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**Participating in ELT Presentations for Professional Development** 7

Takaaki Hiratsuka

**MOOCs: A Failed Revolution?** 17

Sarara Momokawa

**Use of Comic Books as Intensive Reading Materials** 23

Ron Crosby

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# Use of Comic Books as Intensive Reading Materials

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**Abstract:** *This research paper explores the potential benefits of incorporating comic books and graphic novels as reading materials into the language learning classroom. Through action research based on assigning graphic novels for a group of 11 university seniors to read for a period of one 15-week semester, the research focused on the attitudes of the subjects regarding engagement with the prescribed literature. The results revealed differing attitudes towards the use of comic books and graphic novels. This study indicated the importance of using authentic materials such as these novels in improving proficiency of EFL learners, but also highlights the degree to which the motivations of learners will affect learning outcomes and overall success when incorporating such reading materials. The study points out that even though EFL learners have much to gain from the use of comic books and graphic novels as reading materials, it is also important to create materials that are both topically appealing and take popular perceptions into consideration.*

**Keywords:** comic books, reading, ESL/EFL, language learning, Japanese English education

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## Introduction

The emergence of English as the global lingua franca has made it crucial for educational institutions across the world to incorporate EFL education as part of their curriculum. EFL courses are not necessarily required for students, but the increase in the number of students striving to acquire proficiency in the language has created the development of new approaches to language learning. In Japan, too, the increase in the number of students aiming to acquire proficiency in English has increased greatly. While native speakers of the language are most commonly employed to teach English reading and speaking skills, non-Japanese are needed when not enough qualified Japanese teachers are available or when foreign faculty are uniquely qualified for a particular course. While teachers who are trained to teach EFL as part of the second language curriculum are provided adequate training and equipped with tools for teaching the language, several informal aids have been found to make a great difference for students learning the subject. Comic books, with their graphic and visual aids that supplement text that can be quite challenging at times, can be used as highly motivational materials to teach a foreign language (Deligianni-Georgaka & Pouroutidi, 2013). In Japan, the use of comic books (serialized

stories featuring a superhero) and graphic novels (collections of comic books into one complete story such as “X-Men”) as a means of enhancing proficiency in English makes even more sense given the proliferation and popularization of manga, a staple of Japanese reading habits.

While the use of such materials in the EFL classroom is seeing an increase, comic books can also be used to enhance the proficiency of teachers of EFL. In Japan, many English teachers struggle with proficiency themselves, but they hesitate to study with a typical textbook. Regular reading of higher level comics and graphic novels can be effective for teachers seeking greater proficiency. One advantage is there may not be as much of a stigma attached to reading native speaker comics. Second, the reading is conversational, so the material presents a unique opportunity to improve reading, speaking, and vocabulary. Also, comic books—known as manga in Japan—are extremely popular, and their use is not limited to children and young adults but also includes working age adults as well as elderly, people from across the age spectrum. Conversations with Japanese colleagues has made it clear that they are comfortable with this medium, comic books can be used to promote proficiency. Because comics provide the chance to build vocabulary in an informal situation, they can aid the development of language skills.

This research is geared towards examining the potential of comic books as reading material for

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soon to be EFL teachers and the way in which comics can be used to enhance vocabulary and communication skills for a small group of university seniors, most of whom will go on to become elementary school and junior high school English teachers. This approach seeks to promote positive outcomes not only for these university seniors, but also for EFL teachers, to help them utilize comics in their public school classrooms. In order to examine the research question, a group of 11 Japanese university seniors, majoring in English Education, were used for the project, with each one being asked to read graphic novels and report their degree of engagement with it.

The data are compelling regarding the use of comic books and graphic novels as a means of improving the language capabilities of university seniors who major in English and will later go on to teach English in schools, discussed later. Data from previous studies, however, highlight the lack of proficiency of Japanese teachers in English. In a study conducted by Nagasawa in 2004 across 19 national and private universities, it was found that most of the English classes were being taught in Japanese. The study showed that academic English classes, especially literature and linguistics, were taught in Japanese 95% of the time while non-academic classes such as conversation, cross-cultural understanding and teaching methodology were taught in Japanese 65% of the time (Nagatomo, 2012, p. 2). These statistics point to an unwillingness to engage learners in English among tertiary education teachers. This is a matter of concern since proficiency in the language being taught, English, should be integral to the profile of the educator. Since teachers and university seniors are more likely to engage in the study of English through use of Japanese, using a familiar genre of materials that are likely to appeal to Japanese students is preferred. It is in this context that the use of comic books as part of EFL teacher training is concerned.

The use of comic books and the willingness of Japanese seniors to utilize comic books and graphic novels as reading materials is influenced by the popularity of manga, Japanese comic books, as reading material among the people of Japan across the age spectrum. Japan has a strong cultural and historical affiliation for narrative creations that utilize a combination of text and images. Japanese society, relative to the way in which it uses and adopts reading practices, has been described by researcher Michel de Certeau as a “recited society” (1980) wherein people walk through narratives created by television, advertising and journalism. Susan Son-

tag, on the other hand, has pointed out the imagery-creating aspect of Japan, calling it an “image world” where “much of the Japanese media is involved in producing and consuming images ...” (MacWilliams, 2014). Based on these interpretations of Japan and its connection with the world of images, the use of comic books as a means of enhancing interest in reading to learn English from comic books and graphic novels is natural.

## Literature Review

Becoming proficient in English as a foreign language is, to an extent, based on the willingness of students to engage with a variety of materials that can provide multiple contextual situations. The use of a variety of contexts is especially important in the acquisition of language skills for it allows an understanding of meanings of words in different situations. When EFL is used primarily for the purpose of communication it is important to acquire the nuances of the language while at the same time, an adequate vocabulary, which necessarily needs to be quite large, is greatly helpful to language learners. These particular approaches are especially important for non-native teachers of EFL as they give them greater command of language which translates into better outcomes for students. The use of comic books to enhance EFL skills has been examined in a number of studies, both qualitative and quantitative apart from the personal experience of speakers (Deligianni-Georgaka & Pouroutidi, 2013; Jones, 2010). On the other hand, specific studies into the use of comic books by EFL teachers to enhance their own proficiency in the language have not been undertaken. Since non-native EFL teachers are also students at some point, the use of studies where students were participants can be used as a primary analysis tool for the research.

The use of comic books for improving comprehension and engaging students has been one of the most important reasons for the use of comic books and other graphic materials in classrooms. Because of their visual context and the ability to create meaning even from difficult contexts containing challenging text, comic books are well suited for educational purposes. Even though comic books have become popular as educational tools only in the recent past, “sequential art as a format has been used as an educational tool for more than 70 years and is getting more and more popular all the time as an instructive tool” (Syma & Weiner, 2013, p. 3). A research study involving 25 students of the freshman English class at Hiroshima Bunkyo University in Japan found that “84% of the participants held a positive view of the comic book style readers” (Jones, 2010, p. 233).

Furthermore, the research also revealed that many of this study's respondents believed that the use of illustrations was helpful in ascertaining the meaning of certain vocabulary words with which they were unfamiliar.

The use of comic books for the purpose of teaching a foreign language is also based on the notion that it is easier to engage with visual clues and text rather than only textual material. In a research study by Cimermanova (2015, p 2457) carried out with four students who were described as novice readers, the reception of the graphic material was generally positive. Most importantly, the research reiterated Kennedy's claims about visual literacy which gives readers "the ability to construct meaning from images. It's not a skill. It uses skills as a tool box. It's a form of critical thinking that enhances your intellectual capacity" (in Cimermanová, 2015, p. 2458). The very definition of comic books, as articulated by McCloud, reiterates this idea, when he defines comic books as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce aesthetic response in the reader" (quoted in Cimermanová, p. 2454). By bringing together visuals to aid understanding of the text, meaning and context of words and actions is more easily comprehended by students.

One of the most important ideas related to the use of comic books as part of the second language acquisition curriculum can be understood in terms of the role of comic books as "contact zones." Contact zones can be described as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in the contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power..." (Carter, 2010, p. 24). These are also sites of transculturation, speech acts and "unsolicited oppositional discourse", where the application is most significant in the context of education. According to Carter, this allows students to engage in less teacher-centered modes of learning, giving learners the freedom to "challenge norms and engage in critical literacy practices, making text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections..." (Carter, 2010, p. 24). By allowing students to engage in the art of reading at a personal pace and also by choosing works that hold greater appeal to them, the use of comic books and graphic novels is effective.

Research into the literary merits of graphic novels and comic books has been one of the biggest challenges in the inclusion of these materials as part of classroom material. Comics, by their very name, sometimes evoke a sense of less serious or even frivolous material, and also are considered appropri-

ate for lower grades, which makes them seem juvenile. However, modern comic books incorporate a variety of topics, some of which are quite philosophical or sophisticated, that also appeal to young adults and even older readers. Graphic novels, which are best understood as longer forms of comics, are appropriate for use in higher levels of learning for, as Seelow points out, "graphic novels are not just transitions to more advanced prose works ... but that graphic novels, in themselves, are comparable to the best prose works" (In Zimmermann & Kruse, 2013, p. 17). Elaborating on the merits of the graphic novel as a work of prose, Hart states that these novels contain "skillful plot construction, thoroughly drawn characters and conflicts, and richly evocative language" (Zimmermann & Kruse, 2013, p. 17). These qualities make them appropriate for high school and university students, since they deal with topical stories, created with sophisticated storylines, and augmented by images.

It is in the context of the needs of the present day learner and educator that the use of comic books for educational purposes is further applicable or even advisable. The movement away from an exclusive focus on the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics to a blend of those skills along with advanced and higher-level thinking, classrooms benefit from new modes of teaching and learning. In the realm of language education especially students are increasingly being called upon to make connections between texts and visuals. Research across the globe has reiterated the positive impact of comic books and graphic novels upon language acquisition, especially for foreign learners (Cimermanová, 2015; Merc, 2013). One such outcome is a study conducted by Merc (2013) which showed that students who had lower levels of language acquisition greatly benefited from the use of comic books in the elementary and secondary classroom (p. 61).

## Methods

The subjects were recruited in the education department of a private university in rural Japan where the author teaches as a lecturer. In order to investigate this research hypothesis, a group of 11 Japanese university seniors, all of whom were the author's seminar students, was recruited. Seminar students were preferable due to having greater freedom to utilize atypical materials, and because the purpose of undergraduate seminar classes in Japan is to research a theme together with students. Junior seminar students, the other age group available to the author, were deemed too busy practice teaching to be able to focus on comics and generating the data

for this research study. The participants were a mixed group of seven male and four females who were given comics as reading material. They were given 15 weeks to read the various graphic novels, after which they were asked to report their level of engagement and interest in the books which had been given to them. After a period of 15 weeks, the researcher conducted an interview with them to gauge their level of engagement and interest in the reading materials.

Interviews were held in on an individual basis in the teacher's office and were done so in an informal manner so that the students did not feel any pressure and would be more likely to give honest responses. Each interview typically lasted about 30 minutes. The interview did not follow a rigid line of questioning but rather sought to get a general sense of the students' motivation and experience with reading the comics. The first question asked was, "What did you think about the book you read?" Follow up questions depended upon the response of the students. Some typical follow-up questions included: "Did you enjoy the story?" "Why or why not?" "Did anything surprise you?" "Did characters react the way you thought they would?" "Did you find the story easy to follow and understand?" "Was the level of English okay?"

Responses of course varied. One specific response that the researcher noted was when a student said, "I was surprised that they discussed drug use so directly. Most of the Japanese comics I've read avoid such real world issues, or aren't nearly as direct about it." On the other hand, one student that focused on sexuality in comics said, "I wasn't so surprised. In Japan this sort of comic is becoming more and more popular and I think Americans are even more open to such ideas (ideas regarding sexual orientation and sexual identity), so I think it is not so surprising."

As for comprehending the English, most students agreed that while the story was easy to follow thanks to the visual aspect of comics, some vocabulary were difficult. But one boy said, "There were many difficult words for me, but I could look at the pictures and guess the meaning of the words. After I was done reading I checked the meaning and was so happy when I was able to guess the meaning correctly." Another student mentioned that she felt it would be difficult for younger students in Japan to read some of the stories we used, but for higher level classes it could be used.

Of the four female students, two had read one graphic novel each. Upon being asked about the level of interest, they made it clear that from the

start they never had an interest in reading either graphic novels or comics. The conversation with the other two female students revealed that they had read two graphic novels each and had moderate interest in reading such works, but they also clarified that they were not big fans of such reading material. Of the seven male students who had read the prescribed material, a variety of observations were made. Four of the male students reported they had read two graphic novels each and had a certain level of interest though they were not very interested in the works.

Two of the other male students reported that they had read two graphic novels fully and had even begun the third one even though they did not finish it. On being questioned about the inability to finish the third one they said that there were other things which demanded their attention and as such they could not finish the third novel, even though they were both fans of the genre due to the recent popularity of comic book movies, especially the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Only one male student had read a total of four graphic novels, and the interview revealed that he was able to complete the task because he was a big fan of comics from earlier on. He enjoyed reading the graphic novels and his level of interest in the world of comic books and graphic novels was high.

Students had the freedom to choose from a variety of topics. The only main criteria was that they use comics as a focus point. Many students choose to focus on cultural issues, such as racism, gender, sexuality, family dynamics and substance abuse. Other students focused more on using comics as English language teaching tools. Students were asked to write papers, in English, roughly 10 pages in length. Once papers were written, groups were formed and each member was given a copy of the paper to read and corrections and suggestions were given at this time.

## Results

The results of the survey of students use of comic books and graphic novels as a means of acquiring proficiency in English is based on a combination of qualitative data as well as informal interactions with the students. The informality of the interactions was actually preferred due to the perception that they would provide fuller and more honest responses in an informal setting, and also because of the lack of incentive offered. Furthermore, some of the participants had already expressed the view that they would not be able to complete the task fully and as such a formal collection of data could not be accom-

plished. In the course of the interaction with the university seniors, two reported lack of interest in reading graphic novels and comic books, six had limited interest, two showed relatively more interest while only one senior carried out the task to its completion. This particular act of completion can be attributed to the inherent interest of the participant in comic books and graphic novels.

In the course of interacting with the seniors, most of them expressed the desire to gain fluency in English, since they were going to work as English language teachers in the near future, yet five of them had little interest in acquiring vocabulary through visual aids such as comic books. Five of the respondents showed ambivalence towards the use of comics to acquire vocabulary skills, and only one was fully engaged in the task. This individual's deep engagement came about since he believed that reading comics and graphic novels gave him more contexts for use of words. At the same time though, the need to improve one's vocabulary was integral to the mastery of English, according to all of them.

The participants were also questioned about their change of attitude towards comic books and graphic novels as part of the educational toolbox. Questions were asked with the aim of ascertaining the attitude of the participants, whose reading habits showed great diversity. Here too, there was a multiplicity of opinions, with the two female students who expressed low interest in comic books stating categorically that they did not believe in the use of such aids for the classroom. The remaining nine were of the opinion that comic books could and should be used in classrooms as teaching aids and proposed that even university seniors like themselves should be given such material to enhance their visual literacy skills. Learners also benefitted from familiarity with the prescribed material through movies and television serials and identified that as one of the reasons for their willingness to read the novels.

## **Discussion**

The investigation into the notion that comic books can be used as extensive reading material as a means of improving reading among students studying English yielded diverse outcomes which gives teachers much to contemplate and researchers various related approaches to follow up on. Through qualitative research of extant literature and interviews with this group of students who were identified as participants for reading comic books and graphic novels, the study found some promising views related to the use of comics and graphic novels in the EFL classroom. At the same time the in-

terviews revealed the importance of prior interest in comics. Learners who started without an interest in comics did not suddenly develop an interest, but at the same time learners who started with an interest indicated far greater engagement and accomplished more in the class. Similarly, those with an interest with related media such as movies performed the class assignments to a far greater degree. These results indicate that used with appropriately motivated students, comics have great potential.

The chief purpose of the chosen assignment was to examine the viability of using comics as extensive reading material for language learners. This assignment was based on the assertion by Craig Hill (2016) that "comics have become a staple in K-20 classrooms (and) are not just for remedial exercises" and also that "secondary teachers and instructors at college and university levels are inserting comics into literature, history, psychology and in courses and many other disciplines" (pp. 3-4). Even though two of the participants showed reluctance to use comic books as reading material, the willingness of the other students to engage with the books more deeply and enthusiastically showed that the belief of teachers in the educational potential of comic books is not unfounded. The importance and the need for the use of comic books and graphic novels as materials of instruction is also understood relative to the fact that "thesis and dissertation is related to comics have exploded...there is even an online comic for graduate students; see [ww.phdcomics.com](http://ww.phdcomics.com)" (Syma & Weiner, 2013, p. 1).

The chief purpose of this study was to examine whether EFL students who are studying to become public school teachers in Japan can gain from reading comic books and graphic novels. The participant response to the idea was mixed and the interactions revealed that personal level of engagement was related to their willingness to engage with comic books, and also the notion that those who were passionate about movies based on comic books showed greater engagement with the chosen works. In this context, Merc's directions for further research in the field, related to material development makes for a strong case for the use of comics. According to Merc (2013), material developers must be extremely "careful (about) selecting their reading comprehension texts and the illustrations they provide with those texts" (p. 62).

This lack of interest in all super hero media could have been one among several reasons for the aversion to comic books perceived with two of the university seniors who participated in the study, while two others expressed showed lower engagement



rather than outright aversion. Since those four students weren't all that interested in comic books, the series of activities assigned for this research didn't work well for them as learning tools, at least in comparison with the other students who expressed interest from day one. When asked why they would knowingly join a seminar that focused on comics when they had no interest in comics, one girl replied, "I joined because my friend also joined this seminar." Another said, "I wasn't interested in other seminars either, and this one seemed the most fun."

The importance of appropriate material for selected audiences is also highlighted by Zimmerman and Kruse (2013), who point out that "The combination of shorter passages paired with graphics provides the reader strong clues to content and meaning. In this way, use of the graphic novel enhances student reading comprehension that in turn, enhances student learning" (p. 20). The various levels of engagement among the university seniors, based on the various responses which included lack of interest and inability to engage with the text, reiterates the validity of this particular notion. This study points out the importance of choosing material that is appropriate for the personal interests of students, especially in cases where the idea of reading is not inculcated in learners throughout their early years.

The research study revealed several important ideas related to the use of comic books and graphic novels, but the study was marked by certain limitations. The most important limitation was the lack of a clearly defined sample group, along with the lack of formal methods of data collection and analysis. Yet another limitation was the heterogeneity of the participants and, at least among some of the participants, their lack of appropriate engagement with the task and their corresponding lack of willingness to complete the assignment. Future research would benefit from clearly established criteria for data collection, use of carefully chosen material, and the assembly of motivated subjects who are willing to complete the assignment wholeheartedly.

## Conclusion

The increased reliance on the use of English as a means of carrying out effective communication internationally has brought about an increase in the need for teachers who are proficient in EFL. Proficiency in English is considered one of the most important skill sets and is required by individuals to navigate today's globalized world. In the case of Japan, English proficiency is highly valued by businesses who seek out recruits who have developed communication skills in English (Murata, 2015). In

spite of the growing demand for English proficiency, the levels of English attainment among Japanese university students remain relatively low. This can be partly attributed to the lack of proficiency, both in reading and speaking in English, among EFL public school teachers. Several steps have been taken to increase proficiency in English teaching for this group of educators. One of the steps advocated is to increase their levels of English comprehension and communication through teacher engagement with comic books and graphic novels during their training period so as to acquire greater fluency and vocabulary, syntax, and ability to converse.

Comic books and graphic novels are two of the most unique products of the 20th century whose entertainment value is supplemented by their educational potential, including in the field of language learning. These books, relying on a mix of visual imagery and written text, have been chiefly used as recreational literature. For more than three decades, they have also been incorporated in the language classroom due to their capacity to engage readers across all age groups and reading levels. For the EFL learner, comic books and graphic novels can reduce the tedium of learning a foreign language in the formal environment of a classroom. Also, the popularity and easy availability of these texts also allows for personal reading, and learners can read at their own pace and based on their choice of subject matter. For students who are language learners, even university level language learners, comic books and graphic novels can serve as supplemental reading material, as a means of improving reading and vocabulary proficiency. Moreover, with the proper preparation, comic books and graphic novels can be used instead of typical textbooks.

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