



Making Reading Visible: Graphic Novels in the EFL Classroom

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Millennials want creative education. They are growing up navigating narratives presented through various formats (websites, video games, TV, podcasts, interactive media, pictures). Therefore, engaging them creatively and developing their visual literacy is paramount. There are many benefits associated with the up-and-coming arts-based pedagogies: improvement of the aesthetic; socioemotional, sociocultural, and cognitive skills building; and academic development (Iwai 2002), as well as cognitive stimulation and increasing students' positive attitude toward learning (Marshall 2014).

Graphic novels are the perfect medium for exploring arts-based pedagogies. Though relatively a new arrival on the literary scene, graphic novels have received some popular attention in the last decade. Much of this attention is attributed to their power to attract reluctant readers with their captivating storylines.

What Is a Graphic Novel?

Will Eisner, the father of the graphic novel, originally defined comics as sequential art. This definition was expanded upon the growth and broadening of graphic novels. Schwarz (2002) offers the following definition: "Graphic novels are fiction as well as non-fiction with pictures-comics in book format" (p. 262). However, we would like to expand upon this definition to stress that graphic novels are longer, intellectually and thematically sophisticated texts. This is certainly supported by Kelley (2010):

Like a traditional piece of literature in which authors choose their words carefully, the graphic novelist thinks critically about the color, line, form, shape, and detail, as well as the language they use. The story conveyed by a graphic novelist is as intricate as a story told by a traditional author, regardless of the age group of the target audience. (p. 6)

Therefore, it is only fair to stress that graphic novels are far more than mere texts with illustrations. They tackle complicated literary themes, which are deeply rooted in their sociopolitical context. More often than not, graphic novels explore multidimensional, complex themes much like traditional works of prose, only they have the added depth of the visual medium.

Why Graphic Novels?

Graphic novels have great potential, serving multiple purposes. For instance, the unique multimodal format creates powerful connections with students who are disengaged because both format and topics are relatable to young millennials. Also, visual learners respond better to graphic novels than to conventional texts. There is a plethora of reasons why educators should consider incorporating graphic novels in their curricula. Here, we offer a short list of the most compelling arguments.

- **Increase Motivation:** Graphic novels can improve learners' attitude toward reading. They send the message that reading can be fun and motivating. When you give an adolescent a fun and engaging book such as a graphic novel, you help them become a lifelong reader.
- **Educate on Civics:** There are plenty of graphic novels that relate to subjects across the curriculum, so they can facilitate the introduction of complicated, abstract issues and concepts, such as ethics, role and function of religion, government, role of history, power and authority, and so on. In other words, the reader receives a lesson in civic studies, which is hidden in the complex topics.
- **Reduce Cognitive Load:** The illustrations in graphic novels reduce the cognitive load and enable schemata activation. When readers use both linguistic and visual representation of the text, they are better able to recall and understand what they are reading.
- **Hone Inference Skills:** Graphic novels are an invaluable tool for honing inference skills. As text is minimally present and students receive the message in two forms—text and illustration—they often have to infer the message from the context. As in movies, events in graphic novels are often condensed, so the reader has to deduce what happened but was not explicitly stated.
- **Improve Critical Thinking Skills:** Furthermore, between the panels of the story, there are pauses of spaces (gutters) over which the reader must navigate and infer what is happening, both within and between the sequences. In that manner, graphic novels are superior in eliciting the types of critical thinking responses teachers are looking for. Their unique format helps scaffold and build information—the reader must analyze the received information and construct the meaning about the characters and events. This information is derived from facial and bodily expressions, color, language, text size, text font, shading, foreground and background images, and so on.

Classroom Application: Prereading Activities

As with any unfamiliar text, we believe it is important to incorporate prereading activities. This is particularly important considering the unique format of graphic novels.

Author Schemata

The purpose of this activity is to move away from the traditional approach of discussing an author's biography by encouraging students to make predictions and assess their prior knowledge about the author and their background. Students browse through the book (cover, blurbs, illustrations) and make predictions based on the author's name, the book cover, the title, glimpsing through the pages, and so on. You can encourage your students to consider the colors used for the cover pages and the font used for the text on the cover. Get the students to brainstorm ideas working in groups. In the feedback session, students should support their assumptions with evidence.

KWL (Know, Want to Know, and Learnt)

This activity is used during all three stages (pre-, during, and postreading). Students fill out a chart with what they already know about the author, the characters, the topic, the title, and so on. Next, they fill out the second section—what they would like to learn about the story. Encourage the students to pose questions for this part. This is a great prompt for critical thinking. Finally, in the postreading, students elaborate on what they have learnt by answering their own questions. Here lies another advantage of graphic novels—when students need to find information in different parts or chapters, the panels make it easier for them to skim and scan through the whole chapter or even the whole book.

Classroom Application: During-Reading Activities

Think Aloud

This is a reading comprehension strategy which allows students to read and to articulate their opinion at the same time. After reading several pages of the graphic novel (e.g., after 10 panels or a single episode), students stop to express their opinion regarding what has been read, make predictions about what has been said, or ponder on a character's perceptions or future or past actions, and so on.

As students read, they focus on the following prompts:

- Q1. What I've learned so far about the main character/the story
- Q2. I'm wondering about...
- Q3. Summary of the chapter

Conflicts

You can ask the students to identify the internal and external conflicts in the book and anticipate how these conflicts will be resolved. This is a powerful strategy, which triggers critical thinking. Ask your students to support their answers with evidence from the text.

Text Reformulation

This is another during-reading activity worth mentioning. Students convert the graphic adaptation into a standard version by describing the panels with their own words. This activity will help you address the formal aspects of creative writing. An added benefit is that you can assess how much of the story has been understood, especially whether students can decode and grasp the subtle details conveyed in the illustrations.

Classroom Application: Postreading Activities

Postreading activities intend to solidify understanding of the material and guide students toward a more complex, critical interpretation of the text.

Collage

Using magazine photos, students work in groups to create a collage of images that symbolize important ideas, events, or themes in the book. On the back, have students write an explanation of what each image symbolizes and how it draws on key material from the character's experience.



Figure 1. A sample of a collage for [Persepolis](#) by Marjane Satrapi.

Book Mobiles

Book mobiles are paper mobiles with thoughts, ideas, and information about the book. Designed as a group activity, book mobiles are the equivalent to a book report, only completed in a much more creative and engaging way. A book mobile has nine cards containing the following information:

1. Title and author of the book (this one goes at the top)
2. Main characters (at least three, with a short description of each character)
3. Setting (time and place) of the story
4. Conflict (the main problem elaborated in the story)
5. Solution (how the characters solved the problem)
6. Favorite part of the story written in at least three sentences
7. Summary of the story in about 8–10 sentences with at least five details about the story
8. Theme and take-home message
9. Personal opinion of the book



Figure 2. A book mobile for [Tomboy](#) by Liz Prince.

Final Thoughts and Book Suggestions

Our intent is to spark interest in graphic novels and to prove that, with some creativity, they can fit really well in your EFL/ESL teaching portfolio. This flexibility is evidenced in the fact that graphic novels are so multifaceted: One novel can tackle multiple topics. Consider the following graphic novels for a variety of teaching topics:

- In her autobiography [Persepolis](#), Marjane Satrapi combines the personal and the political into a moving story about growing up in a war-ridden country.
 - Themes/topics: religion, repression, heroism, violence, justice, and forgiveness.
- [Marzi](#) by Marzena Sowa is a humorous chronicle of Communist Poland.
 - Themes/topics: history of Communism, rebellion and activism, food shortages
- [Anya's Ghost](#) by Vera Brosgol and Gene Luen Yang's [American Born Chinese](#) engage the reader in complex themes of race and ethnicity.
 - Themes/topics: race and ethnicity, family, self-image, reincarnation
- There are a number of excellent coming of age stories that deal with a variety of themes and topics:
 - [Tomboy](#) by Liz Prince: gender nonconformity, friendship, dating, bullying
 - [New Kid](#) by Jerry Craft: friendship, acceptance, family, prejudice, the importance of community
 - [All Summer Long](#) by Hope Larson: friendship, music
 - [Town Boy](#) by Lat (a follow-up to [Kampung Boy](#)): rural vs urban settings, friendship, multicultural settings, love
 - [Marble Season](#) by Gilbert Hernandez: family, pop culture, bullying, judgment, storytelling
- Ben Hatke's [Mighty Jack](#) (the first in the [Mighty Jack Series](#)) is a heart-warming fantasy story touching upon autism.
 - Themes/topics: communication, single parenting, facing fears, preparing for danger

Graphic novels are a powerful teaching tool that can be included in any classroom, and we hope we have added our voice and support to the discussion.

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