A bridge to another world: using comics in the second language classroom

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Abstract: The multilingual classroom in North America is changing and growing all the time; estimates suggest that by 2016, 20% of Canadians will be visible minorities (Diversity Fact Sheet, City of Calgary, 2003); comics are a way to bridge the gap between multiple first languages/cultures and the target language. This research paper contains a review of relevant materials relating to the nature of comics (primarily Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics) and various studies of comics as second language teaching tools (e.g. Williams, 1995). That the casual language is presented in a dynamic way, with maximum opportunity for the reader to read and re-read, allows for the SLL to integrate into the first language learning environment linguistically and culturally through the development of personal literacy, and consequently, social literacy (Pérez, 2004).

Keywords: comics, second language learning, literacy.

Introduction

The multilingual classroom in North America is changing and growing all the time; estimates suggest that by 2016, 20% of Canadians will be visible minorities (Diversity Fact Sheet, City of Calgary, 2003). The changing nature of the Canadian population at large is reflected in the faces of the public school classroom – and with it, a host of challenges for language instructors. Linguistic backgrounds, socio-cultural differences and individual learning styles influenced by these factors make for an ever-changing environment.

The challenges inherent in teaching reading skills in a multicultural and multilingual setting require an inclusive approach (Banks et al., 2005) and comics are potentially a way to bridge the gap between multiple first languages/cultures and the target language.
Evidence suggests that one of the best approaches for language and cultural integration is dual language books: “it is apparent that incorporating literacy strategies into dual language reading will provide opportunities for all children, regardless of language or race, to participate in a very comprehensive reading program” (Naqvi, 2006).

Unfortunately, the background of each student cannot be addressed multilingually either by resources, time or practicality; in such circumstances, comics can serve to bring learners together and aid them on a visual level. For a second language teacher¹, the following functions inform the choice to use visuals in reading:

- **Representation**: Visuals repeat the text’s content or substantially overlap with the text.
- **Organization**: Visuals enhance the text’s coherence.
- **Interpretation**: Visuals provide the reader with more concrete information.
- **Transformation**: Visuals target critical information in the text and recode it in a more memorable form.
- **Decoration**: Visuals are used for their aesthetic properties or to spark readers’ interest in the text. (Liu, 2004, p. 226).

However, comics are much more than just text + visuals – they employ a combination of the two for a total effect that gives the reader a linguistic and cultural integration unparalleled in ‘straight text.’ This paper seeks to examine just how and why comics make for a useful inclusion in any second language classroom.

¹ NB: I use the term “second language teacher/learner” and sometimes “ESL teacher/learner” almost interchangeably; the bulk of the research I have encountered relates to English, although I believe that comics can effectively convey language and culture in any second language learning environment.
Section 1 outlines terms for and identifies the relevant aspects of comics as they relate to a multi-cultural classroom, based largely on Scott McCloud’s seminal 1994 book *Understanding Comics*; section 2 discusses the specific applications of comics in exposing the linguistic and cultural norms of the target language; in section 3, I offer some personal recollections on my own experiences with comics as a second language instructor and learner. Finally, in section 4, I list my conclusions.

1. Defining and exploring the nature of comics

Will Eisner defined comics as *sequential art* (Eisner, 1985), a term that still appears in academic discussions of comics or graphic novels; Scott McCloud labour to point out that this is a very narrow definition of the art form, leading him to propose the following definition: “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1994, p. 9). This overly thorough explanation is needed in order to encompass the entire spectrum of visual art + words: one-panel cartoons, comic strips (generally consisting of two to five panels), comic books (which tell a story over 20 or more pages) and graphic novels (Cary, 2004) are all contained within McCloud’s definition; I will use the term “comics” in discussing them all, with an emphasis on narratives told through sequential art (Bierbrich, 2006).

The very nature of comics lends itself instantly to the teaching of a second language: in seeing action play out alongside words, a reader’s efforts at comprehension are greatly reduced. There is more going on in comics than the simple addition of visuals to a story, however; McCloud describes the appeal of the visuals themselves:
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… factors such as universal identification, simplicity… [creating] an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon [or comic], we become it. (p. 36)

For a second language learner (SLL), there is an instant appeal here: instead of feeling alienated and distant from the character by struggling with the language, the SLL gets to effortlessly inhabit the characters, putting the learner at ease with the material.

In reviewing the time/space aspects of how comics are constructed, McCloud points out that the three most common categories of panel transitions used in western-based comics depict shifts from action-to-action, subject-to-subject and scene-to-scene (p. 74); he then demonstrates graphically that Japanese comics are much more likely to incorporate elements of aspect-to-aspect shift or non-sequiturs (p. 77). In doing so, McCloud reinforces that comics are a product of their culture, and Western comics reflect the “goal-oriented” nature of that world, while the Eastern comics reveal a tendency toward a “rich tradition of cyclical and labyrinthine works of art” (p. 81). Thus the most fundamental metaphors of the culture (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) are apparent in one of the simplest and most accessible forms; this provides an introduction to the semiotics of the dominant culture in a way that is easy to access and interpret. A learner can see from western-based comics that there is more of an emphasis on “getting there than being there” as McCloud points out (p. 81).
2. Specific pedagogical applications of comics

2.1 Conveying language

For second language learners, the universal language of visuals helps to bring meaning to the constant, confusing dialogue of the real world (Burmark, 2002); as a result, the structures of language are comprehensible – such as vocabulary, linguistic oddities and colloquialisms – and accessible in a way that is enjoyable and easy to (re-)read (Cary, 2004). The speed at which the learner chooses to read is self-moderated, as is the choice to look up new words as he or she follows the narrative (Lai, Bjornerud et al. 2002). The language in comics is generally of one register – the informal, normal, everyday speech between friends and acquaintances (Williams, 1995). Students of all ages and abilities can appreciate the immediacy of comics and the opportunity to engage with language on a dynamic and authentic level.

Comics contain a richness and variety of language for a reader to experience. In Neil Williams’ (1995) extensive review of comics use for the adult second language leaner, he reveals that comics can have many different levels of language, exposing SLLs to native speech patterns, including:


This rich variety of English, directed toward native speakers, is on the page and can be reviewed and reread for meanings. Puns and double meanings are often an intrinsic part
of comic strips (Lucas 2005) and expose SLLs to language as play. In light of the orthographic complexity of English (Galletly and Knight, 2004), comics could help teach spelling. Linguistically, comics are as complex as everyday speech in terms of syntax, semantics and pragmatics; instructors can then exercise their own choice in determining which levels and forms of language they wish to introduce to their second language learners.

2.2 Conveying culture

Second language learners are drawn to activities that involve learning the casual language of everyday use (Lai, Bjornerud, et al., 2002). Stephen Cary (2004) talks about his introduction to Spanish as an opportunity to participate in not only language learning, but also cultural exposure:

A summer trip to Mexico opened my eyes on the second language and second culture fronts… The visuals reduced the amount of written text I had to tackle and provided comprehension clues that 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 (p. 3).

As SLLs are already involved in the everyday world of the target language and culture, comics give them the opportunity to see the world as their first-language speaking peers do, only within a controlled environment, allowing for a much lower anxiety level for the student. Authentic materials such as comics can add to the feeling of community within the class and the wider world. There is also evidence to suggest that enjoyableness and effectiveness of language learning activities can be correlated (Green, 1993).
Even within the L1 classroom culture, there is evidence that comics can play a role in children’s reading habits in creating an environment of active readers, who trade comics and stories, while debating the merits of various characters (Norton, 2003). There is an opportunity here to integrate the SLL with the L1 students who may already be engaged in “meaning making practice… rather than ritual” (Norton, 2003, p. 146), creating the ideal social conditions for the development of not only personal literacy, but also social literacy (Pérez, 2004). The social literacies of children are expanded by including comics as assigned or pleasure readings, while encouraging interactions between first language and second language learners.

3. Personal observations on the effectiveness of comics

I have been a casual reader of graphic novels (such as the Sandman series by Neil Gaiman) over the years, and even had one as a course text in an undergraduate class in science fiction (Y: the Last Man by Brian K. Vaughn, a post-apocalyptic tale of the last man on earth). I have always believed in their potential aesthetic and literary appeal; in researching their use in the second language class, I was surprised at the amount of references to disputes among librarians as to the value – or lack thereof – of including comics/graphic novels in public school library collections (Horner, 2003). After considering and researching the effectiveness of comics in the second language learning environment, however, I need no convincing as to their value in that regard; in fact, it has caused me to reflect on my own interactions with comics as a learner and an instructor.

As a second language learner of French and as a second language teacher of English, I have had the opportunity to explore the effectiveness of comics from both sides of the fence. In my French class in grade 11, my teacher read the French comic Astérix et
Obélix with us once a week. The comic is set in ancient France (Gaul) and depicts the silly, light-hearted adventures of a band of Gauls who travel around Europe and often fight off invading Romans. A lot of the humour had to be explained to us, and I remember our teacher using the text to talk about the Latin roots of French and English – there were a lot of puns on Latin phrases we didn’t know. It really helped me to remember vocabulary words, sparked my love of linguistics and inspired me to figure things out for myself. When I’d finish my work early, I’d go to the back of the room and grab a copy to see if I could figure out the puns on my own. I remember realizing that all of the names were themselves some kind of joke – the bard’s name was Cacaphonix, indicating he was not a very good musician – so I’d look hard at the names and use that as an indicator of their position in the story. Our weekly tour of ancient Gaul was not everyone’s favourite part of the class, (I can remember people grumbling when we pulled out the book and groaning at the terrible puns) but I adored it. I very much enjoyed being drawn into the French language through humour, and relished the opportunity to reflect on it on my own time.

As an English language instructor in Québec a few years later, I used comic strips to draw in my young English learners and connect with them through humour. When I was twenty, before I finished my undergraduate degree and before I had any instruction in how to teach ESL, I was an English language monitor in a large secondary school in a rural town outside of Québec City. I was expected to play games, sing songs and otherwise engage monolingual francophone students in English from ages 12-17 in order to supplement their English language classroom learning. Like Neil Williams in The
comic book as course book: why and how, I decided to use the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes. At the time I didn’t consider Williams’ well-considered observations that the comic could teach register, intonation and suprasegmentals (Williams, 1995, p. 1) – I just thought it was funny, and the drawings simple and direct enough to appeal to the grade nine students I was having a hard time connecting with. I gave the students a short strip with empty word bubbles, and asked them to fill them in; I then gave them the “real” version and asked them to compare them to their own and their classmates’ versions. I remember laughing at some of the results, and the students seemed to enjoy it; more than anything, though, I remember I learned a lot about French that week, as I watched the students translate directly from French to English. This is when I learned that the verb *venir* (‘to come’) in French is used with an infinitive to indicate that something just happened recently (e.g. one of the responses in the bubbles was *Je viens de gagner 1 000 000 $*, which means ‘I just won a million dollars’). My students taught me that there’s not always much use in a direct translation – all through comics.

What I learned in both of these instances is that the medium of comics is one of great appeal for students – challenging, but because of the humour level, not particularly stressful. This is not a unique discovery (Phillips, 1991) but it is one that, when added to the other positive aspects of comics (universality, reinforcement, cultural exposure, etc.) makes for a well-rounded case in favour of their use.

4. Conclusions

Comics can be used in lieu of first language texts in cases where the classroom makeup is so diverse as to limit individual first language reinforcement. But the question
remains: why should we use them – just because they are effective at transmitting the
target language and culture? It is possible that the introduction of comics might act as a
part of a pedagogy that is less traditional, “formalised, monolingual and monocultural”
(The New London Group, 1996, p. 9) as in the past. I believe it is possible to introduce
comics as part of a pedagogy of exposure, not immersion – there is no need to force the
dominant language and cultural values on the readers; merely exposing students to these
concepts in a non-stressful way can be valuable and effective.

Literacy researcher and second language acquisitionist Stephen Krashen considers
comics a vital part of an overall effort to encourage reading in public school students – he
sees comics as a conduit (Krashen Handout). I prefer the metaphor of a bridge: if dual
language reading books are individual bridges – light and strong – for each student,
offering the quickest, most direct route to second language learning, then I see comics as
a broader bridge – stone and permanent – with room for everyone.
References


