

Using Comics in the English Language Classroom

by James Whiting

Why Use Comics in the English Language Classroom?

Why should English language teachers use comics in their classroom? There are many reasons. Comics are fun for both teachers and students, they foster positive motivation, lower students' affective filters, and allow for creativity with language and art. Consider these advantages:

- Comics offer an enjoyable way to teach higher levels of linguistic competence, such as pragmatic intelligence. In addition, they can help students understand and appreciate humor and irony in the target language, two notoriously challenging areas for language learners.
- Comics are particularly useful for teaching colloquial language and register. They offer ways to teach idiomatic speech, reduced speech, and slang, and present numerous opportunities to bring the target-language culture and vocabulary into the classroom.
- Comics help promote best practices of communicative language classroom pedagogy by promoting the target language through student-centered work, varied group work and discussions, student discovery, and lowered filters.
- Comics in the language classroom inherently promote the use of higher level thinking skills—analyzing (for example, comparing two panels), evaluating (examining what makes something humorous), and creating (generating a comic), in *Bloom's Revised Taxonomy* (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956).
- Finally, comics can help students develop improved skills in each of the four language domains: reading—both silently and out loud, using small, comprehensible chunks; listening—to themselves, their classmates, and their teacher as they read and discuss a comic; speaking—reading the comic aloud, acting the story out, discussing and explaining what is logical or humorous, and why; and writing—creating their own comics, completing cloze activities, and finishing existing comics.

Approaches

There are a number of easy ways to bring comics into any language classroom, for students at any ability level.

- *Creating comics.* Have students generate their own comics. Templates can be provided, and the prompts for these comics can be similar to ones used for writing activities—for example, a childhood memory, or something that the student did over the weekend, told in a few steps. These can also be done in small groups or pairs where students write and draw together. Students could retell a story visually that they have read; they can be assigned to work in illustrator-writer pairs, with one student drawing and the other assigned to write the text.
- *Dialogue bubbles.* Remove one character's dialogue from a panel, and ask students to fill in this bubble. More open-ended than a cloze, this exercise promotes creativity and playfulness in the target language, pragmatic intelligence, and using appropriate vocabulary and grammar. Make this activity more approachable by providing a word bank of possible choices for the blank bubbles. This can be done individually, or in pairs or groups to encourage target language use.
- *Drama.* Have students act out the comic, providing a springboard for drama. Speaking dialogue promotes practice with intonation, rhythm, prosody, and read-and-look-up techniques.
- *Extending comics.* Give students a sequential comic strip with a panel missing from the middle and then ask them to write the missing panel; students could also be directed to extend the comics by adding a panel at the end. (Pre-literate students can draw the final panel of a wordless comic, and explain their ending verbally.) This activity, which could be completed in small groups to

promote target-language use and communication, prepares for sequencing and prediction skills and negotiating this with partners. A communicative follow-up for both this and writing dialogue bubbles might involve having students placing their work around the room and comparing and contrasting the different words used and endings given.

- *Jigsaws*. Since comics often are done in three or more panels (strips), comics can also be used for a jigsaw activity. Cut a strip apart—you can have the students do this—then ask the students to put the strip back into the original order. Using the target language in small groups, students justify their ordering and compare their ordering with classmates; this promotes higher level thinking skills of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis.

Jigsaws also promote reading and vocabulary skills, and the logic of sequencing and prediction. Doing this activity in small groups promotes the use of target language, and encourages the students to negotiate what they believe is the correct sequence for the comic and why.

- *Jigsaws variation: Information gap*. There are multiple variations for jigsaw activities for more advanced students. Once a multi-panel comic is cut into separate panels, give each student in a group one part to describe it to his or her groupmates but without showing it to them. After the students describe their section, the group, still without looking, agrees on the sequence. This promotes directed target-language usage—student-directed speech with a visual guide.

This activity could be done with comics that have only images, or with images and words. To increase the challenge, combine a jigsaw with a cloze. In this case, a comic with dialogue is chosen and words removed; the comic is then cut into pieces. After students establish the correct sequence, they can then work on supplying the missing words.

- *Retelling comics: Multi-day activity*. Have students read a comic one day and then retell it a few days later; this could be accompanied by a student or group redrawing of the comic. A variation might include having students construct an alternative ending visually to a story they have read.
- *Vocabulary and grammar cloze*. Comics naturally offer small chunks of easily understood language that can be used for vocabulary and cloze activities—both excellent ways to highlight or practice specific grammar or vocabulary items, and easy to modify to suit the group being taught. Prepare for this activity by taking a comic and removing words from one or more panels; these words should be connected to a specific grammar and/or vocabulary. A modification for advanced levels would include removing a group of words or an entire sentence; for less advanced students, you could provide a choice of potential words in a word bank.

Comics are a natural for the communicative language classroom. They promote negotiation and communication in the L2, practice in all four language domains, creativity and higher level critical thinking skills, independence of thought, and diversity of opinion. Students of all ages and abilities find comics fun, interesting, and motivating, and for teachers they offer opportunities to bring target-language culture and authentic language into the classroom.

References

Bloom, B. S. (Ed.), Engelhart, M. D., Furst, E. J., Hill, W. H., & Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives, Handbook I: The cognitive domain*. New York: David McKay.

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