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Articles

Language Learning and Teaching

The Use of Comic Books as a Teaching Tool: A Descriptive Study

Ron Crosby

Gifu Shōtoku Gakuen University

Abstract: *Visual aids are learning resources that are visible to students and provided by teachers. Visual aids are also one way for teachers to effectively communicate a subject or a discussion to their students, so that students can familiarize themselves with content in a more effective way, retaining knowledge. Teachers can use visual aids to explain a difficult concept, clarify a discussion point or even conduct a stand-alone lesson. According to Bowman (2018), visual aids assist students in making associations between information pieces, absorbing content at a more rapid rate and serving as memory assistance. Since vision is so important to humans, students who observe and watch aids during a lesson gradually become more inspired to engage in each lesson. An example of this dynamic is comic strips. Comic strip themes are quite flexible; they can be utilized in a wide assortment of subjects, from history and writing to math and science. Educators can help students develop higher-order thinking skills such as inquiry, assessment, forecasting, and deducing by using appropriate and relevant comic strips. In our computerized environment, such multimodal text also helps students learn from visual and linguistic sources.*

This study aims to ascertain the effectiveness of using comics as a teaching tool. A quantitative study was performed, with 12 English education student-teachers using comics as visual aids in teaching elementary and junior high school students in Gifu, Japan. The results indicate that almost all elementary school students enjoyed classes that utilized comics. As for the junior high school classes, the student-teachers also received positive results, in which the students enjoyed the classes, but the enjoyment level was slightly lower compared to the elementary students.

Introduction

Students of different levels will benefit from comic strips as teaching tools in the classroom. These teaching materials are successful because they engage students in meaningful learning experiences and help students practice key skills such as composition, reading, speaking, and communicating. A comic strip, by definition, is an unfinished sensational tale about a recurring group of characters told in a series of sketches, with images and a story text exchanged regularly and, at times, published sequentially in newspapers. One aim of using comic strips as a teaching tool is so that teachers can interact with students of all learning styles and to engage a wide range of faculties (Crosby, 2020). In the grade range of 3-4, comic strips help students exercise fundamental skills such as perusing, discerning visual concepts, communicating and understanding sig-

nals for settings. For instance, with the aid of a comic, students can more easily visualize physical settings.

Comics also lead to thought-provoking questions and can aid students in comprehending complex topics in a succinct framework (Muzumdar, 2016), particularly because they are so easy to identify with. According to Plasq (n.d.), "Comics speak to students in a way they understand and identify with" (¶4). Thanks to the visual elements, students can more readily identify with the characters in the comics, which makes conveying information about language and math easier. For instance, Plasq (n.d.) discusses using comics to teach components of language.

Young students can also benefit from using comic strips to foster positive emotions, particularly if the comic strip characters are relatable. As a result, important delicate expertise, such as empathy for those less fortunate or for non-human species, that will aid students in becoming well-adjusted individuals in the future is demonstrated. Depending on the comic strip, it can even make

them laugh, assisting teachers in reducing the pressure and tension learners may be experiencing after spending much time in school. Again, depending on the comic strip, older students can learn about current social issues. One article shows that cues are a fantastic way to get students thinking; they do not have to agree with the image being shown or message being expressed. Students are, however, encouraged to think about the situation and, preferably, make valid arguments to help them work out their emotions (Sellars, 2017).

Sellars (2017) shows how students can look at information critically through comics, and how it can increase reading comprehension. They exercise healthy skepticism. The author shows how students who read an X-Men comic can look beyond the immediate plot and essentially identify that X-Men is about non-normative characters living in an oppressive society as marginalized outcasts. One classroom teacher taught X-Men, the comic book, and had students discover salient features of oppression with respect to the text (Sellars, 2017). In this way, teachers may use comic books to teach valuable life lessons.

Visual aids are critical teaching resources that can be utilized during instruction; they facilitate reading, teaching, and presenting a theme. Visual aids facilitate visual learning and increase student success rates (Bowman, 2018). Visual learning is the method of assimilation of information by the use of visual representations. Additionally, visual learning aids students in developing visual thought, a type of learning in which a learner associates ideas, phrases, and concepts with images to better comprehend and retain knowledge.

Visual prompts, such as photographs and abstract images, can also be effective, as they penetrate the mind quicker than texts, but can also work together with text. Higher thinking abilities are founded on a solid foundation of concrete learning, which includes comprehension, external stimuli, visual feedback, and motor movements. Multisensory cues, which include visual, auditory, and tactile cues, are particularly critical for the development of young children.

Another theory relevant to teaching with comics is situated learning, which attempts to explain the power of visual stimulation in learning. The theory states that people gain information about an event through social context and significance (Hillaire, Schlichtmann & Ducharme, 2016). Comics are important for situated learning because students can look at images comprehensive-

ly to make holistic conclusions about contextual features. For instance, a comic book such as Watchman (Moore & Gibbons, 1986) might be a good way to teach children about what America's political landscape looked like during that era.

The role of visual aids in helping students' understanding of content is well understood by educators. Teachers value the help that visuals provide in the classroom because they enable students to make connections between different pieces of information, absorb large chunks of information easily and be instrumental for remembering (Bowman, 2018). Visual discernment and identification are important in cognitive activity and presenting information in both visual and verbal form enhances memory and recognition; in other words, any graphic, or any visual cues for that matter, improve cognition. The purpose of this study is to find out whether the utilization of comics as teaching tools is effective in elementary and junior high school students in a Japanese context.

Literature Review

In education, comics can be used as specialized educational tools. The features of comics, as well as the historical publishing industries that created them and comics' evolving position within culture, highlight the relationship between comics and education. Throughout the twentieth century, educators, readers, and publishers found comics important, though they have become more commonly known in educational contexts/discourses in recent decades. Learning, according to constructivists, is a fluid and ever-changing process. Over time, one's understanding of values or beliefs deepens and develops. Because of this, constructivist teachers emphasize the importance of students utilizing thought and research, and incrementally adding information depth and layering. Learning is an ongoing cognitive process. With respect to comic books, they can assist in this learning process through providing something additional that students can use as a supplement to their learning.

For young children, reading a comic book can be an essential part of developing good comprehension and valuable life skills. These picture books encourage young students to read between the lines and draw logical picture inferences, which improves their overall ability to make inferences (Combs, 2003). For instance, comic books can help students learn a foreign language through the supplement/support of visuals. Images can reference words written in a book to provide a con-

text for young learners. In this way students see a snapshot of the action or a representation of scenes while reading.

Constructivism is a theory that states that rather than passively absorbing information, learners construct knowledge. People's life experiences assist them in incorporating new information into their current knowledge. When students read comic books, they align memories to new knowledge (Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002). This means that the new information they experience while learning comes into full and comprehensive view. Simply put, comic books are utilized as a tool to help learners construct new knowledge (University at Buffalo Center for Educational Innovation, n.d.).

The use of comic books to teach elementary school students how to solve Math Word problems is the subject of a study from Batrisyia, Shahrill, Azamain, and Musa (2020). The study enlisted the participation of twelve Year 2 students from a Brunei Darussalam elementary school. To help students become more involved in their learning, a series of comics was developed, and several activities included characters adapted from local popular culture. A pre-test was provided to assess the students' previous knowledge of the words used in math word problems before the lesson intervention. Following that, a post-test was given immediately after the intervention lessons were completed to see if any performance improvements had occurred. The children were enthusiastic and engaged with the comic materials, according to a classroom evaluation distributed after the intervention. In addition, two main themes emerged from the interviews: 'Enjoyment,' which described students' excitement for and enjoyment of using comic books in the classroom, and 'Interest,' which described students' enjoyment as a result of their interest in comic books. Because of this result, the researchers encouraged educators to use comic books in the classroom, especially in mathematics, where certain concepts can be difficult for some students to understand (Batrisyia, Shahrill, Azamain, & Musa, 2020).

Comic books have also gained attention in recent years as a potential tool for teaching history to students. One of the advantages of using comic books is the fact that they can provide an engaging and visually stimulating format for conveying historical information. Additionally, comic books can offer a unique perspective on historical events. When learners engage with the material more intimately via a comic book, they can more easily develop empathy. In addition, scenes of a comic book can be depicted in a way that will encourage critical thinking. According to Soper (2019), comic books provide a way to visualize history that can be particularly useful for students who struggle with traditional history textbooks.

One example of a comic book that teaches history is "Maus" by Art Spiegelman. This famous series tells the story of a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust and his son. Readers might be less traumatized because the characters are mice rather than humans enduring torturous circumstances of concentration camps. "Maus" not only offers a unique perspective on the Holocaust but also teaches important lessons about prejudice, resilience, and family relationships. "According to Zuckerman (2008, p. 68), "The graphic novel is an appropriate medium to discuss the Holocaust is demonstrated not only by Maus itself, but also by later graphic novels that it inspired.".

Another theory applied to comics in language teaching is observational theory. According to Albert Bandura, (1977) observational theory rests on the idea that people emulate actions through everyday observation, frequently acting in the same way as others around them. Modeling, which is a key technique within observational theory, includes attention/observation, retention/emulation, motor reproduction/self-control and motivation and self-regulation (Bandura, 1977). Learners learn a behavior while it is being enacted, and then follow their own imperatives, acting in similar ways. Comic books can serve as positive role model resources for students learning a language. For instance, a graphic might display a character using certain phrases to connect with a local shop owner or police officer, modeling how English Language Learners (ELLs) can positively interact with these figures in their own lives.

Bandura's observational theory is the best theory for explaining the utility of such an effect. The reason for this is that observational learning allows people to learn as easily as possible by simply listening, watching, and visualizing a scene or situation. People's attention is captured and affected by their surroundings and atmosphere in observational learning, and in this way, they learn new things and have new experiences. Then individuals will finally comprehend the actions and then act or transform them into what they have learned externally. The same can be said about visual aids that are provided to students. When students are presented with lessons using visual aids, their attention is engaged, and they are allowed to use the

lessons presented as a model to strengthen and refine their learning skills so they can equate what they see with what they hear, making it easier to fully comprehend a subject.

Mitchell and Milan (2008) conducted a study on high-interest comics and their positive impact on children's behavior, particularly in the pro-social direction. These researchers wanted to gauge, unlike other studies, how comics could be used in real-life settings to improve social outcomes and cooperation. "The results demonstrate that high-interest cartoon models are both effective and feasible agents for positive behavioral change when used within the generalized imitation framework" (Mitchell & Milan, 2008, p.15).

Methods

For this study, I have utilized the quantitative method to observe and collect responses and information from the students who have experienced comics as a teaching tool firsthand. For two years, data was collected over a two-year period from university students majoring in English Education in Gifu, Japan. Each student completed one month of student teaching at an elementary school and one further month at a junior high school. The chart below (Figure 1) is a breakdown of the number of students the teachers taught as student-teachers, as well as combined responses of elementary school (ES) and junior high school (JHS) students regarding the use of comics as a teaching tool.

During their university teaching practicum, students were required to try out different teaching methods and keep track of the results. These students were to compare how comics/visual aids were used in the classroom and how the young learners reacted. Their experiences lasted one month and they performed two sessions, one at junior high school and one at elementary school.

The comics used by the student-teachers were mostly from comic books as they were unaltered, and showed some scenarios that the students may encounter in real life; the others were comics in which the student teachers changed the text on speech balloons so that the material could be used to relate to the subject they were discussing. All the comic strips that were used incorporated well-known characters and thus the student teachers did not make their characters. Some of the characters were Batman, Superman, SpongeBob SquarePants, various Avengers characters, and other characters from popular Japanese comic books as well. The student-teacher provided feedback to the children orally to enhance communication and strive to ensure they obtained truthful answers. Also, oral feedback was considered a more discrete method that would protect the children's privacy.

Student teachers at the university were free to devise their own customized lesson plans that incorporated comic activities. Student teachers attempted to use oral and written aids instead of visual aids during at least one lecture. They were to use materials, such as graphic organizers, in another class. Many student teachers used comic books to illustrate conversations. Others used blank dialog bubbles in comics and let the learners fill them in, allowing them to create and then have conversations using comic books. Some teachers used the pictures as conversation starters, asking the learners to explain what was going on in the scene.

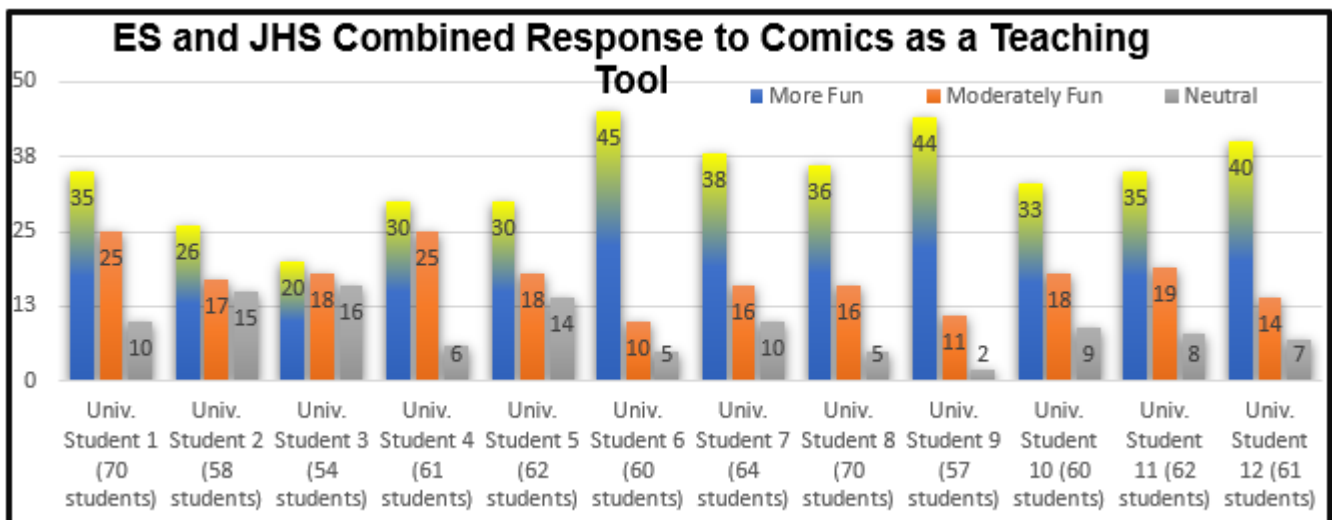The following are visual representations or approximations of these materials:

Figure 1. ES and JHS students' responses concerning comics as a Classroom Activity

1. Illustrating Conversations (from Pixton, an online comic creator website)

Here, the comic book created by the student teachers illustrates a casual conversation between two people, showing students how to politely ask for something and apologize for not being able to provide it, within formal contexts such as in an office or classroom setting.
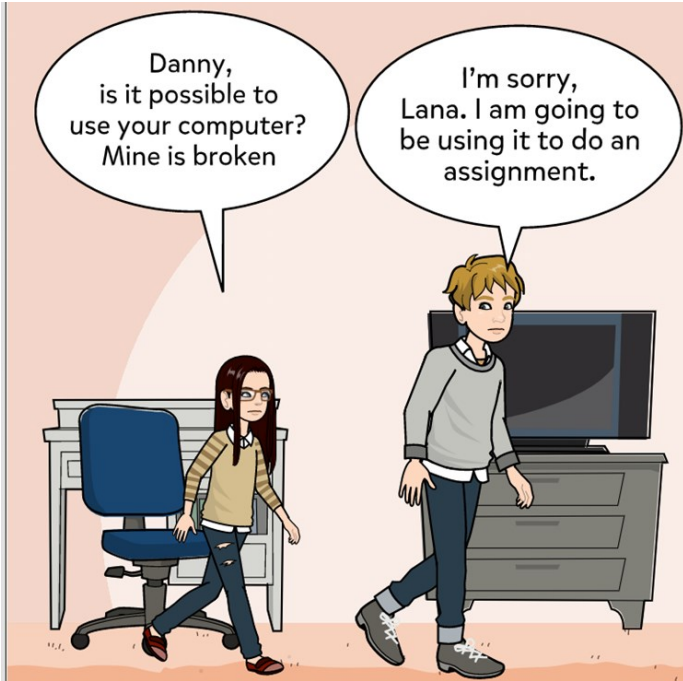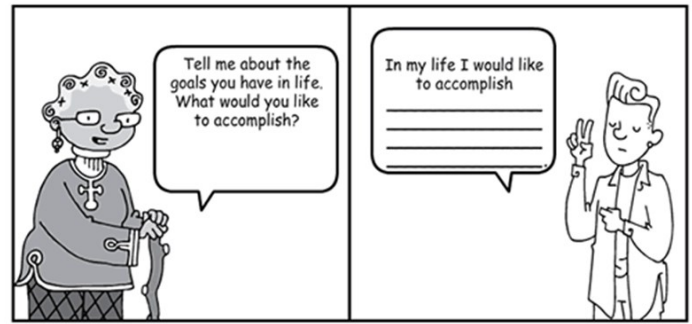

2. Blank dialogue bubbles

Here, students fill in the dialogue bubble. The comic book creator from Pixton was used by the instructor to create the comic book. Students can be creative in what information/dialogue they want to insert here.
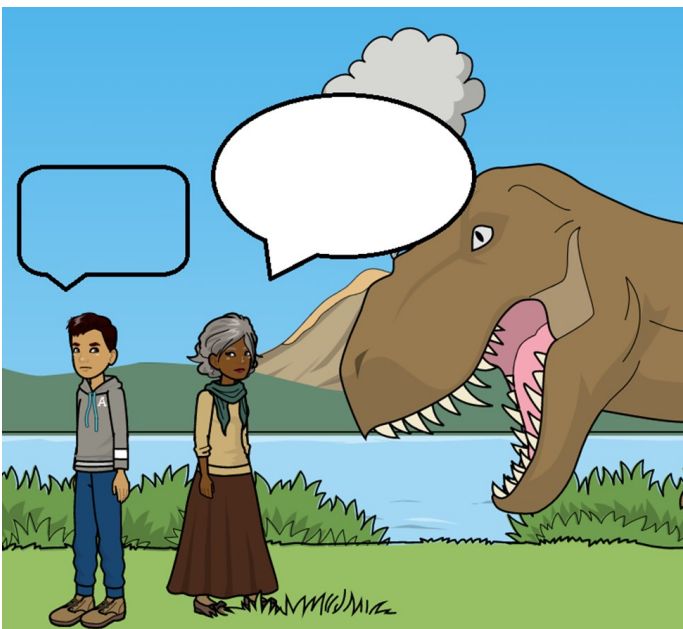
3. Conversation starters

Results

The response in elementary school was overwhelmingly positive. The students said that using comics helped them envision situations that would have been very difficult to visualize otherwise. Many children, especially boys, enjoyed seeing superheroes in the classroom, according to one student teacher, and this increased motivation. Most children said that the class that used visual aids was much more enjoyable than the classes that did not. According to the student teachers, the classroom was livelier (in comparison to other/typical classrooms) and most of the class members (approximately 85%) participated in recitations about the content, or just shared thoughts about the content. The use of popular and recognizable superheroes (Superman, The Hulk, Spiderman) and cartoon characters (Garfield, Elsa from Frozen, and other notable Disney characters) has been noted by the student teachers as the most popular.

The findings were almost identical in junior high school. When asked if they liked the activity, they said, 'yes', which corroborated the observations the student teachers made. In their classes, many of the student teachers found that there was more general interest in the younger group. In this sense, the comic books seemed to appeal even more to the younger audience.

Discussion

Aside from the entertaining aspect of using comics as a tool for teaching, they also integrate with the students' interest in specific characters that appear in the comics. This was the same for me when I was a child. In every morning newspaper that my family received, I would quickly scan through the paper and find the entertainment section, where the comics are placed. Comics are very appealing, especially to children. Teaching in general, incorporated with humor and entertainment, is already proven effective as it creates an atmosphere inside the classroom that is lighter, making the classroom more learner-

friendly. This also helps to build a student-teacher relationship.

As a result of the students' engagement with comics, they finally received new learning opportunities based on what they had seen and heard at the end of each discussion. In this case, it is important to remember that Albert Bandura's observational theory states that observational learning is extremely sensitive and influential in many ways because it describes and affects how people function and is often modeled. The impact of cultivating or enhancing an individual's intellect, atmosphere, and social behavior enhances this (Shettleworth, 2010). Observational theory helps to underscore this study's thesis that comic books can be a tool to secure more comprehensive and nuanced understandings of material. Observational theory also works when an individual learns and adopts a particular behavior rather than simply imitating it, which is why Bandura claims that children are the most vulnerable individuals when exposed to observational learning because they choose both desirable and undesirable behavior, making this a very strong model that dictates and explains how individuals function and operate (Stone, 2005).

In general, Bandura's observational learning theory is focused on behavior evaluation as well as learning and identifying the core elements or behaviors that learners appear to exhibit. It is also a type of learning that does not require reinforcement; in reality, it is a form of entertainment learning in which learners enjoy watching and listening to comics, drama, and other forms of entertainment while learning, as opposed to traditional learning with a teacher or instructor, which may have limitations. Therefore, it is essentially observation, learning through viewing, and listening. We can use Bandura's observational learning theory to suggest that learning is based on learners being provided rich content so that they can then choose the elements most salient to them.

As a result, the style of learning is relevant in the growth of children. Observational learning is a recommended intervention and solution to promoting the better growth of children from a psychological perspective, and it benefits children extensively with respect to social behavior change and development, making them interactive and curious to learn more. In other words, through examples provided in comic books, children can learn essential and new responses such as how to react when approached by an elderly individual or even a parent or how to respond when given a gift by someone. This is important even within the context of language learning. Children use comic books as models and templates to assist them with acquiring language and being able to converse in certain settings. To clarify, there is a strong link between using comic books and observational learning. Observational learning involves viewing something and modeling behavior after it, which is what students can do when they view visual aids. Children can also join a peer group that doesn't study, gets into trouble and engages in negative habits, which they pick up through observational learning, particularly in new contexts they have not been previously exposed to. With regards to comics and language learning, teachers can model positive behavior and words to students, which ensures they have effective communication skills.

Conclusion

Looking at comics as a visual aid learning tool involves graphical learning, which is important in children, and as a result, children can copy or adapt some of the behaviors illustrated in comic learning. A practical example of the Mitchell and Milan study mentioned in earlier could be, for instance, a comic book for an ELL that models how to appropriately talk to teachers/instructors during class, when to ask questions or how to cooperate/collaborate with other students in a group. Children can act, talk, mimic sounds, pose like characters in comic learning material and behave like characters in a learning toolkit during classroom activities.

These are all instances of observational learning. In this regard, comics aim to improve social learning and interaction, as well as behavior copying or learning and observational learning. Comics also provide social models such as teachers and parents who guide learners through the entire learning process; hence, it is a representation of observational learning (Shettleworth, 2010).

Using comics in teaching languages among children and teens is highly beneficial in learning (Swain, 1978). It is termed a fun art-enrichment activity. When students are acquiring new knowledge or are beginning to read, comics help in offering them a narrative experience. As such, the students can more easily follow the plot of the story up to the end (Sarada, 2016). Through comics, children and teens get to be actively engaged with comic books. This happens especially when images are sequenced within several boxes. Using comics in teaching languages to children or teens, large amounts of information can be presented to learners over a short period. On the other hand, it is not only large amounts of data but also the understanding that comes with the use of comics. Developing activities that utilize

comics to make learning fun and more engaging to children and teens is one of the ways teachers make their classroom lessons more effective.

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About the author: Ron Crosby teaches English majors at Gifu Shōtoku Gakuen University's Department of Education. He has over twenty years of experience in education, including teaching elementary school in the US, working as an ALT in Gifu Prefecture and a dozen years at the university level. His research focuses mainly on English education, but often includes cultural issues.