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Reading comics in the language classroom

A literature review

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Abstract

There is no denying that comics and their characters have become a major part of our culture. Still, comics remain highly questioned as educational material. This review aimed at understanding whether there are arguments and reasons in research that would support comics as educational material. This review has focused on areas relevant to English education in Sweden and it is divided into four parts: multiliteracy, motivation, content learning, and language learning. The texts are mainly from different parts of the English-speaking world. The reviewed texts indicate that comics can be used to develop a number of literacies, motivate students to read, engage and educate around a vast variety of topics, and assist in students' language learning.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Culture

The second highest grossing movie of the year – so far (and in the US) – is the latest Avengers movie, *Age of Ultron* (Box Office Mojo, 2015a). It is second to *Jurassic World*. The first Avengers movie is the fourth highest grossing movie ever – worldwide. According to the statistics from Box Office Mojo (2015b), four out of the fifteen highest grossing movies ever are based on comics or characters from comics.

In the next five years, approximately 40 movies will be released that are based upon comics and/or characters from comics (Comics Alliance, 2015). Notably, these are only live-action movies (*Lego Batman* is probably going to be a borderline case) based upon characters from DC Comics or Marvel. Excluding these 40 movies, there are also a number of animated movies, other movies based on comics from other publishers, and a great number of TV-series based on comics currently airing or that will be aired in the near future. Thus, we should probably not deny the fact that comics and their characters are a major part of and have a great influence on our culture. If comics are a part of our culture today then they should probably also have a place within schools and the curriculum.

1.2 Syllabus for the English Subject

The purpose of the English subject is for the students to develop language skills and knowledge about the English-speaking world. This includes learning about culture, history, politics, and reading literature from and about these areas. It is also mentioned in the syllabus that education should incorporate material and sources from the English-speaking world as a resource for learning (Skolverket, 2011a, p.53).

The content in the English 5 course is supposed to cover “content and form in different kinds of fiction” (Skolverket, 2011a, p.54). It is up to each individual teacher to decide how to address this goal. However, Skolverket (2011b) have provided some examples of what ”different kinds of fiction” might include. ”Teckande serier”, the Swedish name for comics, is given as one example but other examples include movies, song lyrics, myths, and video games.

1.3 Expanded Literacy Concept – Multiliteracy

One of the advantages in using comics is to develop multiliteracy. Knowing how to read and write traditional word based texts is not sufficient literacy competence in today's society. Because of changing communications and the development of new technology, we are able to communicate with other means than by typing words. Against this background, Elsner, Helff and Viebrock (2013) define a multiliteracies approach for foreign language education:

A multiliteracies approach to teaching and learning a foreign language aims at the development of functional, visual, multimodal, and digital literacies, transcultural competence, language awareness and critical-reflective thinking skills. (p.8)

The authors argue that students should be able to function with these new literacies in the 21st century. They mention that learning how to decode and interpret visual images is especially important since much of the communication today uses visuals in some way (Elsner and Viebrock, 2013, p. 20). Skolverket does not explicitly mention or discuss the expanded view of literacy in the syllabus for the English subject (Lundahl, 2012, p.63); however, they do state that the content in the English 5 course is supposed to cover several different types of text, as mentioned above.

1.4 Terms and Definitions

Even though it might seem quite obvious what comics are, researchers are not in agreement about their use of terms and definitions. There are two definitions that most researchers rely on in their studies. The first definition can be found in Will Eisner's book, called *Comics and Sequential Art* (2008, first published in 1985), which is considered to be one of the fundamental books within the field. Eisner simply defines comics as "sequential art", in which images and letters together form a narrative. The second definition comes from Scott McCloud's highly acclaimed book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993):

Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the reader. (p. 9)

Although McCloud mentions that all we might actually need in terms of a definition is, Eisner's definition, i.e. "sequential art", he argues that with a more specific definition we

are able to explore comics and their history in another way. As a consequence, the definition of comics allows us to include not only comic books and graphic novels but also ancient hieroglyphs from Egypt, and tapestries.

However, understanding the usage of these terms requires more than simply defining them. Douglas Wolk (2007, p. 60f) discusses the different connotations of these terms and definitions. He compares the different views with a class struggle, where “comics” or comic books is the “bad” or cheap way of referring to comics, while graphic novel or sequential art would be the better, more fancy way. Therefore, depending on which term researchers use they might try to position themselves within the field. Wolk also makes an important distinction between two different types of graphic novels: mainstream and art comics. Mainstream comics are several individual comic books, most likely telling parts of the same story, put together into a volume or collection to tell an entire story arc. Art comics are generally only published as graphic novels, and they might vary quite a lot in style and content because the most important thing for readers is the artist and his or her ideas presented in the comics rather than a specific characters from DC Comic or Marvel.

At the same time, “comics” can also be used as an umbrella term for several different types of sequential art, including cartoons, comic books, comic strips, and graphic novels (Cary, 2004, p.10) and this is how the term will be used in this review.

Here it would be appropriate to include a short comment on manga. Even though manga clearly fits in with the scope of sequential art that McCloud (1993) defines. Wolk (2007) mostly ignores them – because he is not interested in them - and also because he argues that they are slightly different from comic books and graphic novels. Cary (2004) does not include manga as a part of his “comics” umbrella, but he does discuss manga several times in his book. Consequently, manga will not be discussed further in this text.

1.5 Structure of the Review

The aim of this review is to understand the educational benefits of reading comics. The research question to be investigated is as follows:

What reasons does research provide as to why educators should include comics in language education?

This review has been divided into four parts that are relevant to English education in Sweden: multiliteracy, motivation, content learning, and language learning. Several different types of texts have been used in this review. Some researchers have provided theoretical discussions, a number of authors rely on their own experience to discuss the potential of comics, while others have conducted different kinds of empirical studies with interviews, questionnaires, “immediate recall protocols”, and learning studies. These resources have mainly been produced in English-speaking countries. While it would have been preferable to only include resources aimed at high school-level, this has not always been possible and a number of texts have focused on both younger children and adults.

2 The Review

2.1 Multiliteracy

Historically, comics have been considered to be a threat to people's ability to read and write (Eisner, 1994); however, more recently researchers and educators have started to realize the potential comics have for developing different types of literacy and together develop students multiliteracy skills (e.g. Carter, 2009, Rapp, 2011, Eisner, 1994, Elsner 2013).

Comics can be used to develop a number of different literacies. Elsner (2013) mentions that "combining different semiotic codes and offering rich and complex plots, graphic novels can be considered as a valuable text form for the enhancement of visual, multimodal, critical, and functional literacies" (p.55). Critical literacy means that readers are able to interpret and assess different types of texts so that they do not fall victims to false or manipulated information. Elsner discusses critical literacy in relation to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in which the characters are portrayed as different types of animals: Jews are mice and Nazis are cats. Critical literacy would be to interpret and understand why Spiegelman has chosen to portray people involved in the Holocaust this way. To read critically, readers have to "actively participate" (Elsner, 2013, p.62) in the reading and apply their own knowledge and ideas to the text.

Chun (2009) also explores how *Maus* could be used with English-language learners in order to develop critical literacy; "what makes the use of *Maus* in the classroom so compelling is its intellectually engaging content realized through its visual narrative strategies of representing history" (p.147). Chun points to the importance of asking good or key questions, in order to become more critical. For example, "why was this book written?" And "who is this text addressed to?" (p. 147). According to Chun (2009), *Maus* might resonate especially well with ESL students. Mainly because students might identify with the characters' situation when it comes to racism and language use for example. He argues that *Maus* enables discussion about racism, genocide, and other similar topics, not only in the past but also how these things are still happening in the world today. Some ESL student might identify with Vladek Spiegelman, Art Spiegelman's father who lived through the Holocaust, and his ability to use several languages and the need for him to use specific languages in specific situations. *Maus* may also provide learners with an alternative to traditional history textbooks used in schools, which might enable them to think about what and how history is presented in history books.

Comics can also help students develop visual and multimodal literacy. Visual literacy is defined as the “ability to decode, use, and create visual forms of expression” (Elsner and Viebrock, 2013, p.28), while multimodal literacy “denotes the ability to obtain, systematize, expand and link information from different symbolic systems” (Elsner and Viebrock, 2013, p.28). Elsner (2013) mentions that “[i]n graphic novels, each panel has its own story to tell. The complete and comprehensive meaning however is only revealed in the overall interplay of all panels” (p. 63). Readers need to learn how to decode and interpret the individual panels, the words and images that they contain, and how to relate the panels to each other.

According to Elsner (2013) graphic novels can develop functional literacy, “the ability to learn languages and use them adequately in different contexts” (Elsner and Viebrock, 2013, p.28) just as well, if not better, than traditional books. The language aspect of comics will be discussed further in section 3.4, and will only be mentioned here briefly. Elsner argues that the quality and lexical density of the vocabulary in comics are higher than in other books at the same level. She also argues that the combination of images and text is especially helpful for weak readers, and that young readers might be more motivated to read multimodal texts.

Many people do not want to use comics in their literacy teaching because they believe that the images limit the students’ own ability to visualize the story. Elsner (2013) and others (e.g. Cary, 2004) disagree. Researchers seem to agree that comics do not interfere with visualization or creativity (e.g. Elsner, 2013, Wolk, 2007). Most writers and illustrators do not create overly detailed panels. Instead, they work with visual and/or textual clues and symbols to indicate setting, mood, motion, time, and so on. From these clues readers have to actively participate in making meaning out of these clues. McCloud (1993) calls this “closure”: “the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole”(p.63). The readers’ understanding of the medium, their background knowledge and their imagination will help them determine what happens in the story based upon the clues given.

Thus, it seems as if the key to understanding what comics can do lies in understanding the medium itself. Elsner (2013) concludes her chapter by advising educators to “start with reading and analyzing graphic novels themselves, they will soon recognize the very potential of this fascinating piece of literature, not only but especially in terms of their benefits for literacies development in the EFL classroom”(p.68).

The importance of understanding the comics medium has been studied by Heidi Hammond. Hammond (2012) observed that the circulation of superhero comics and manga, at the library where she worked, was increasing as they brought in more comics to their collection. This made her wonder how students would respond to more serious art graphic

novels. Therefore, she set out to determine “whether students’ knowledge of comic conventions involving multimodal literacy skills would affect their responses to a graphic novel” (Hammond, 2012, p.26). The participants in her study consisted of “23 senior Political Science students” (Hammond, 2012, p. 26). First they had to read the chosen graphic novel, *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang, and after that write down responses on three different occasions. Thereafter, they had recorded book discussions, which were followed by classroom lessons about the history of comics and comic conventions. After that they had to read the graphic novel once again and write down new responses. Finally, some students participated in a group interview, while other created their own comics.

Hammond (2012) found that knowing about comic conventions helped the students become more aware of the clues and techniques the creator used, it also increased their comprehension and visual literacy:

Due to the lesson on comic conventions, the students claimed that they paid closer attention to the images, noticing more details, including facial expressions and characters’ emotions.

Many students reported that they changed their reading method the second time they read the graphic novel. (Hammond, 2012, p.28)

Knowing about comic conventions also assisted the students in creating more “sophisticated and complex” (p.29) comics, which means that knowing about these conventions affected both the receptive (comprehension) and the productive (communication) literacy skills. The students in the interviewed group commented that they thought that the negative view of comics would probably decrease as more people become familiar with the medium.

Hammond simply states how she conducted her study but she does not give a thorough description or explanation of it. For example, she writes that the students “wrote responses to prompts at three designated intervals” (p.27) without any further explanation, which makes it difficult to duplicate the study to corroborate her results. Furthermore, she states that Americans are not as familiar with the comics format as others (“in other parts of the world”(p.24)). Once again, it is unclear whom Hammond is referencing. Since comic books and graphic novels are very closely connected to the U.S. and have a long tradition there, it seems unlikely that Americans should be less familiar with the medium than others. Some students might not have read comics before but it seems more likely that more students in America than in, for example, Sweden, would have come into contact with comics.

Rocco Versaci (2008) claims that comics promote another concept of literacy: Literary Literacy. He sees this as people's passion for books, the stories that they tell, and the importance of those stories:

All of my suggestions stem from my belief that to foster literary literacy, we must present students with engaging reading material that rewards meaningful analysis, demonstrates important connections with their lives, and invites them to take an active role in their literary education rather than be passive consumers of it. (p. 94)

Comics could be especially suitable to foster literary literacy according to Versaci. He found that most of his students did not have this love of books, instead the students read or watched stories and searched for information through the TV, movies and the Internet. These are all media that rely on a combination of text and images (visuals) but that can be processed rather passively (Versaci, 2008, p. 96). Comics than could be the bridge that connects the combination of text and images with more active and engaging reading by the students.

Versaci (2008) argues that the static panels in comics allow readers to spend time analyzing each panel, much like photographs but unlike the constant motion in TV-series or movies. At the same time, a panel cannot be analyzed in isolation as a photograph, because panels are only meaningful in relation to the other panels in the story. Therefore, the nature of the medium can help students develop visual literacy skills.

In addition to developing visual literacy, comics also invite students to actively participate in discussions about what constitutes literature. Versaci (2008, p.106) found that his students were more willing to participate in discussions and interpret comics than highly acclaimed works of literature such as Faulkner's *Barn Burning* or *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. The fact that comics are considered to be "lowbrow" literature might make students more open towards criticizing them.

In addition to the visual aspect and that comics invite students to actively question them and literature in general, the vast range of topics available in comics make it possible to connect comics reading with the students' own experiences and lives (Versaci, 2008, p. 103f). For example, Chun (2009), previously mentioned in this section, explicitly discussed the relevance of *Maus* in today's society. Together, these aspects might foster literary literacy.

2.2 Motivation

There seems to be almost a consensus amongst researchers that comics have an innate power to motivate students to read, learn and engage with these texts (e.g. Norton, 2003, Carter, 2009, Rapp, 2012), and many researchers argue that they are especially helpful for “reluctant readers” or “struggling readers” (e.g. Eisner, 1994, Rapp, 2012). Some researchers have pointed out that they can also be motivating and engaging for high-level and advanced learners as well (e.g. Kelley, 2010, Carter, 2009).

One idea as to why comics are motivating to read, is that they are first and foremost an entertainment medium – they are supposed to be engaging to read – otherwise people would probably not buy them. Cary (2004) calls this the “fun factor”(p.13) and he argues with a starting point in Krashen’s input hypothesis that if students are engaged in their reading they are more likely to learn from it as well.

Norton (2003) came to a similar conclusion in her research, namely, that one of the driving forces behind children’s motivation to read Archie comics is that they are fun to read. In her study, Norton wanted to find out why students read Archie comics, and to see if these findings could possibly assist literacy teaching in schools. She interviewed 34 students between the ages of nine and twelve in an elementary school in Canada. All of the interviewed students were readers of Archie comics. She had also conducted interviews with teacher students, which she used to contrast the views of teachers and students regarding Archie comics.

The majority of students in Norton study answered that humor was a part of why they were reading Archie. Norton discusses several aspects as to why the students found Archie comics fun. One aspect was that they “found the characters interesting, engaging, and humorous” (p. 142). Another aspect was the fact that they felt a sense of ownership over the reading - they felt that they were in control of the reading. A third aspect was the visual appeal of comics. Some students commented that they liked to look at the pictures while others, mostly those with other L1s than English, also argued that the pictures helped them understand the text.

Unsurprisingly, the teacher students did not share the student’s positive view of Archie comics. Instead they considered the characters to be “superficial and shallow” and most of them would not include Archie comics in their classroom (Norton, 2003, p.141). A couple of the teacher students who were slightly more positive towards using comics in their classroom, simply argued that reading comics was better than reading nothing at all. Norton

(2003, p. 146) concludes her text by arguing that in order for students to make meaning out of reading they need to feel like they are in control of that reading which, unfortunately, is not always achievable in schools.

A common opinion amongst those who negatively criticize comics is that people consider comics to be childish diversions. From this background Botzakis (2009, p.52) set out to explore what adult fans of comics get out of reading comic books, and with the aim of understanding if this could possibly have any implications for educators.

Botzakis (2009) observed and interviewed twelve individuals of different ages and origins that had been reading comic books for quite some time throughout their lives. Four out of these twelve were used as examples to demonstrate Botzakis observations. The four areas that he could identify were: reading as study, reading as appreciation and ownership, reading as friendship, and reading as search for meaning. The first individual was going to use comics and other sources of pop culture to investigate people's view and knowledge of specific cultures, in this case Japanese and Chinese cultures. Comics, in this case, was used as a source in higher education and studying. The second individual enjoyed reading the stories that comics tell. He answered the question of what he got out of reading comics with the following: "Just happiness. Just joy. There is a collectible aspect to it that I like. I like picking up a book, reading it, enjoying the story, enjoying the artwork, and then having it, kind of like forever. Maybe" (Botzakis, 2009, p.54). For the third individual reading comics became an escape, and a way for him to tackle problems in his own life situation. He had read the same comics for a long time and the same characters still remained in those, which gave him something constant in his life. The fourth and final individual read comics in search for existential answers – to find meaning.

As a result of his observations and interviews, Botzakis (2009, p.57) draws the conclusion that popular culture texts such as graphic novels and comic books can be read for a number of meaningful purposes. He also makes a valid point in his conclusion, namely, that comics might not motivate every single student to read because they are not a universal cure for students who resist reading. However, for some students they might make all the difference in the world and get them to start reading. For that reason comics should not be excluded from education.

Another aspect that might motivate students to read comics is the range of topics available. Rapp (2012) states that "the sheer variety of topics and stories to be found in comic books suggests that readers, regardless of their demographic characteristics and personal interests, should find titles that interest them" (p.66). These topics can not only be a source for

interest and motivation but also learning.

2.3 Content Learning

When it comes to comics, laymen might be quite ignorant of the span of issues and topics that comics today cover. First of all, it is crucial to understand that comics is a medium (McCloud, 1993, Wolk, 2007, Duncan, Smith and Levitz, 2015, etc.), just as television, radio, and the printed page are. All of these different media consist of different genres. Duncan, Smith and Levitz (2015, p. 163ff) mention 19 different genres in comics, excluding hybrid cases, with everything from romance to horror stories and funny animal stories. Carter (2009) points to the variety of comics that has been published:

[E]xemplary graphic novels of the past 30 years have dealt with such mature topics as date rape, teen pregnancy, the Iraq war, Hurricane Katrina, genocide, and gang violence, as well as all of the major issues that adolescents face: coming of age, identity formation, friendship, and change. Even superhero comics have explored such weighty issues as drug addiction, mental illness, HIV infection, and land mine safety. (Carter, 2009, p.70)

Rapp also indicate the great range of comics available today:

Besides the expected humor, adventure, and science fiction stories, there are comics for readers of all age groups and ability levels that focus on historical events, discuss political, cultural, and scientific issues, and offer beginner's introductions to academic topics. (Rapp, 2012, p. 66)

McCloud (1993, p. 22f) makes an important point, namely, that there is no limit as to what could be presented in the medium, or in the comics format. Even though superheroes are closely related to the medium, it does not mean that there are not other stories without superheroes.

Gorg Mallia, who works at the university of Malta, has conducted several studies regarding comics. In his study called *Learning from the Sequence: The Use of Comics in Instruction*, published in *ImageText* in 2007, Mallia set out to explore whether comics can function as educational material to learn content from in relation to more traditional text based educational material. To test this, Mallia created three different text versions of the same content. The first text consisted of the original text which consisted of text only. The second

version included the original text but with the addition of illustrations. Finally, a third version of the original text was converted into a comic according to comic conventions but with the same core content. Mallia gave these to 90 students from four different Maltese secondary schools. The students were 14 or 15 years old with an equal division of boys and girls. The different versions of the texts were given to 30 students each. After the students had read their assigned text, they answered a questionnaire. Everyone answered the same questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice, open spaces to fill in with single words, and open answer questions. The majority of the questions were to test the students' ability to remember facts from the texts, and the rest were open to opinions and speculations regarding the texts. Mallia also included some questions regarding the students' learning preference and other demographic aspects.

According to Mallia (2007) "recall of content of the comics treatment was very close to that of the illustrated text treatment, and both fared better than the text-only treatment"(p.4). Interestingly, there was no difference amongst the students depending on their preferred way of learning (for example visual or read/write). All of the students seemed to be at an equal disposition towards reading comics.

Jun Lin (2004) conducted a similar study to Mallia's, where he tested "the effects of comic strips on L2 learners' reading comprehension"(p.225). He divided the students into four groups: two high-level and two low-level. One out of each level-group were given an ordinary text that was adapted to the group's level while the other group read the same text for that level but with a comic strip accompanying it. Thereafter, the students had to write down what they remembered from the text. Lin's findings show that accompanying comic strips were significantly helpful for the low-level students but it did not have any significant effect for the high-level students. Lin (2004) argues:

The high-level students do not benefit from the comic strip accompanying the high-level text because the comic strip provides simplified input that shifts their attention away from the complexities of linguistic structure and the details of the story that the comic strip does not reveal. (p. 238)

According to Lin, the comic strip accompanying a text needs to reflect that text's linguistic complexity otherwise it might not help the reader to understand the text.

While Mallia (2007) used questionnaires to test what the students remembered, Lin (2004) used immediate recall protocols. According to Lin (2004) immediate recall protocols

is “a postreading task designed to test students’ ability to understand texts without the help of outside materials” (p. 233). The questions in Mallia’s questionnaire might have helped students recall specific facts, or the students might have simply guessed which was the correct answer in the multiple-choice questions. Lin’s postreading task in which the students simply had to write down what they remembered, was not affected by questions directing the students and they could not guess the correct answer.

The possibility of using comics as a source for content learning was also investigated by Cromer and Clark in their theoretical discussion of comics in relation to history teaching. Cromer and Clark (2007) set out to explore “the potential of the graphic novel as a means to approach history and historiography in secondary school social studies and history classrooms” (p.574). They discuss the potential of graphic novels theoretically without support from practical studies or any mention of in-class experiences. Cromer and Clark (2007) argue that the dual nature of graphic novels, with text and images working together to create a narrative, gives graphic novels their pedagogical potential. According to Cromer and Clark (2007, p.586f) graphic novels are more accessible to students than other more extensive works and also that the nature of comics enables multiple interpretations and reading of graphic novels. The students might be more willing to make their own interpretations of text if they do not feel that there is a correct way to interpret a specific text.

Consequently, Cromer and Clark (2007) argue that graphic novels can help students “appreciate the complexity of history”(p.583), “develop historical consciousness”(p. 583), and “encourage them to become more critical consumers of historical accounts”(p. 589). Some graphic novels offer complex stories or retellings of historical events that students need to be able to make sense of. To make sense of these texts they need to become critical consumers of their reading of comics. Students should not simply accept the historical retellings in graphic novels as true facts, rather, they need to realize that writers and illustrators have made their own interpretation of events when creating the story. As has already been discussed in relation to critical literacy, the portrayal of Jews as mice in *Maus* cannot be interpreted literally but the readers have to be critical consumers to realize what it actually represents. Another aspect that Cromer and Clark mention is the fact that, for example, *In The Shadow of No Towers* by Art Spiegelman presents a highly subjective view of an historical event. *In the Shadow of No Towers* is a story about what Spiegelman himself experienced on 9/11 and thereafter. Comics such as this offer students the possibility to analyze retellings of historical events.

Even though Cromer and Clark’s conclusions seem reasonable they are a bit unclear in

their use of terms and, unfortunately, some of their arguments do not have as much effect as they could have had. First of all, they use the term “graphic novel”, in accordance with Wolk’s (2007) concept of “art comics”(p. 11 + 27) and they are quite obviously trying to distance themselves from “comics”, in order to gain legitimacy. However, it becomes ironic when they are promoting graphic novels and distancing themselves from comic books, when they put a lot of emphasis on *Maus*, which was originally published in a comics anthology magazine, *Raw*, as comic books from 1980 to 1991 (Wikipedia: *Maus*, 2015, Wikipedia: *Raw*, 2015). Neither do they explicitly mention “art comics” or “art graphic novels”. Secondly, they only discuss a small number of graphic novels in their text and when they try to indicate that a lot of topics and issues could be addressed with graphic novels they only mention Canadian history as an addition. While interesting that there is in fact graphic novels about Canadian history, it does not really point towards the range of topics available.

In her study regarding graphic novels, comic conventions and literacy teaching (discussed in section 2.1), Hammond (2012, p.26) also wanted to know whether students could appreciate “serious issues” in the comic book format. She simply mentions in the end of her text that the students could appreciate serious issues in the comics format but does not present any support as to why she came to this conclusion.

2.4 Language Learning

With a starting-point in Stephen Krashen’s input hypothesis and affective filter hypothesis, Stephen Cary (2004) promotes comics as a source for foreign language learning. According to Cary:

Comics provide both the needed input and positive affect. Abundant visual clues increase the amount of comprehensible input and consequently boost reading comprehension and L2 acquisition. Increased comprehension, in turn, keeps the affective filter low by eliminating or considerably reducing the anxiety and frustration many students feel... (Cary, 2004, p. 13)

Comics can function as a source for language learning as they provide readers with authentic language that native speakers would use in different contexts, and with the help of visual clues to understand. According to Cary (2004, p. 15), “comics provide authentic language-learning opportunities for all students, regardless of a learner’s second language proficiency level. The dramatically reduced text [...] of many comics [...], make them manageable and language-profitable for even beginning level readers”. This might be true;

however, according to James Milton (2008), comics usually have a lexically dense language, which might require more from the reader in terms of language proficiency. The language level and the amount of written language in comics will vary from comic to comic.

James Milton (2008) has conducted studies regarding whether foreign language students can learn vocabulary from informal tasks such as reading a comic book, watching a movie, or listening to a song outside of school. His study regarding comic book reading consisted of one native English speaker learning Dutch. The learner read a Lucky Luke comic book for one hour, once a week, for eight weeks. A pre-test was administered to determine how many words of the text the student knew from the beginning. During the eight weeks, the learner did weekly vocabulary tests. The tests, both the pre-test and the rest of them, consisted of 300 words from the text, which the student had to grade on a scale of 0-3 (0 meaning that the learner definitely did not know the meaning of the word and 3 meaning that the learner was definitely sure about the meaning).

During the pre-test the learner gave 3's to 82 out of 300 words. At the last test, after eight weeks, the learner gave 3's to 223 words. According to Milton (2008), this means that on average the learner learned 30-36 words per every hour spent reading the comic book. He contrasts this with previous studies on incidental learning, which indicated that only a small limited number of items could be learned this way. He also mentions that comic books are more lexically dense than, for example, song lyric or movies: "it is clear that reading the comic book text, in particular, is a very lexically dense activity; an able learner might be expected to take rather more vocabulary from this compared with the DVD..."(p.236). Milton also makes some concluding remarks regarding whether it is possible to learn vocabulary from informal out of school activities and point out that "learners were apparently very willing to spend time, and considerable amount of it, in foreign-language activities provided they enjoyed the activity"(p. 234). He also mentions the role and importance of repetition in language learning.

Milton (2008, p.233) acknowledges the fact that he only had one participating student in his study. The reliability and generalizability of the results could therefore be questioned since one student is most likely not representative of all students. However, it does give an indication of the fact that students might actually learn from informal learning activities such as reading a comic book outside of the classroom.

Comic book reading outside of the classroom has also been investigated by Kay Hammond and Katherine Danaher. Since "reading outside the classroom offers students greater exposure to language than is possible in class time alone..."(Hammond and Danaher,

2012, p. 193), it is an important aspect of language learning. However, Hammond and Danaher reference a study which stated that adult refugees and migrants do not always have the time to engage with the types of texts that are commonly used in education even though they might want to. Thus, there was a need to find or create material that provided these learners with more efficient texts and readings.

As a result of this, Hammond and Danaher (2012) created their own comic books. These were used with elementary and upper-intermediate level adult refugee and migrant ESL learners. The focus with the comic books was for the students to learn vocabulary; therefore, the grammatical structures of the comic books were at a level that the students could understand. The researchers also made recordings of the stories so that the students could listen to them while reading.

The aim of the study was to investigate the perceived value of targeted comic book readers with ESL learners. The participants were adults from all over the world: Asia, Africa, The Middle-East, South America, and Eastern Europe. At first they were given a questionnaire to respond to; however, these did not provide useful information for the researchers. Therefore, interviews were conducted instead. These interviews allowed the researchers to identify five areas of relevance as to the value of targeted comic book readers. According to Hammond and Danaher (2012, p. 201) the students found the comic books valuable and enjoyable. The illustrations played a major part in making them enjoyable and understandable. They also mentioned that:

The main aspects that appeared to be useful were the level of difficulty and the repeated target vocabulary that matched the vocabulary taught in the courses and which was relevant to their needs. The readers were beneficial as a model for understanding and using vocabulary in context. The recordings were useful for improving listening and as a pronunciation model. (p.201)

From the interviews with the learners several aspects could be identified that the targeted comic books helped with. Except the already mentioned language aspects, the students also mentioned that reading these comic books improved their confidence, motivation, and they felt more relaxed toward learning English. They were also able to practice using different learning strategies such as re-listening and re-reading parts in order to understand it and also using dictionaries.

These students valued targeted comic book readers as educational material. However,

it is also possible that they could have learned vocabulary just as well in other situations. Since this is a qualitative study about comic book readers' perceived value it is possible to question whether it really is the most effective method to learn vocabulary outside of classrooms. Still, the study indicates that targeted comic book readers can be used as learning material that students might actually enjoy working with.

Another difficulty with targeted comic book readers is that the researchers had to make their own comic books. Most educators are probably unable to create their own comics with specific and repeated vocabulary. However, Milton (2008) also pointed towards the importance of repetition, his student achieved this by reading the same comic book several times.

3 Conclusion

The reviewed texts indicate that comics can be used to help students develop multiliteracy, more specifically in this case critical-, visual-, multimodal-, literary-, and functional literacies. Readers of comics are motivated to do so for a number of different reasons but notably, comics seem to have an innate power to motivate readers, probably because of the fun factor, the appeal of visuals and the range of topics and issues covered in comics. Research indicates that students can learn content from comics just as well, if not better, than from traditional letter-based texts. In addition, the vast range of topics covered in comics opens up the possibility to use comics in several school subjects. Comics have a lot of potential within the second or foreign language classroom as they provide students with authentic language but with reduced amount of texts, that can nevertheless be quite advanced. Images also assist students and help them understand texts.

The use of comics in education is a relatively new field of study. The majority of the texts used in this review are from this millennium. There is a lot of diversity within the field in terms of methods used to conduct studies. Some researchers have conducted interviews while others have had students take recall tests and so on. Many researchers also provide theoretical discussions about comics, drawing on information and knowledge from several different fields. Because of the fact that researchers might have their starting point in different fields, different research methods perhaps should be expected.

Another issue with research on comics in education is the amount of research available. On the one hand there is a surprisingly large number of studies but on the other hand there is not enough. Many of the studies seem to be the first of their kind specifically focused on comics and many of them are quite limited in their scope. For example, Milton (2008) only had one participant. It is also possible to question whether the results presented in these texts are generalizable across cultures. For example, it seems relevant to question whether Botzakis's (2009) participants would have had the same experiences with comics if they were not Americans. While Hammond (2012) argues that even Americans are not always familiar with comics, it seems unlikely that Americans in general are less familiar with comics than people in other cultures.

There seems to be a discrepancy between what research shows and what people in general know. The reviewed texts indicate several possible usages of comics in education; however, educators and people in general who do not read comics are not aware of this. For example, some people regard comics only as slightly better than reading nothing at all, and

they question whether comics can cover serious issues or topics. Some of the reviewed texts seem to disprove these negative views. But as a result of these negative views and discrepancy, comics remain highly questioned. Once again, it is possible that these negative views remain because a lot of the research on comics in education is quite new and it might not have reached that many educators.

Further research needs to corroborate the results that have been found with more substantial studies. For example, a remake of Mallia's study but perhaps with immediate recall protocols instead of questionnaires or a follow-up study of Lin's study to see whether a more advanced comic strip as an addition to a text could assist higher-level learners comprehension. Furthermore, it would be interesting with more studies from different cultures where comics might not have as long tradition as they do in the U.S. Could comics really be motivating and interesting in cultures where they do not have as long tradition? From a perspective of a teacher student in Sweden, it would be interesting to investigate how and why teachers in Sweden are using comics in their education - if they do so at all.

4 Bibliography

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