

Comic Books as a Teaching Tool

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Abstract

This paper begins by exploring the benefits of using comic books to teach reading, writing, and grammar to English Language Learners (ELLs). Then, one of the writers presents a comic book creation project she has used with her students.

Introduction

In the past twenty years, comic books and graphic novels have become increasingly popular all over the world and now include more characters that reflect global diversity. For example, the new Ms. Marvel is Kamala Khan, a Pakistani-American teenager who fights crime and is Muslim. Furthermore, there are a wide range of apps available that enable users to make their own comics or comic strips. Thus, the goal of this article is to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors with a wide range of ideas about how they can incorporate comic books and comic creation apps into their classrooms. To accomplish this, the article will be divided into two parts. The first half will focus upon the various ways in which comic books have been used as teaching tools in the ESL classroom while the second part of the article will detail a project one of the writers uses in her IEP grammar class. For the sake of brevity, the term “comic books” or “comics” will be used for the rest of this article to refer to comic books as well as graphic novels, trade paperbacks, photonovels, and/or comic strips.

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Why Comic Books

Unfortunately, there is not much in the literature about using comic books in ESL. However, what little information is there sheds some light on the advantages of using comic books with English Language Learners (ELLs).

Comic Books to Develop Reading Skills

First, comic books are authentic texts, which can expose learners to advanced grammar structures, vocabulary, idioms, and collocations as well as providing cultural information. Additionally, comics can promote reading comprehension and critical thinking (Ranker, 2007).

Another advantage of comic books is they are a good way to get students to read for pleasure or for extensive reading (Iwahori, 2008). That is, since comic books are created for entertainment purposes, students would be more likely to view reading them as fun. Therefore, students are not as anxious as they would be in reading an academic article or a textbook. By lowering the students' affective filters, comic books encourage students to read for fun. Furthermore, comic books may increase ELLs reading fluency – i.e. the ability to read accurately and quickly – when they are assigned through extensive reading (Iwahori, 2008). In fact, some research suggests that extensive reading can improve students' reading fluency. Specifically, by seeing the same words multiple times, students build their vocabulary, and so when they encounter these words they know, “they decode more words automatically. As a result, they can save their finite cognitive resources to comprehend a text” (Iwahori, 2008, p. 74).

Yet, the unique advantage of comic books is that they scaffold meaning for students by combining pictures and words (Chun, 2009; Krashen, 1989). Or, as Krashen (1989) put it, the visual narrative that accompanies the text in comic books “can provide clues that shed light on the meaning of an unfamiliar word or grammatical structure” (p.146). In doing this, Chun (2009)

argued that comic books promote “critical discussions in ways that are not always possible with only written texts, due to their scaffolding of textual meanings through their rich visual modes of representation” (p. 146).

Comic Books to Develop Grammar and Writing Skills

Up to this point, we have been discussing the use of comic books for the purposes of reading. Yet, students can also practice their English by creating their own comics. There is not much research available on the subject, but one example, which was written about in two articles, will be explored in this section, namely Nimmon and Begoray (2008) and Nimmon (2007). The focus in these articles is on the students learning about health issues affecting immigrant women in Canada – the learner population which the authors teach. To summarize, both articles detail how the students chose a health issue affecting them (i.e. nutrition), learned about that issue, and then worked together to create a comic book demonstrating what they had learned. Despite the content focus of this project, Nimmon and Begoray (2008) mention how the comic should “reinforce new language learned in class” and that the students should write out the dialogue before inserting it into their comic (p. 176).

An added benefit of the students’ collaboration was that it created a community of learners (Nimmon & Begoray, 2008; Nimmon, 2007). At the start of the project, the women reported “being affected emotionally by a lack of social support in Canada” (Nimmon, 2007, p. 338). However, the researcher “found that relationships within the group started when the women wrote the [comic] and created it,” and these relationships continued to develop throughout the project (p. 338).

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Comic Book Creation Project with a Grammar and Writing Focus

As one can conclude from the literature review, comic books can be a valuable teaching tool for ESL instructors. In the next part of this article, a comic book project which one of the authors created and implemented will be discussed. The project was created out of the struggle which instructors in many ELL programs often face: encouraging their students to read more outside of class as well as ensuring that they are actually able to use what they are learning in an authentic context. So, in an effort to deal with these issues and present the students with something fun, the comic book project was born. The project begins with an introduction to comic books, basic storyline, plot points, story writing devices, and vocabulary. Time is also spent reading comic books as well as looking at the different styles and types available. After the students have had time to become comfortable with the ideas, they are then asked to create their own comic book.

Overview of the Project

In this project, the students have a set list of grammar and narrative goals to accomplish. They complete the comic piece by piece as they learn about the basic structure of a story, elements of descriptive writing, and move through their grammar components. For this project, Google slides were used as the comic book building medium, but hand drawn projects or many of the apps available would work as well. Below are listed some of the project's target narrative and grammatical objectives. To view the entire Google Slides presentation the instructor showed her students, please use the following link:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/172sDoNeUIGWR4rQfFxoVmex6d-0lVFbytB8-s6ewMp8/edit#slide=id.p>

Preparing for the Project

The longest amount of time was spent collecting and creating materials to help show students what the finished product should look like. The writer collected multiple comics (both digital and print) to have on hand for students to use as examples. She also has a long list of Tedx, TedEd, and other videos, radio broadcasts, articles, and readings about superheroes, comics, writing narratives, etc.

Time Needed to Complete the Project

It takes four weeks at minimum to complete this project – assuming the instructor is teaching the five story components and the grammatical structures.

Story Components

The five basic components of a story are the introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

Grammar Components

The target grammar included adjective clauses, noun clauses, adverb clauses, and modals for certainty, ability, and advice. (Even though this project was designed for intermediate to advanced learners, students at beginning or low-intermediate levels could focus on using adjectives, adverbs, or prepositions in their comics.)

Both the story and target grammar components were discussed. Then example texts and comics were shown, and after that the students were expected to produce the first part of their comic combining both of these components. They then continued on through the remaining story and grammar components that must be completed for the class.

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Student Reactions

Overall, most students saw the project as a fun way to practice their grammar as well as an opportunity to be creative, which is not usually afforded them. For the occasional student who is not particularly thrilled about this project, it is recommended that teachers stress the fact that the project is helping them to use what they are learning in an authentic context – not just filling in the blank. After explaining this to students, they are usually willing to participate in the project.

Lessons Learned

With this project, the writer has learned there is a fine balance between being explicit and having specific deadlines to help the students with feedback as well as being willing to allow alterations – either to the project or the requirements – to help students both practice the objectives and embrace their opportunity to create.

Potential Challenges and Issues

There are a few potential challenges and issues which may arise with students. For example, students may be inexperienced with writing a story, be reluctant to write a story, encounter writer's block, and/or copy stories they already know. Furthermore, there may be students who want to participate in the project, but they are interested in creating more of a nonlinear story.

Other things to consider might be lack of vocabulary to write descriptively enough and issues with grammar other than the structures specifically being taught. Also, the level of the project must be altered in each situation to suit the level of the students. A one-format-fits-all version should be avoided as teachers cannot expect such a version to work for everyone. More advanced learners can be expected to write a more extensive story with more fleshed-out

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characters and settings. In contrast, students who are high beginning or low-intermediate should only be expected to write a basic story line with basic descriptions.

One last thing to consider for teachers preparing students for academic work is plagiarism. That is, if a teacher allows his or her students to find pictures online, be sure to provide them with a way to cite photos to avoid possible issues in the future. Moreover, it is recommend that teachers show students how search engine photos can be sorted by usage rights.

Comic Creation Resources

The following are different comic creation resources which teachers could use in their classrooms:

- Strip Designer
- Comic Book
- Comics Head
- Comic Life
- Moodboard Lite
- Art Studio
- Superhero Comic Book Maker
- Seedling Comic Studio
- Make Beliefs Comix
- Halftone 2 – Comic Book Creator
- Paxton

Conclusion

Even though comic books can be valuable classroom assets, there are some potential issues in using them with ELLs. First, it can be difficult to find age--and language--appropriate

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comic books for the class. For instance, if a class consists of adults who are high beginners, it would not be hard to find comic books that are written for adults. However, the lexical and grammatical structures might be too advanced for them. Furthermore, gaining access to comic books may not be financially possible. That is, although there are some comics that are available for free online, other comic books (e.g. *Ms. Marvel*, *Persepolis*) can cost anywhere from a dollar to twenty dollars or more. Another issue with comic books is the lack of research about using comics with ELLs.

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