ORIGINAL PAPER

Comics as Effective Teaching Tools in the English Language Classroom

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Abstract:
Based on the combination of two code systems, the linguistic and the imagery, comics have served various cultural and political purposes, thus acquiring the range and depth to be regarded as something more than just a form of popular literature for children. During the communist regime in Romania, for instance, comics were used as an instrument of ideological propaganda, aiming at rewriting the national history and familiarising the young with the "great" achievements of socialism. Since comics are culturally contextualised, they represent a valuable tool in the process of teaching/learning a foreign language. The aim of this article is to present the pedagogical potential of this genre, and thus to argue for its inclusion in the school curriculum. The theoretical investigation is backed by a set of activities for students, meant to exemplify the possible uses of this type of literature in the English language classroom. The conclusion is that comics offer more than just text and visuals; they provide a rich and appealing source for the development of learners' language skills and intercultural competence.

Keywords: *comics, cultural diversity, language skills, reading, superheroes.*

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Introduction

Comic books were for long regarded as a form of "low" culture, unworthy of any serious reading, let alone research, or academic interest. Scott McCloud points out that the authors of comics, although obviously gifted artists, shared the infamous status of their work: "For much of this [the 20th] century, the word *comics*, has had such negative connotations, that many of comics' most devoted practitioners have preferred to be known as *illustrators, commercial artists,* or, at best, cartoonists." (McCloud, 1993: 18) It took time for this type of art to be considered a form of literature which is worth reading and studying. One of the reasons behind this change of status is the special attention that postmodernism has given to popular culture, to all the artistic expressions that had formerly been rejected as non-art. The value of comics has gradually been acknowledged, and thus, they are no longer seen as "those bright, colourful magazines filled with bad art, stupid stories and guys in tights" (McCloud,1993: 2), but rather as an art with hidden powers.

One of these powers consists of creating superheroes. Our collective imagination has been enriched by popular characters such as Superman, which emerged in 1938, at a time when America was struggling with the depression caused by the Wall Street crash, and Europe was witnessing the assent of the ambitious Chancellor Adolf Hitler (Morrison, 2011: 4). The fruit of the imagination of two adolescents, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman emerged as an imaginative response to a dehumanised, industrialised world. In his research on the creation of this first superhero, Morrison points out that, unlike the heroic archetypes of Hercules, Agamemnon or Perseus, who were "full-time" heroes, Superman was the brave, strong, determined side of the shy, bespectacled newspaperman Clark Kent, often denied respect and largely misunderstood. Many people can therefore identify with him – "there is something of Clark in all of us" (Morrison, 2011: 9) – and, at the same time, feel the inner energy of a Superman, hence the public appeal of the superhero.

The hidden power of comic books was used by the communist regime in Romania as an instrument of ideological propaganda (Spătaru-Pralea, 2019: 20). The comics in popular magazines, such as *Cutezătorii* (1967-1989), *Arici Pogonici* (1957-1977) or *Şoimii Patriei* (1980-1989), intended to familiarise the children with the "great" achievements of socialism, and to rewrite the history of the Romanians as to suit the principles of the communist ideology of the time. It was mainly children's literature, a fact which comes to confirm the instructive/pedagogical potential of comics. Since 1989, the publication of comic books has flourished in Romania; yet, it has remained a genre mostly dedicated to, and enjoyed by children and teenagers.

Starting from the fact that youngsters like reading comics, it has been argued that this resource can successfully be used in the English classroom in order to enhance language learning (Graham, 2011:92; Clydesdale, 2006: 2). The article seeks to bring arguments in favour of including multimodal texts in the process of teaching, analysing the specific discourse of these texts, and presenting the linguistic, pragmatic and cultural advantages of this type of material in the English classroom.

The language of comics

According to the majority of critics and theoreticians of the genre, comics rely on the interaction of image and text, thus representing a hybrid art whose very heterogeneous nature defies clear cut definitions or classifications. They are broadly perceived as a story told via a sequence of images; hence, its definition as *sequential art*,

proposed by Will Eisner, the father of the graphic novel (Eisner, 1985: 7). Scott McCloud admits that "in most cases, this is the only definition we're likely to need" (McCloud, 1993: 9); yet, he expands it, considering that this form of art requires a more detailed explanation: "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the reader" (McCloud, 1993: 9).

Discussing the possibilities of defining this genre, Stephen Cary explains that the term "comics" refers to several types of material: cartoons, comic strips, comic books, graphic novels, that use cartooning to tell the stories, but with a different format. They also vary in size, stretching from single panels in the case of cartoons, to full-length books (Cary, 2004: 10-11). In the late 1990s, comics have found their way on the Internet, and "webcomics", as they are known in the online medium, have gathered a whole community of creators, eager to self-publish their work (Smith, 2006: 4-5). In this article, we shall use the generic "comics" to refer to them all, focusing on the narrative as comprehensible input in the English language classroom.

In order to choose the most appropriate teaching material for classroom use, the teacher has to pay attention to the different elements of the comic strips, because they all play a major role in the unfolding of the story as they carry specific meaning that needs decoding for a thorough understanding of the text. Here are some of the main elements:

- **The panel**: the space, usually rectangular, that contains a single image. This graphic convention functions as a metaphoric window that the reader opens to the fictional space. It shows "a single moment in time" (McCloud, 1993: 94), and the sequence of panels sets the action on a temporal line that moves from left to right.
- **The gutter**: the space between panels, that works as a break, or as a gap in time. The reader can use his/her imagination in order to fill these gaps with what may have happened. The panels and the gutters are the readers' guide through time and space.
- **The caption**: a speech box, placed at the top or bottom of a panel, that provides information about the scene, the characters and so on. It is the author's narration that is used to set the scene of the action in the panel, and it must not be confused with the speech bubbles pertaining to the characters.
- **The speech balloons**: contain words spoken by the characters. Apart from indicating who is speaking and what he/she is saying, the versatile balloons codify messages in new ways, their shapes being used to convey paralinguistic information. Thus, a rounded or rectangular shape indicates a common utterance in a normal tone; a cloud-like bubble contains the thoughts of a character, while a star-shaped balloon shows the anger a character is feeling, or an "explosive" situation. McCloud points out that "variations in balloon shape are many and new ones are being invented every day" (McCloud, 1993:134), in the author's attempt to render sounds, motion, thoughts, feelings, emotions in visual images.

Figure 1: Comic balloons

- **The icons**: symbolic images, such as happy/sad faces, little stars, hearts etc., that are used to represent people, things, places, ideas. The iconic pictures speak for themselves; they carry an encoded, easily recognised meaning, that needs no explanation in words. It is an instance of what McCloud calls "amplification through simplification": "By stripping down an image to its essential *meaning*, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't." (McCloud, 1993: 30) It is perhaps this very simplified reality of comics that makes them so popular, yet, so deep.
- **The sound effects**: images and words that make the reader "hear" various sounds. An explosion, a thunderstorm, a falling object, or a fight can be rendered by drawings alone, but once accompanied by words such as *boom, bang, splash, ouch*, their sound effect is clearly enhanced. The interjections and onomatopoeic words are therefore widely used in comics, their sonority greatly contributing to the comprehension of the text.

The brief analysis of the constitutive elements of the comics shows not only how complex this art is, as a creative mixture of different codes, but also how useful it can be in any foreign language classroom, as a rich, authentic, appealing, versatile teaching material.

Why bring comics into the English language classroom?

We believe that, out of so many types of instructional materials, there are good reasons, stemming from the main principles of language acquisition, why teachers should take comics into consideration. Carry Stephen points out that: "Despite substantial research showing the benefits of learning comics, despite teachers' frequent calls for relevant, high-interest materials, […] getting teachers to use comics is still a tough sell." (Cary, 2004: 4) We shall therefore present the reasons for integrating comics into curricula, and how they can facilitate second language development.

The appeal of comics for English language learners

The strength of students' motivation influences their learning, being an important factor that determines "how seriously they approach the work, how much time they set aside for it, how hard they push themselves" (Scrivener, 63). In other words, the curriculum needs to attract and engage students. From this perspective, more and more scholars have acknowledged the importance of bringing popular culture into the classroom (Buckingham, 1998; Lewis, 1998; Alvermann, Moon & Hagood, 1999). As Norton and Vanderheyden point out, if teachers do not take into consideration "the social and cultural texts that are authorised by youth – which may simultaneously empower and disempower them – they run the risk of neglecting and silencing their students" (Norton & Vanderheyden, 2003: 204-205).

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Having been educated at a time when learning meant memorising words and grammar rules, overcorrecting and reading long literary texts, many teachers tend to disregard popular culture, and do not take comics seriously as a source of language input. Yet, a class is about the students, and for the students; therefore, (pre)adolescents should be engaged in a curriculum that is relevant to them, to their age and their interests. It goes without saying that various forms of popular culture will interest and attract them more than traditional texts. As Sylvester (1995) pointed out, attention leads to learning; that is, appealing content directly impacts motivation. Rememorizing the early stages of his school days, Stephen Cary confesses that: "Superman made me a reader. Dick and Jane tried their best, but they couldn't give me what The Man of Steel offered: a good reason to read. Like most American school kids […] I could decode and comprehend like a champ, but I had little to no interest in what teachers were asking me to read." (Cary, 2004: 1) It all resulted in the child hating reading and becoming "the classic nonreading reader" (Cary, 2004: 1). Nowadays, in the age of the Internet, when children are more hooked than ever before on social media content, YouTube shorts, video games and computer graphics, it has become a must to make room for their superheroes in the English language classroom, and to encourage them to bring in the knowledge that they have acquired outside the classroom (Norton & Vanderheyden, 2003: 204-205). Teachers should eventually admit that popular culture is the target language culture their students are interested in and, therefore, it must be incorporated into the curriculum.

Apart from attractive subjects, the appeal of comics for learners resides in the addition of visuals to a story. McCloud points out that: "When you look at a photo or a realistic drawing of a face – you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon – you see yourself […]. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it." (McCloud, 1993: 36) In Stephen Cary's confession, "I never once wanted to be any of the people I read about in school. But I would have changed places with Superman or Batman or Turok, Son of Stone, in an instance." (Cary, 2004: 2) Therefore, instead of feeling alienated from the characters while struggling to grasp the meaning of a text, comics offer learners the space to identify with the characters, since part of the story is conveyed by images. Visuals acquire several functions in reading: they help learners understand the text better by offering additional information; they enhance the coherence of the text; they make the information vivid and memorable; their aesthetics catch the eye and spark interest in the text.

Comprehensible input and the affective filter

Starting from the theoretical considerations in second language education that emphasise the prominence of the meaning over the form of a message, Stephen Krashen has developed a theory of language acquisition based on a series of hypotheses. Thus, in order to acquire a second language, learners need comprehensible input and an affective environment: "comprehensible input and the strength of the filter are the true causes of second language acquisition" (Krashen, 1982: 33).

The input hypothesis says that learners go first for meaning, and after that they acquire structure. The acquisition is done by understanding language which is "beyond our current level of competence", and this is possible with the help of "context and extra-linguistic information" (Krashen, 1982: 21). In this light, comics provide a valuable input because the visuals, as mentioned above, help the students decode the text, by providing "clues that shed light on the meaning of an unfamiliar word or

structure" (Krashen, 204: 123), and at the same time bring in much extra-linguistic information. Cary emphasises this idea, saying that: "In second language education, teachers and students know the truth of the old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. In fact, […] the right picture at the right time may be worth several times that many words." (Cary, 2004: 23). When a text is paired with images, there are high chances that students will understand the material better and faster, and they will remember it for a long time. As Irina Boncea points out: "Without understanding input appropriately, learning simply cannot get any improvement" (Boncea, 2021: 124).

Another aspect of the input that educators emphasise is its authenticity. Comics provide real world and authentic language of an informal register that is commonly used with friends and acquaintances. As a result, readers of all ages can enjoy the casual, every day talk, while, at the same time, being exposed to the richness of native speech.

The affective filter hypothesis proposed by Krashen brings forth the role of self-confidence and low anxiety levels in the process of second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982: 31). A relaxed learning environment, in which students feel confident to express themselves, is essential for the input to be efficiently acquired. The need to create a friendly atmosphere for language learning has been emphasised by numerous educators: "In order to take risks, you need a learning environment in which you do not feel threatened or intimidated. In order to speak, you need to feel you will be heard and that what you're saying is worth hearing. […] In order to succeed, you need an atmosphere in which anxiety levels are low and comfort levels are high." (Kristmanson, 2000: 1)

When reading comics, learners have the possibility to go back and forth in the text, and read at their own pace. As Kress explains, "The sequentiality and linearity of former textual structures is replaced by a web, which can be entered at any point of my choosing and explored with neither a pre-given point of entry nor a pre-given point of departure." (Kress, 1997: 161) This freedom to move through the text enhances the comprehensibility of the input, as students can re-read the parts they do not understand. It is much like browsing on the Internet, a skill that all students have. In this context, anxiety levels are much reduced, since students do not feel the stress of getting stuck or losing track of the information.

A study conducted by Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden on the topic of the appeal of Archie comics for English language learners revealed that eleven out of thirteen preadolescents "cited humour as central to the appeal of these texts, using the adjectives *fun, funny,* and *humorous*" to characterise the comics (Norton & Vanderheyden, 2003: 208). Humour in the classroom helps creating the affective environment discussed above by reducing stress, enhancing interaction, increasing students' joyful participation in activities, encouraging less confident students to speak, and ultimately, creating a warm, friendly relationship between students and teachers. Apart from its pedagogical value, humour is a valuable source of language input. The puns and twists often imply sophisticated vocabulary and an effort on the part of the reader to decode the message. As Meek argues, "a joke is often the best reading test" (Meek, 1988: 19); in other words, if students do not laugh, they most probably have not understood the joke.

The development of learners' skills

The use of comics in the English classroom helps the development of all language skills. We have discussed the advantages of reading comics in terms of

comprehensible and appealing input, but the benefits can stretch in time, in the sense that they create a conduit of reading, a taste for reading, and a desire to read more and more. Therefore, comics reading does not exclude book reading; on the contrary, it builds students' skills and nurture future readings of other types of literature.

Regarding the difficulty of comic books for English language learners, research has shown that, on average, there are 2000 words per issue, and the degree of difficulty can vary considerably (Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Krashen, 2004). Comics can serve to teach vocabulary (idiomatic speech, colloquial register) and grammar in context, while providing a form of reference for the observation of narrative structure (Ranker, 2007). Students can thus develop their print literacy, learning punctuation, sequencing, the role of different fonts and so on. As reading implies decoding the connection between visuals and text, learners make use of higher-level thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Moreover, the multiple forms of representation that accompany the text – drawings, speech balloons, captions, icons – make the reader assume two identities at the same time: "the identity of the teller and that of the told" (Norton & Vanderheyden, 2003: 211). The reading process becomes more complex, as the learner has to make two interpretations simultaneously - from the perspective of the narrator and that of the narrate -, and thus develop skills which are otherwise difficult to teach. All these aspects make comics suitable for instructional purposes for various ages and language abilities.

The multimodal text is an excellent source of input for creative outcome. It is well known that the shift from a linguistic perspective (Chomsky, 1965) to a communicative one (Hymes, 1972) in language teaching has shaped current teaching approaches which focus on developing learners' communicative competence. In terms of practice, Communicative Language Teaching stresses the necessity of introducing classroom activities that engage learners in communication (Richards & Rodgers, 1986: 76). Here are a few examples of activities that can be done in pairs or groups:

- **Fill in the blanks**: the teacher removes the words or sentences from one panel and asks the students to fill the gaps with the missing information.
- **Finish the story**: the last picture of a comic strip is removed and the students have to continue the story and come up with an ending. They may even make a drawing of this last frame.
- **Jigsaw**: a comic strip is cut into pieces which must be put in order. The teacher can ask the students to justify their ordering. Alternatively, the teacher removes the speech bubbles from a comic strip, cuts them, and asks the students to pair each bubble with the right picture. As a variation for more advanced students, each group gets a picture of a comic and has to describe it to the other groups, without showing it. Based on the descriptions, the students must agree on the sequence.
- **Role-play**: students are presented with a comic strip, without words. In groups, they have to make up the story and act it out in class.
- **Debates**: based on the action of a comic strip, the characters, the moral or cultural issues prevailing in the story, the teacher can involve students in group debates on various topics, depending on their age and language level.

The communicative activities can easily be extended into writing tasks. For instance, a possible assignment would be to write an essay on:" What kind of comic book character would I be?", or to create a narrative story based on graphic illustrations.

Students may also be encouraged to draw and write their own comics inspired, for example, by a childhood memory.

Intercultural competence

A language is the "mirror of a particular culture" (Wei, 2005: 56); therefore, being a good communicator in a foreign language means understanding the culture of that language. The language teaching profession has acknowledged the connection between language and culture, and has therefore advocated for the necessity of developing learners' intercultural competence which "involves developing with learners an understanding of their own language(s) and culture (s) in relation to an additional language and culture. It is a dialogue that allows for reaching a common ground for negotiating to take place, and where variable points of view are recognized, mediated, and accepted." (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003: 46) Nowadays, in the context of our globalised world in which communication makes borders irrelevant, and migration is an on-going phenomenon, focusing on the intercultural dimension should be the ultimate goal of language teaching.

Research has shown that comics facilitate not only second language acquisition, but also contact with the target-language culture (Norton & Vanderheyden, 2003: 209). Stephen Cary remembers that Spanish cartoons "made learning Spanish vocabulary and structures easier. I was also picking up colloquialisms and pop culture knowledge I could immediately put to use in my Mexican travels." (Cary, 2004: 3) In his analysis of the time/space construction in comics, McCloud reinforces the idea that these forms of art are a product of their culture. Western cartoons put forth "the goal-oriented" nature of that world, whereas Japanese productions reflect "a rich tradition of cyclical and labyrinthine works of art" (McCloud, 1993: 81). From this perspective, the rich cultural references encountered in English language comics give students the possibility to get in touch with Western values, compare them with their own system of values, and thus acknowledge and respect diversity. In this way, students will be well prepared for future interaction with people of different cultures.

Conclusion

Comics are fun: fun to read, fun to teach, and fun to learn from. The humorous connotation of "fun" should not let the genre fall into triviality; on the contrary, it should reinforce reluctant teachers to take popular culture into consideration, because the funny side of teaching materials is very appealing to learners and greatly contributes to enhancing their motivation. It creates the perfect learning environment for the acquisition of language skills that will serve the students long after the class has finished. It also provides a gateway to other cultures, promoting the empathy and tolerance that we all need in order to become true intercultural speakers.

Apart from all these benefits, perhaps the most important aspect related to the use of comics in the classroom refers to its capacity of promoting reading for the pleasure of reading. At a time when both parents and educators complain about the children's lack of interest in books, the superheroes have the superpowers to keep alive the printed text, and to create role models for a generation so eager to find idols with whom to identify.

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