necessitates a multidimensional analysis of words, art, culture, and other texts to be read and interpreted for meaning (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Students must now confront multiple formats of images and texts blended together to convey meaning in an increasingly digital dependent society (Lapp, Flood, & Fisher, 1999). Recent technological advancements have led to a society with increased dependence on multisensory utilization and there have been calls for educators to recognize these changes in communication and to adjust accordingly (Canagarajah, 2008). Comics have been identified as being beneficial for visual literacy, sharpening and deepening comprehension (Schwarz, 2006; Burmark, 2008). Researchers have found that students who have read comics were more proficient in reading and interpreting gestures, facial expressions, movement in space, typography, use of color, sequencing of panels, along with an array of other visual elements found in comics (Cary, 2004; Rudiger, 2006). Additionally, readers can benefit immensely from the accompanying visual images by improving their memory recall of material read (Burmark, 2002). Moreover, the availability of visual cues eliminates the need for readers to be singularly dependent on text to decode meaning. The process involved in reading comics has been described as requiring a need for developing a specific form of essential literacy skills to decipher meaning through understanding a sequence of events, interpreting the nonverbal gestures of characters, establishing the story's plot, and relating interferences (Lyga, 2006). The presence of multimodal

elements should entice language educators to incorporate comics into EFL pedagogy (Derrick, 2008). Recognition of the importance of the added visual components as a developmental skill in early literacy learning has led to demands for the inclusion of comics throughout school curriculums (Fenwick, 1998; Hughes, 1998). Combining several forms of visual literacy, the blend of textual and visual components may offer educators a viable and effective instrument for language instruction.

Content and Readability

One promising aspects of the comic lies with its ability to motivate reluctant learners to read. Comics have been surprisingly well-received among these learners and the ease in readability is particularly advantageous for early and second language learners. Comics present a manageable level of reading with less text per page allowing the completion of an entire story within a reasonable time frame (Cary, 2004). It should be noted that there remains a great deal of variability in terms of the quantity of text. There are obviously comics that offer the advantages of a manageable amount of text per page, but there are many that are extensive in terms of the amount of reading content. One study noted that graphic novels contain an average of 12,400 words with some receiving as high as a 20,000 word count (Miller, 2005). However, comics generally contain much less content than graphic novels, averaging approximately 2,000 words per book. Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that reading only one comic per week will result in reading 100,000 words a year (Krashen, 2004).

The advantages of a reduced amount of text alongside 'attention-grabbing' graphics can assist ESL students in reading comprehension and motivate them to read more (McTaggart, 2008). Readers can easily follow

the visual format. The permanent visual presence of characters interacting with each other, alongside numerous simultaneous paralinguistic cues, can assist the reader in the comprehension of dialogue (Williams, 1995). The established visual presence of panels is advantageous for language learners who may decipher meaning without the constraints found in other time-bound visual media forms. Numerous aspects of situational dialogue, often requiring complex written descriptions, can be easily substituted through visual representations. In addition to the aforementioned 'visual literacy' needs, the accompanying illustrations may also act as a visual guide for assisting learners in comprehending meaning. This is a particularly convenient tool for language learners who frequently pause to consult dictionaries in search for the meaning of unknown words or phrases. Reading comics could assist these learners in eliminating dictionary dependency, a step closer towards reading fluency. The ease in the readability of comics can also lead to an increase in confidence for struggling readers. In studies that have investigated extensive reading schemes that included reading comics, students developed increased confidence and reading skills when they were allowed to choose their own reading materials (Krashen, 2005; Worthy, Morman, & Turner, 1999). Moreover, allowing students the option of selecting reading materials relevant to their personal interests has resulted in enhanced motivation and positive attitudes towards reading (Krashen, 2004; Nippold, Duthie, & Larsen, 2005; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). The increase in confidence and motivation to read often leads to aspirations to challenge even more complex texts.

The language found in comics may be equally encouraging for second language learners. The abundance of conversational dialogue offers students numerous examples of the natural form of spoken English. Comic book writers tend to create realistic dialogues filled with many of

the features found in natural spoken communication. These may contain aspects of language that are often excluded from language learning textbooks, including "...ellipsis, blends, non words, vague lexis, confirmation checks, contrastive stress, new topic signals, nonverbal language, mitigators, routine/ritual phrases...." (Cary, 2004, p.33). Displaying many authentic conversational features, comic books may contain some of the closest written representations of the spoken form. The access to authentic conversational language in comics offers a structured and simplified format that may be conveniently integrated into language teaching. In an attempt to provide students with a number of sample conversational elements as a means to raise awareness of pragmatics, comics were utilized in a university course introducing applied linguistics theory because of their authenticity, visual qualities, cultural content, consistency of register and limited lexical phrases (Williams, 1995). Additionally, they have been cited as a source of reference for understanding aspects of humor (Cary, 2004). A large proportion of comics published in the commercial markets are humor oriented and educators may focus on this aspect of the target language to enhance cultural knowledge. They often present an authentic form of language by providing realistic examples of colloquialism, slang and humor. Filled with dialogues that are commonly used in daily life, the culturally rich elements within comics provide teachers with an abundant source of educationally appropriate content for language learning.

Popularity of Comics

The comic book industry in Japan is the largest in the world, consisting of an estimated 1.5 to 2 billion publications sold yearly (Lent, 2006). The Japan External Trade Organization estimates that comic

purchases consist of 37% of all published material sold in Japan (JETRO, 2006). One estimate has calculated that between 90 to 95 percent of all literate Japanese read comics (Cary, 2004). The unique status of comics in Japan is incomparable to that of any other country. They are popular among all Japanese regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic class or educational background. The educational role of comics in the United States, for example, is more often described as being limited in part because of age and gender considerations (Hall & Coates, 1997; Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999). These sociological barriers would have significantly less impact in Japan. Despite the popularity and widespread availability of comics in the commercial markets, they have continued to be disregarded in many educational establishments. Libraries offer only limited collections, in comparison to the amount that is available in bookstores. In addition, some elementary school textbook publishers have integrated comic strips within textbooks, but only in a limited capacity. A number of educational establishments may be proceeding too cautiously for any significant progress to occur. Nevertheless, the potential educational benefits of reading comics have influenced many noted scholars. Serving as a source of inspiration, motivation and learning, the influence of comics are finally beginning to be recognized as supportive statements emerge:

But one of the things that my father did was to let me read comics....I devoured all kinds of comics -- fed my love for English and my love for reading but I suppose if he had been firm I might not have developed this deep love for reading and for English.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu
Nobel Peace Prize laureate
(Academy of Achievement, 2004)

Coincidentally, another Nobel Peace Prize recipient, U.S. President Barack Obama was a noted reader and avid collector of comics (Edler, 2009). The sphere of influence of this reading medium is a worldwide phenomenon that seems to have grasped not only the interest of elementary school aged children, but a growing readership extending to all age groups. In the United States, comics have gained recognition as a legitimate form of literature following the publication of Art Spiegelman's 1986 Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel, *Maus*. Although some educators still remain pessimistic about using comics in the classroom, many have embraced them after recognizing the immense popularity among students. Studies investigating library book circulation levels have reported increases of 25% to 30% on all publications following the addition of comics to their collection (Dorrell & Carroll, 1981; Miller, 2005). In one study, comics consisted of only 1% of all reading materials in a library, but accounted for over 30% of circulation (Heckman, 2004). Another study recorded a junior high school library had an 82% increase in traffic after adding comics (Dorrell & Carroll, 1981). These statistics provide insight into student reading preferences and the overwhelming popularity of comics. In order to improve the quality of language learning and pedagogical outcomes, teachers and textbook publishers need to create and utilize materials more in accordance with the preferences of learners (Kryszewska, 2008). An awareness of student reading preferences is critical for educators to develop and implement a reading program that can acquire and maintain interest levels.

Extending Extensive Reading

The use of comics in education has often received criticism due to its image as a form of leisure reading. Although this may have generated

negativity in the past, persuading students to enjoy autonomous reading has been a major objective in the pursuit to develop reading literacy. Innovations in language teaching are continually being sought by practitioners in an attempt to improve the learning experience and motivation of students. Extensive reading has repeatedly demonstrated enormous benefits for both L1 and L2 learners (Coady, 1997; Day & Bamford, 2005; Krashen, 2004; Yu-Li, 1999; etc.). Based on a framework of autonomous language learning, extensive reading eliminates a number of restrictive barriers. Students are given the freedom to choose their own reading materials with minimal accountability. Successful implementation of an extensive reading program requires sustaining a collection of insightful and appealing books for students that can cultivate their interests and lead to developing their language skills. The selection of available reading materials may seem to have only a minor role in comparison to the entire equation, but it may be one of the most crucial elements of any extensive reading program. Among an array of reading materials increasingly utilized in extensive reading programs across public schools in the United States, comics have recently gained recognition as a potentially significant literary form with a unique combination of art and literature (Edmunds, 2006). Comics have been specifically mentioned by advocates promoting the use of extensive reading programs as a possible step from light reading to heavy reading (Krashen, 2004, 2005). In one study, researchers examining the reading habits of middle school boys found that those who read comics tended to read more often, enjoyed reading more and this led to reading other forms of literature (Ujiiie & Krashen, 1996). Recognition of individual student interests is critical in promoting motivational reading levels and improving attitudes towards reading (Krashen, 2004; Nippold, Duthie & Larsen, 2005; Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999). The popularity of comics as a source of

reading enjoyment outside of the classroom should establish the necessity for its inclusion within.

Conclusion

After a decade of integration, comics have become an established part of K-12 education in the United States. As literacy may no longer be defined from merely a singular perspective in technologically advanced societies, educators must seek innovative materials that appeal to the needs of students. The visual element in comics can be equally beneficial for second language learners. Comics offer numerous visual cues that can eliminate singular dependence on text. The availability of multimodal elements can heighten awareness and clarify meaning for language learners. The numerous barriers that have delayed the integration of comics in education in the United States are not necessarily pertinent in the case of Japan. Educators that have introduced comics into the classroom remain convinced of their importance from the increase of interest in reading and the development of literacy skills among students. The successful utilization of comics as a means of promoting literacy development for students in the United States should encourage educators throughout the world to seriously consider the potential benefits for all language learners.

References

- Academy of Achievement. (2004). *Archbishop Desmond Tutu: Forging Equality in South Africa*. <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/tut0int-1> (accessed November 18, 2009).
- Alexio, P., & Norris, C. (2007). Comics, reading and primary aged children. *Education and Health*, 25 (4):70-73.
- Burmark, L. (2008). Visual literacy: What you get is what you see. In N. Frey & D. Fisher (Eds.), *Teaching visual literacy: using comic books, graphic novels, anime, cartoons, and more to develop comprehension and thinking skills* (pp. 5-26). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

- Cary, S. (2004). *Going graphic: Comics at work in the multilingual classroom*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Coady, J. (1997). L2 vocabulary acquisition through extensive reading. In J. Coady & T. Huckin (Eds.), *Second language vocabulary acquisition*, (pp. 225-237). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coady, J., & Huckin, T. (Eds.). (1997). *Second language vocabulary acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (2005). *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Derrick, J. (2009). Using comics with ESL/EFL students. *The Internet TESL Journal* 14(7), July. <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Derrick-UsingComics.html> (accessed December 1, 2009).
- Dorrell, L. D., & Carroll, E. (1981). Spider-man in the library. *Library Journal* 27.
- Edler, R. K. (2009). Spidey swings into Obama's world. *Chicago Tribune: A Tribune Web site*, 8 January. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/chicobama-spider-man-090108-story,0,2231909.story> (accessed November 8, 2009).
- Edmunds, T. (2006). Why should kids read comics? *Comics in the Classroom.net*. http://comicsintheclassroom.net/ooedmunds2006_08_24.htm (accessed November 12, 2009).
- Evans, J. (Ed.). (1998). *What's in the picture? Responding to illustrations in picture books*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Fenwick, G. (1998). The Beano-Dandy phenomenon. In J. Evans (Ed.), *What's in the picture? Responding to illustrations in picture books* (pp. 132-145). London: Paul Chapman.
- Frey, N., & Fisher, D. (Eds.). (2008). *Teaching visual literacy: using comic books, graphic novels, anime, cartoons, and more to develop comprehension and thinking skills*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Hall, C., & Coles, M. (1997). Taking Comics Seriously: Children's Periodical Reading in England in the 1990s. *Reading*. 31 (3): 50-54.
- Heckman, W. (2004). Reading heroes for a new generation. *Florida Media Quarterly*. 29(3): 3-4. http://issuu.com/cmckilli/docs/fmqspring2004?mode=a_p (accessed November 5, 2009).
- Hughes, P. (1998). Exploring visual literacy across the curriculum. In J. Evans (Ed.), *What's in the picture? Responding to illustrations in picture books* (pp. 115-131). London: Paul Chapman.
- JETRO (2006). Japan Publishing Industry. *Japan Economic Report, October-November 2006*. http://www.jetro.go.jp/en/reports/market/pdf/2006_25_r.pdf (accessed December 8, 2009).
- Krashen, S. D. (2005). Free Voluntary reading: New Research, Applications, and Controversies. In G. Poedjosoedarmo (Ed.), *Innovative Approaches to Reading & Writing Instruction* (pp. 1 - 9). Republic of Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Krashen, S. D. (2004). *The power of reading: insights from the research*. Englewood: Libraries Unlimited.
- Krashen, S. D. (2005). The 'decline' of reading in America, poverty and access to books, and the use of comics in encouraging reading. *Teachers College Record*. http://www.sdkrashen.com/articles/decline_of_reading/index.html (accessed November 21, 2009).

- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2003). *New literacies: changing knowledge and classroom learning*. Open University Press, Buckingham, UK.
- Lapp, D., Flood, J. D. (1999). Intermediality: How the use of multiple media enhances learning. *The Reading Teacher* 52(7): 776-780.
- Lent, J. A. (2006). The Transformation of Asian comic Books - 1990s - 2006. *Dartmouth Summer Arts Festival*, July 21, 2006. Hanover: Dartmouth University.
- Lyga, A. A. W. (2006). *Graphic novels for (really) young readers*. <http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6312463.html> (accessed October 18, 2009).
- McTaggart, J. M. (2008). Graphic Novels: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. In N. Frey & D. Fisher (Eds.), *Teaching visual literacy: using comic books, graphic novels, anime, cartoons, and more to develop comprehension and thinking skills* (pp. 27-46). Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Mee, C. Y., & Moi, N. S. (Eds.). (1999). *Language instructional issues in Asian classrooms*. Newark: International Reading Association.
- Miller, S. (2005). *Developing and Promoting Graphic Novel Collections*. New York: eal-Schuman Publishers.
- Nippold, M. A., Duthie, J. K., & Larsen, J. (2005). Literacy as a leisure activity: free-time preferences of older children and young adolescents. *Language, speech, and hearing services in schools*, 36 (2), 93-102.
- Norton, B. (2003). The power of comic books: Insights from Archie comic readers. *The Reading Teacher*. 57(2), 140-147.
- Poedjosoedarmo, G. (Ed.). (2005). *Innovative Approaches to Reading & Writing Instruction*. Republic of Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, Anthology Series 46.
- Rudiger, H. M. (2006). Reading lessons: Graphic Novels 101. *The Horn Book Magazine*, VOL 82-(2), pages 126-136. April/May.
- Schwarz, G. E. (2006). Expanding literacies through graphic novels. *English Journal*, 95(6), 58-64.
- Ujiie, J., & Krashen, S. D. (1996). Comic book reading, reading enjoyment, and pleasure reading among middle class and Chapter I middle school students. *Reading Improvement*, 33(1), 51-54.
- Varnum, R., & Gibbons, C. T. (Eds.). (2001). *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*. Jackson: University Press Mississippi.
- Williams, D. (1995). *The Comic Book as Course Book: Why and How*. Long Beach: Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (Report No. ED390277).
- Wolk, D. (2007). *Reading comics: how graphic novels work and what they mean*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Worthy, J., Moorman, M., & Turner, M. (1999). What Johnny likes to read is hard to find in school. *Reading Research Quarterly* 34(10): 12-27.
- Yu-Li, W. S. V. (1999). Promoting second language development and reading habits through an extensive reading scheme. In C. Y. Mee & N. S. Moi (Eds.), *Language instructional issues in Asian classrooms* (pp. 59-74). Newark: International Reading Association.

Abstract

The educational benefits of integrating comics into English language learning

Norman Fewell

Despite being a popular form of reading worldwide, comics have been one of the most underutilized reading mediums in education. Recently recognized as exhibiting enormous potential for promoting and developing literacy in K-12 education in the United States the use of graphic novels, an expanded form of comics, have become immensely popular in the classroom. Educational application of comics worldwide remains surprisingly limited, if not absent from English language teaching. As literacy may no longer be defined from merely a singular perspective in technologically advanced societies, educators must seek innovative materials that appeal to the needs of students. Comics offer numerous visual cues that can eliminate singular dependence on text. The availability of these multimodal elements can heighten awareness and clarify meaning for language learners. This article examines the results and rationale of integrating comics in education in the United States and the advantages they may offer language learners throughout the world.