

Spring 6-2023

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Recommended Citation

Brown, Caedin, "The Benefits of Using Comics in the Classroom" (2023). *University Honors Theses*. Paper 1396.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.1427>

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The Benefits of Using Comics in the Classroom

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

University Honors

and

English

Thesis Adviser

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Portland State University

2023

Keywords: Comics, Graphic Novels, English as a Second Language, English Learners, Teaching English as a Second Language

Abstract

With more research being done on the use and effects of comics in classes, teachers and the general public are becoming more accepting of them as a teaching tool. A study in the use of comics in classrooms has found positive correlations between comics and learning in academic environments and very few possibilities of negative connotations. Comics are being proven to show an increase of motivation in students along with better retention of knowledge, especially in the field of language learning. Comic activities in language learning environments that have been developed by Stephen Cary have shown an increase of engagement, motivation, and language retention for language learners (specifically English language learners).

What made me interested in the study of comics in ESL classrooms was the textbook *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom* by Stephen Cary. I took a course at PCC for ESL teaching and this was the main text we had used for our studies. The course was specifically about the use of comics and graphic novels in multilingual classrooms and how effective they are for students learning English. My expectations going into this class were that it would be a fun and different look on how to teach a language class. The class was fully online so I assumed it would be a somewhat passive experience for me, but I found myself enthralled with the learning because the material we were going over felt so fresh. I didn't expect to leave this class with a newfound interest in using comics in my own future work. When the Cary text was introduced to us I knew that I wanted to continue my work with it even after the class because I could see how beneficial it would be to enrich the learning environment of language learners.

For this thesis I will examine the research of other scholars and then synthesize their works so that I can show the benefits of using comics in classrooms. Comics are a beneficial learning and teaching tool and I want to show why that is. I will explore the positives of using comics as a teaching and learning tool. Further research needs to be conducted on the use of comics because I believe that any teaching tool should be given an opportunity to become more mainstream if it is indeed proven to be exceedingly beneficial for education.

As comics are being taken more seriously, they are also becoming more frequently used in multiple classroom settings. Comics have gone through many stigmas both in and out of academic settings ever since they had become a part of our pop culture. Now comics are becoming widely accepted in society, although they are perhaps not as popular due to other outlets of entertainment now available. Comics are being used in all sorts of classes in big and small ways; some classes will use a comic for a one off activity while certain classes will read

and use and analyze or even create their own comics throughout the entire course. A common subject that uses comics is English. The way an English class uses comics is similar to how they look at a regular novel, but with added discourse on topics of art and style through the images. The images associated with comics are what makes them an important item in an ESL classroom. ESL courses are beginning to use comics as a part of their curriculum more often as a result of research being conducted on their effectiveness as a teaching tool especially in the field of language learning. Through academic research, I am showing that comics are an essential part of the classroom and in particular ESL classrooms.

Comics often have the negative stereotype of being only for children and are often not taken seriously as anything other than entertainment. Comics have also been referred to as a low artform for many years. The negative connotation of comics makes them a hard sell to some in their usefulness as a classroom tool or helpful teaching mechanism. Recently comics have been used more often in schools and they are becoming more commonplace; this will help for comics to lose some of their negative stigma. Comics are becoming more popular in high school and college English courses with many courses using materials such as *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. *Maus* is actually quite a popular comic to use in many ESL classes. *Maus* is extremely prevalent in English courses and comic classes and even in history classes, so it makes sense for many ESL teachers to be using it as well. Spiegelman's work is a great example of a comic that can be used to teach English to a more advanced class as well as teaching a valuable history lesson about the holocaust that many students may be interested in or even unaware of. When Dawn Wing talks about teaching, she writes, "I learned that most of my 11th-grade intermediate and advanced ESL students wanted to learn more about world history. With the help of online educator resources such as the International Literacy Association's Read Write Think website, I decided to teach Art

Spiegelman's *Maus*" (Wing 25). This shows that students are willing to learn from comics and teachers will actively provide students with materials that will work for them. ESL courses are also starting to use comics and graphic novels as a stable part of course materials and tools for the students. My hope is that more and more people will accept the fact that comics have become an exciting and helpful pedagogical material worth the time of teachers and students alike.

The Cary textbook will be the main source of information for my thesis along with other articles and essays on the topic of comics. Cary's work is important because he gives information on almost every aspect of using comics in the multilingual classrooms, along with activities to use in the class and other ways to incorporate comics as a class tool. Cary has interesting takeaways on the use of Comics in ESL settings, but the textbook was written in 2004. So though some of his information could be dated or irrelevant to today's standards, it's likely that the applications are even more diverse and have been improved upon in the time since then. Cary's work is vital to my research, but it's necessary for me to have multiple perspectives on the topic in order to have the best and most current information on hand. Cary splits his textbook into four chapters, which include: Theory and Research, Questions, Activities/Quick Takes, and Resources. Chapters one and three seem to be the most important because they give an insight on the theory of comic use in multilingual classes as well as how to use comics in the classroom.

The fun factor of graphic novels can increase the student's desire to read not only comics, but novels and other materials as well. When students see how much fun reading can be from comics, they often get turned on to reading in other forms as well. Kathryn Hansen discusses this kind of correlation, writing, "For Seyfried [an educator who led an elective book club course], teaching graphic novels provided unexpected payoffs, and he recounts how students sought him out after the class had ended for reading recommendations-and not just for graphic

novels. This kind of passion is as important in high-achieving students as it is in those whose reading skills aren't as strongly developed" (Hansen 57). With these findings it is shown that graphic novels are a benefit when it comes to reading in general. We see an enhanced learning experience for students, but we also see an enhanced experience for teachers as well. Student passion increases which benefits the affect of the classroom and that improves the classroom experience for everyone involved.

Writing can also become more enjoyable for students as well. Many ESL classes incorporate activities like having the students write their own comics after reading a few. Enjoyment also increases motivation which is one of the most important things for getting a student to be willing to learn something new. Creating comics has been proved to show this enhanced motivation as Ferit Kılıçkaya writes, "it has been observed that comic strip creation has increased learners' motivation while dealing with the task and grammar items" (64). These observations from Kılıçkaya provide a more positive connotation between comics and motivating students to write. These positive connotations from comic strip creation are deeply examined in the activity sections of the Stephen Cary text.

In *Going Graphic* by Stephen Cary there is a chapter all about activities related to creating comics. Creating a comic of their own can be beneficial to reading, writing and conversational skills all while keeping the students engaged and letting them be creative and imaginative. Cary has over 13 activities that all sound useful for all different levels of learning, but I think the most useful activities he shares are: Make-A-Title, Add-A-Panel, Scripting (similar to Fill-It-Up and Missing Panels), Adopt-A-Strip, and Comics from Scratch. The other activities from Cary are all great, but the ones I mentioned could be used at any class level in an

effective way. Some of the other activities can only be used in more advanced classes or they are too similar to the activities I have mentioned.

In a study by Sally Brown to get young students interested in reading and writing, she used graphic novels. Similar to Cary, she used the technique of having her students create their own comics after reading multiple graphic novels. She writes, “The second phase of the project created a space for the students to write their own graphic stories based on the elements of graphic novels they learned about while reading in the first phase” (212). Brown mentions how using comics in group activities adds a sort of scaffolding to help support students because of the interaction with the material and with peers: “Providing support and scaffolding are necessary for students learning a new language. For example, working in small groups with peers provides the required contextually embedded support for language use” (209). Using the Cary activities and similarly the activity of creating a comic that Brown studied is an excellent scaffolding tool to support students to learn language.

Creating comics of their own really allows students to use language that best suits them. The language may not be the most scholarly or professional, but it is the language that a student would hear and use in their everyday life which is very important when learning and becoming comfortable with a new language. Creating comics lets EL’s use their creativity and write in a meaningful way to themselves. Creative writing through creating comics can be a big motivation when it comes to writing assignments because of how freely students can express themselves. The writing gets to feel more personal and like themselves when it comes from an artistic standpoint. Tanya Manning-Lewis makes a point on the personal impact this activity can have on students: “The creation of graphic novels certainly offers many opportunities for students’ natural voices to become a part of their writing” (392)

Comics can also make learning and teaching enjoyable so they are a win-win in many aspects. Enjoyment is a great factor in motivation for anything we do in life. If learning is fun then students will want to learn. Fun can be a rewarding motivator for students if in the end they learn something. The fun factor may also contribute to retention in knowledge which is something Aimee Blanchette discusses:

A study by the University of Oklahoma found that graphic novels engage students, encourage reading and increase complex thinking skills. The study, which measured how students retain information, found that students who read material in a comics format, as opposed to text-only, retained more information verbatim. A full 80 percent of the students in the study also said they preferred the comics.

The Blanchette news article also shines a light on how motivated comics make students and that they often don't want to quit reading them. Blanchette also mentions that comics were initially used to help teach struggling English learners in classrooms, but are now used in all sorts of English classes in all learning levels from elementary school to college.

Comics can help students learn language due to the amount of visual aid that they provide. Comics can also increase dialogue exposure for ELs as comics will use language not necessarily in a formal or educational way. This as explained by Victoria Risko: "Providing quality reading material (e.g., full-length trade books, magazines, informational materials) beyond textbooks enriches students' access to content and world knowledge, as textbooks can lack 'depth and perspective'" (376). Pictures, cartoons, props, and videos can be used to supply visual aid in many classes to add that depth and perspective. Ikue Kunai writes, "Using manga should help reluctant readers: both those who are good first-language readers, but are stressed by reading full-length English books and articles, and also those who are not skilled first-language

readers” (6). This further solidifies comics as a helpful tool and not a hindrance to learning.

When a teacher uses images to show something like foods or animals or clothing or any other simple thing for Spanish vocabulary I quickly understand the words and I can make connections with the image to retain that knowledge. Just telling someone the words doesn't create a substantial connection to what they are trying to learn. The visuals of a comic can act like flash cards or the images used to teach vocabulary. The visual aspect is the most beneficial part of a comic when it comes to creating connections within a new language. With the images a learner can see what something is and they know what it is in their first language and then they can see the words on the page and make assumptions from what they can see to help better determine what is written.

When visual connections can be made for a student then their retention for that knowledge will be greater than if they had only the words to look at. The images give something to reflect on later. When reflecting on what a teacher said or wrote down during class it could be confusing for students, but when reflecting on the images of a comic students have a plethora of correlations they can make with the images and story and the words. If an English learner were to think back on their teacher explaining how a monkey was eating a banana they might not remember everything perfectly, but if they had a comic and in a panel a monkey was eating a banana and it said that then the student would be able to understand that better because of the visual representation. A student would know what a monkey is and they would know a banana, but they may not know the English words for those things. The visual of those things would create connections between the languages and make learning so much easier. Comics can be such an important tool in an ESL environment because of how much easier it can make learning. Comics give 'hints' through their visuals that aid students in understanding what they are

reading, as explained by Caitlin McGurk: “Comics are a tool that can be used across languages, and there are many anecdotal accounts of people learning new languages by reading comics.

With the physical/visual action paired with the text, the reader is given a hint at what emotion the character may be experiencing, and is able to use these visual cues to decipher what they may be saying” (McGurk 197). Anything that can make teaching or learning English easier should be used when it can because it is beneficial to both students and teachers. Sometimes all a student needs is a sort of ‘hint’ when it comes to learning something new and retaining knowledge and comics can provide that help.

The biggest challenges with using comics in an ESL class would be finding appropriate comics that would also be of significant help. A teacher looking to use comics, graphic novels, or manga, or anything in the medium should read through any work that they may use in their class. Some graphic novels may be too complex for many age groups and maybe even too complex for ELL’s at advanced levels. If the teacher is reading through something and it seems like the piece will be too difficult then they should look for something else. *Maus* is an excellent choice for a high school English class or a college class even, but it would most likely be too advanced for many ELLs. Some characters “speak” in accents in *Maus* and things like that may be too much of a nuanced idea or it could make for a confusing concept at times. The subject matter is also heavy if we are just trying to use a book as a language tool. The comics a teacher picks should have simple stories and concepts that are not majorly complex. Another thing teachers would have to look out for would be graphic content.

Some comics have extreme graphic content in them that definitely would not be suitable for someone under the age of 18. Many students older than 18 may not be comfortable with some images shown in certain pieces as well. There are many examples of manga that have graphic

images that may not be appropriate for any class, but could be encouraged to read outside of class time. Manga like *Berserk* by Kentaro Miura has beautiful art and a great story that is usually simple enough to where it could be used as a language tool, but its content is so graphic and mature that it would be inappropriate even for an adult class. Any comic with graphic nudity or sexual content or extreme violence and gore should definitely be kept to personal time and not be used as a class tool so that no one would be offended. Luckily a lot of manga and some other comics as well will have age warnings on them not unlike movie or video game ratings (R, PG-13, M). Most novels will not have an age recommendation on them, but since comics are a visual thing sometimes they need the warning. Some comics with graphic images and words and concepts can and should be shown in classes and even used for language learning, but some things can be too much. It's important for the teacher to look through the material and make a good judgment on if they should use the material or pick something else and just suggest the more graphic works as an extracurricular reading choice.

Just like any other class, the teacher should be familiar with the tools and media they are using in their classes. McGurk explains, "It can be exciting and fun to integrate these new materials into the classroom, but it is essential that the librarian and professor first understand how to effectively use them" (McGurk 198). Teachers have often read the books they are teaching multiple times and have a plethora of information about them so that they can effectively teach about them. Film teachers should know everything important about the films they are showing and they should have knowledge on the directors and writers and other crew. Teachers that teach comic classes will use comics that they have a plethora of information on and have read at least more than once hopefully. An ESL teacher will have many tools at their disposal like novels, movies, music, and of course comics. Since in an ESL class the teacher can

use multiple tools they may not be an expert on everything they are using in their courses, but they should have an understanding on everything they are using and they should have read or watched or listened to anything they are going to use. Reading a comic before using it as a teaching tool is important so that the teacher at least has a basic understanding of what they will be using, but more importantly it confirms if the comic is appropriate to teach both in its educational content but also in if it contains too graphic of content. As an ESL teacher you don't want to be teaching a bunch of vulgar words. Teachers also don't want to be showing extreme violence or sexual content, or anything that may be offensive to people's personal beliefs like religion or morals.

Teaching with the use of graphic novels is an easy thing, but maybe not at first if a teacher is unfamiliar with reading them. Comics are easy to read, but everyone has to start somewhere and not every single person knows how to read or create comics correctly. Reading Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is an absolute must for any teacher wanting to use comics for reading or activities related to comics. Once the way comics work is evident to teachers and students, then comics become an easy well of knowledge. Erlene Bishop Killeen writes about the ease of using graphic novels: "Again, the ease of using graphic novels is evident. Each character's speaking parts are defined and easily found. Teaching left to right reading is simplified with speech bubbles, framed sequencing, and even directive arrows in the story" (57).

In an ESL class for younger students it would be most beneficial to use comics aimed for kids and younger audiences. Comics like *Garfield* or *Calvin and Hobbes* would be good choices for younger students. Older students may also appreciate comics meant for younger people as well, however, due to their simplicity and accessibility. Older students who are still at a beginner

level would benefit from comics meant for kids because they shouldn't be too complex. A teacher would also have less worry on how appropriate a kids comic would be for any age group. When teaching adults it might not seem right to use kids comics, but for beginners or those struggling with the language nothing too complex should be used. When teaching older students with a better grasp on the language, then more complex and more adult comics should be used—, but kids comics should never be shied away from because of their helpfulness and are usually classroom appropriate. Students should also be given a choice of a few comics as well so that they can decide for themselves if they want to pick something that isn't focused mainly for a child audience. Some teenage or adult students could shy away from the childishness of a comic if it is too childlike. It's important that the students are interested in what they are reading and that they want to read and learn from their materials. If a learner is disinterested in their reading material then they will be disinterested in learning from it. Options give students the important opportunity to pick what they would like so that they are more engaged and willing to learn.

Many classes unrelated to the use of graphic novels have started using them and there are even some “textbooks” that are created in the form of a graphic novel. These uses of graphic novels in non-English classes is a great idea for keeping students engaged. And for a class on graphic novels a textbook in graphic novel format makes perfect sense. Scott McCloud is an author with a few great examples of graphic textbooks that can be used in a comics class. An example of a book in comic form that could be used in a history class is *Latino U.S.A. A Cartoon History* by Ilan Stavans and illustrated by Lalo Alcaraz. The book is completely in the style of a graphic novel, but it is a history book that teaches Latino history in the US that not many people may know about. The way the book is drawn and the way it is written make everything engaging and interesting and it gives a visual representation to everything that a traditional book or even

textbook could not do. Because of the engaging way this history is presented students may become more interested in reading it and learning something new. A book like this could also be used in an ESL class and not just a history class. If this book was used in an ESL class to teach English then it would also be teaching history at the same time. It may even be something many of the students would be interested in if some students were Latino. Jie Y. Park also agrees that comics relating to history are an excellent way to teach ELs about two subjects at once:

reading and discussing graphic novels can support high school-age English learners (ELs) in their development of historical literacy. In reading and discussing historical graphic novels, the ELs in this study not only developed capacities for academic reading (e.g., referencing page numbers when giving evidence, rereading a panel) but also engaged in historical literacy practice (35).

Books in comic form that are created with the intention to teach something can be an amazing tool in ESL classes because not only will it help to teach language, but it could teach the students other useful things too like history, or culture, or many other useful subjects. Comics have become something more from their success throughout the years, which McGurk relates to “[a] driving necessity behind the success and continual acceptance of comics in the academic setting is the understanding of comics not as a genre, but rather a format: another communication platform through which knowledge can be gained on various subject matter” (192). Comics have what seems like an unlimited amount of uses as pedagogical tools because of how diverse they can be and how innovative they are. With so many points of entry through education that they can reach it would almost be unwise to not use comics in a classroom that has access to them.

The Cary activities are what exposed me to using comics in ESL classes specifically. Using comics and creating comics and other activities surrounding their use is what *Going*

Graphic is mostly about. Cary also shares his research on his theories and he answers common questions about the use of comics in multilingual classes and he even gives some helpful resources, but the activities chapter makes up the bulk of his work and is the most helpful part of the text. Make-A-Title is the most simple of the activities and so it is the first that Cary includes. In this activity students read a short comic strip and then in small groups they come up with a fitting title for the strip. This activity is a great starting off point because of its ease, but also because it engages students in reading to find key words and to relate the images to vocabulary that they already might know. This activity also allows for group work which allows for collaboration while using English.

Add-A-Panel is the next activity and it is suitable for younger or beginner students. In this activity the language learners read a small comic strip of about four panels and then they have to add one more panel of their own. More advanced students could add more panels if they wish. This is a helpful activity because it gets students engaged with reading, art, and writing. Students have to read the panels and then draw their own and write their own continuation. With so much engagement in all the aspects of comics this is a great activity to get new students to enjoy the use of comics as an academic tool. This activity also lets students bring out their creative and artistic sides which makes schoolwork more personal and enjoyable.

Scripting is an activity that is similar to two others that Cary includes: Fill-It-Up and Missing Panels. Scripting and Fill-It-Up are so similar that they are practically the same thing; both activities use comics with just art and no dialogue and students are tasked with writing the dialogue for the comic either in groups, pairs, or alone. Scripting focuses more on the use of pairs to complete the dialogue and the dialogue can either be written or presented orally. Scripting is more of an advanced version to Fill-It-Up. Missing Panel is similar in the way that

students create dialogue for a panel that has been taken out of an existing comic strip. Students also have to create the art for the missing panel. This activity is also similar to the Add-A-Panel activity except that these panels are not added to the end of the strip and the missing panel they create must logically fit with the previous and next panels. Missing Panels is usually a solo activity, but most of the activities included could be done in duos or groups if desired. Scripting is an activity that is similar to an activity done by Sarah Mathews where she showed her ESL class a comic called *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan. In her activity she shows her students the comic and they talk and write about it. In the comic there are no words and the students had to converse about the emotions and actions being displayed through visuals alone. Mathews explains, "This book displays the complexity of migration within a text that does not feature a single word. As we explore this "graphic" text I emphasize strategies for helping ELLs strengthen their vocabulary development, visual literacy skills, and understanding of social studies concepts" (65). Mathews doesn't exactly do a scripting exercise, but it is similar due to the dialogue free comic that students work with.

Adopt-A-Strip is a fun activity that students can do as a homework assignment. It involves reading comic strips every week and then reporting back to class about developments in the comic they have chosen. Students could either write about their comic or they could do an oral presentation. Students get to pick a comic that comes out weekly (or they could pick older comic strips and just read one every week) and then they report back with changes in the story or what a character has done or they can say something about a joke that was used. Students get to pick a comic that they enjoy or that is interesting to them for this topic which makes it something they want to read and not something they are being made to read. Adopt-A-Strip allows for more reading options at home and gets learners interested in reading something they might not have

ever been interested in. If learners find a comic enjoyable then they may find other reading enjoyable too and they could seek out more literature on their own time.

Comics from Scratch is the last activity in *Going Graphic* and it is the most advanced activity. The activity is just what it sounds like: students make their own comics. This activity is encouraged to be a group effort, but it could also be done alone. Making comics from scratch is the most advanced of the activities and maybe the most daunting of them for students, but any level or age group of students could do this activity. Lower level students could create very short and simple comics while more advanced students could create long thought out comics with a lot of dialogue and depth. For any of these activities teachers should never expect all of their students to be artists and so the art should never be a concern as long as students are trying. The English aspect of creating comics is what matters and if students just draw to the best of their abilities then that is all that is needed. Comics from Scratch can stimulate all parts of learning that comics offer. Students can read each other's comics, they show off their writing skills, they create art based on what they write or they write based on what they draw, and the students work together or share their comics which is done verbally increasing their communication skills. All of the activities listed and the rest that Cary has in his textbook are amazing examples of academic work that can be done with all sorts of comic materials. The comic activities are all specialized for ESL courses, but they are not limited to them.

Throughout my college career I have personally seen comics being used in many non-comic related courses. I have had professors use comics in literature courses, writing courses, and in history. Even science classes will implement a comic strip in an activity to show a humorous image relating to a subject being discussed. Surprisingly, a class I have yet to use a comic in is Spanish. Images and cartoons and similar visual aids are used all the time, but I have

never been given a comic or graphic novel in Spanish. I have created small comic strips in Spanish courses for projects which are a great use of comics, but we didn't have comics as supplemental reading material. Comics are proving to be an exceptional thing in ESL classes and in other classes as well, so my hope would be that their use becomes more common in all language courses. If comics can help to teach English then certainly they could benefit in teaching any language.

Overall, comics and graphic novels are proving to become a popular tool in ESL and other language learning classes as well. Negative stigmas of comics in classroom settings are becoming a thing of the past as they are being widely accepted as valuable tools by teachers and students. Comics have been used for many years now at schools and there is a plethora of research available to validate the effectiveness and credibility they have on teaching not only English, but other subjects as well. Valuable research and studies have been conducted on the importance of these materials as teaching tools, but more research can always be done and should be done when regarding helpful information that can benefit thousands, or even millions, of people across the world. Comics are great at motivating and engaging students of all ages; when students are engaged and motivated to learn, that can only be a good thing. When people want to learn something the knowledge will come to them quicker and will stay in their minds for longer. When learning is fun then students will retain knowledge more adequately and for longer and they will want to seek to learn more. Activities utilizing comics create fun learning environments that are sure to get students willing and ready to actively learn. One of the only negative aspects dealing with comics used in an ESL class is that students might not want to go back to using other learning techniques. With no negatives other than being so fun that students don't want to put their comics down it is clear that comics should be used as a teaching tool

because of all the benefits they can provide. As it is now, comics are seen as a legitimate teaching supplement and are being used more and more in classes around the country to teach English in ESL classrooms and in other English classes as well.

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