Unleashing the Potentials of Reading Graphic Novels in Advancing Meaning Making in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

Effective teaching of reading skills requires responsive actions to the requirements of 21st century students. At present, the students are digitally oriented and in urgent need of skills and competencies that empower them to smoothly understand and critically engage in dialogue with the world beyond their countries' borders. Therefore, gone are the days when the sole aim of learning a foreign language is to develop linguistic and communicative competences. The objective of this research study is, therefore, to offer a much-needed account of transcending the traditional linear manner of teaching reading comprehension and to embrace graphic novels as a challenging alternative for interpretation and meaning-making, particularly since graphic novels do not lend themselves to a straightforward interpretation of the authors' mise-en-scène. The reading session can be a powerful means to assist the students in deciphering the aesthetic dimensions of the elements of graphic novels including images, panels, language, words, balloon captions, colour, violence, the gutter, and the mise-en-scène. In this respect, graphic novels can provide the students with multifaceted concepts that are open to miscellaneous interpretations since the students are in a position to deduce meaning and unleash the power of their imagination in the reading and literature classroom alike.

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1. Introduction

Reading plays a major role in exploring several aspects of the target language. The students can enrich their vocabulary and language use such as idioms, and metaphors, and discover the culture of the language they are studying including historical events, traditions, lifestyles, literature, and civilization. Moreover, reading is a cognitive process that evokes the students' understanding of a text. In the language classroom, the reading skill is majorly focused on deciphering traditional script texts that are read from left to right, and techniques such as skimming and scanning have always prevailed; however, the students should be trained in reading and interpreting other kinds of texts since they are surrounded by an extensively visual and digital world. Similarly, although canonical classical literature is a fundamental component of learning about past human experiences (2003), graphic novels can supplement traditional literary texts by infusing students with extrinsic motivation at a time when this generation's focus span is limited. Since the students are constantly interacting with images thanks to the internet and social media, they should also be exposed to media that provide them with the opportunity to decipher the messages and understand how symbols are used to convey given messages to help the reader understand the content of a text.

Graphic novels, in this context, can be very advantageous since they are visually rich and can enhance the reading experience of struggling and curious readers as well. According to Jones and Hafner (2012), students are surrounded by multimodal elements across texts they encounter in their daily lives; hence, the graphic novel can enhance the students' multiliteracies because they positively transfer these skills to read and interpret the graphic text. Thus, this study aims to highlight how graphic novels can enhance the student's understanding of a visual text and interpret its symbols to critically engage in constructing the plot of the text.

2. Review of Literature

Reading literacy is defined as the reader's capability to grasp written texts and interpret them in multiple ways. Engaging with different forms of written texts enables readers to develop their knowledge, to be members of reading clubs, and to embrace reading as a leisure activity (Mullis and Martin, 2019). Currently, a reading text transcends the conventional way of perceiving reading merely through mono-modal texts (standard, linear texts) in the language classroom. The twenty-first century is fundamentally characterized by an abundance of visual images that are the production of increasing trends in digital and print media. Furthermore, today's students are digitally- and visually-oriented; therefore, teachers should cater to their interests and profiles by engaging them in reading and interacting with multimodal texts.

Sahli (2021) suggests that developing innovative methods to help students cope with the requirements of the twenty-first century is urgently required so that the students can efficiently advance their critical abilities, cognitive skills, and interpretive skills, manifestly when the teachers aim for the inclusion of graphic novels and visuals in the EFL classroom. Graphic novels are closely associated with visual literacy. On a similar note, visual literacy is associated with the ability of meaning-making in still and moving pictures in a given context by scrutinizing miscellaneous visual texts such as picture books, animations, comic strips, film trailers, graphic novels, advertisements (Victoria State Government, 2018).

2.1. Graphic Novels

Graphic novels are book-length books that are written in the form of comics (Chunyk, n.d). The term *graphic novel* began to receive recognition in 1978 with the acclaimed commercial and critical approval of Will Eisner's graphic short story collection *A Contract with God*, which tackled the themes of disillusionment and guilt. Graphic novels, as an outstanding literary genre, came to prominence in the 1980's when Spiegelman's *Maus* was published. Besides, Lev

Grossman's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* was a masterpiece release (Ma, 2020). These prominent graphic novels have been the epitome of shifting opinions on how a visual text is considerably relevant for conveying universally relatable themes and human suffering experiences throughout the history of humankind.

Historically speaking, graphic novels were regarded as void of literary forms. Moreover, there was a cultural stigma surrounding the genre as a type that is addressed to children (Chute, 2008). According to Jacobs (2007), both researchers and teachers evaluate graphic novels and comics as an inferior genre of literature that should not be considered for literary analysis and study purposes. In addition, graphic novels were accused of advocating debased values such as violent behaviours, racial stereotypes, mutiny (Hansen, 2012; Wright, 2001), sexual themes and providing simplistic accounts of themes, and that the use of script texts is chiefly superior to the incorporation of striking images (Mayer, 2013). However, graphic novels and comic strips are culturally valued in other contexts such as Japan, Belgium, and the United States of America. For instance, manga, which is a visual artistic production, became an outstanding symbol of the Japanese culture and publishing industry after World War II. In this respect, manga was first introduced to children, then it evolved to include themes for the grown generation. Manga has surpassed the Japanese borders, and it has become an omnipresent narrative art that attracts readers from various age groups and countries including Italy, Germany, Spain, North America, and the United Kingdom (Johnson-Woods, 2010).

Some interesting aspects are emerging from the inclusion of graphic novels in the reading classroom. Burmark (2002) argues that when students are exposed to image-rich instruction, they can advance effective learning, and they inevitably retrieve knowledge better. Consequently, it is high time teachers advocated visual literacy as an essential skill in their classroom settings. Pinkley and Casey (2000) believe that graphic novels are resilient forms of literature since they tackle a wide range of meaningful topics that can help readers develop critical thinking, advance reading comprehension, and enhance literary interpretive skills as well. Hence, graphic novels provide a combination of elements such as the quality of the artwork, the use of colour (white and black, or multicolour), the visual sequence, the gutter, the speech balloons, the panels, the dialogues, and the onomatopoeic expressions. All these previously mentioned elements constitute a whole system that necessitates reading proficiency to decode the intended, hidden message of the graphic novels.

2.2. Graphic Novels in the Language Classroom

Graphic novels have the potential to increase the student's motivation to read. In a study by Öz and Efecioğlu (2015), the incorporation of graphic novels as a literary rich text addressed for high school students in Ankara, Turkey enhanced the students' curiosity and motivation tremendously since this new format of visual reading stimulated their interest to grasp the literary elements of these texts. Additionally, they enrich their vocabulary repertoire and unveil the hidden meaning of these texts as well.

Aldahash and Altalhab (2020) conducted a study about the impact of the inclusion of graphic novels on intermediate students' reading comprehension, and whether EFL teachers have positive attitudes towards this format of literature. The results indicate that the experimental group outperformed the control group when the results of the post-reading tests were compared. Furthermore, the teachers believe that graphic novels are powerful means to improve reading comprehension in the language classroom. Graphic novels can also be used as a tool to assist students in acquiring the target language vocabulary. Karp (2011) highlights the fact that contemporary students are exposed to visual vocabulary through graphic novels, and this learning experience can be rewarding since there is a combination of effective learning coupled with entertainment.

Even though graphic novels have significant roles in bringing positive gains to the student's reading comprehension and process of learning English, the teachers' beliefs, attitudes, prior knowledge, and exposure to graphic novels and comics are of paramount importance in the decision-making of implementing them in the curriculum and using them as a teaching resource. Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher, and Frey (2011) found that 77% of the teachers in their study had no interest in reading graphic novels; similarly, they had no intention of relying on them in their teaching, though they held positive attitudes towards them. In the same line of thought, Yosuf, Lazim, and Salehuddin (2017) scrutinize the challenges that teacher trainees encounter when they teach graphic novels to primary school children in Indonesia. The obtained data indicated that the graphic novels succeeded in attracting the children's interest in reading; however, the teachers found out that the pupils failed to follow the storyline since they ignored the words contained in the speech balloons. As a consequence, they failed to interpret the content of the graphic novel. The researchers recommended that the results of this study should be used as a milestone to train teachers in how to utilize multimodal texts in their classes of English including graphic novels.

The implementation of graphic novels in teaching transcends the reading skill to be an essential constituent for the improvement of writing in the foreign language classroom. Cimermanová (2014) investigated the use of the Australian author and illustrator Shaun Tan's picture books in teaching descriptive and creative writing since the author's proposed themes tackle social issues such as displacement, cultural differences, and the struggle to belong to an entity. In addition, these books can be read by different language proficiency groups. The main conclusions of this study highlighted the fact that picture books developed the students' writing. At university, van der Sluis (2021) dissected the use of manga, graphic novels, and cartoons across disciplines including sociology, psychology, history, nursing, autonomy, and engineering in Higher Education, and how they are relevant assets in furthering the students' knowledge and provoking critical thinking and reflection. Research studies dealing with the implementation of graphic novels in Algerian classrooms is still an underdeveloped field since the researcher could not locate any study about graphic novels' use in the English language classroom since reading and literature classes have always relied on canonical, classical texts as the dominant medium of instruction.

3. Methodology of Teaching Graphic Novels

Graphic novels provide a rich landscape of analysing a multimodal visual text. According to Eisner (2008), sequential art provides the readers with its own 'grammar' that will help them navigate their interpretation and understanding of the graphic novel at hand. For instance, a recurrent series of symbols and images throughout the visual text constitute similar ideas. Hence, this literary technique is a language itself that provokes a deep understanding of the messages hidden in graphic novels.

This section highlights a repertoire of techniques that are employed in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986). This graphic novel won the Pulitzer Prize, for it majorly depicts the non-fiction story of Spiegelman's father about his experience as a Polish Jew and a Holocaust survivor. *Maus* was written between 1980 to 1991. According to Elsner (2013), students should possess the competence of critical literacy to decipher the symbols and engage in the process of the evaluation of content, appearance, and statements portrayed in a text. For example, the front page of the graphic novel *Maus* showcases two mice, probably a father and his son. Behind both of them stands a bold swastika and Hitler as a headcat. The title of the graphic novel is written in bold red colour, which is apparent suggestive of blood.
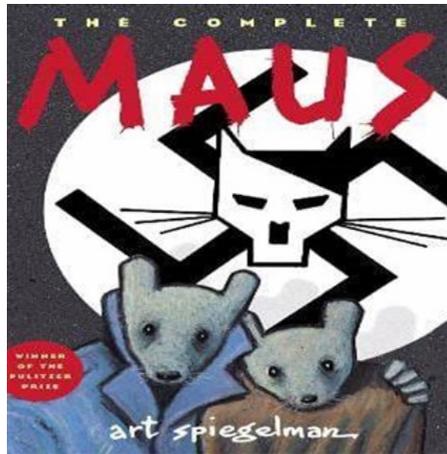
Illustration 1. Spiegelman's, Art *Maus* (1986)

The teacher can engage the students in questioning the choice of embodying the atrocity of the Nazi regime through the use of animals; cats and mice. According to Wolk (2007), the strongest device that Spiegelman used is drawing Jews with mice heads and tails, Nazis with catheads, Poles with pig head, and French with frogs. The interpretation would be very deep and traumatizing since, in real terms, cats torture mice first, and then they eat them. In addition, the simple fact of drawing mice in a simple outline, with a pair of dots is another technique of a reductionist style. In this respect, all mice are drawn similarly in the concentration camp; therefore, it is a sign of losing individual traits, and characters can be distinguished, while reading the text, by what they say (Spiegelman, as quoted in Hangartner, 2009, p.44). Throughout the novel's illustrations, the author uses two colours exclusively: black and white. The juxtaposition of these two colours is strictly meant to enable the readers to immerse in a deep interpretation of the brutality of the matters discussed throughout the novel. In addition, these colours have a significant value because they are non-biased. Consequently, the readers can forge their way of interpreting the story events.

Illustration 2. Spiegelman, Art Prisoners

Another device that the teacher can devise a reading activity about is the combination of text and image. In this prospect, the brain is meant to decode the written linguistic text, and the eyes are supposed to make meaning by observing the harmony between the graphic image, the gutter, and the panel respectively. A powerful aspect of graphic novels is that they can incarnate emotional states such as trauma through the means of metaphors and analogs by merging verbal and visual images.

To highlight this point, the students can be invited to decipher the burden of memory in *Maus*. The traumatic experience that Anja, Artie's mother, has gone through after her three friends were hanged. Although Vladek reported what Anja said as "*I was frightened to go outside for a few days...I didn't want to pass where they were hanging.*" (Spiegelman, *Maus,* 84). A close interpretation of the visual text reveals the trauma that Anja underwent, and how excruciating and disturbing the memory was. Both Anja and her husband Vladek are drawn in small black shadowy figures; however, the three hanged mice are the main focal figures to intensify the experience of trauma and the burden of helplessness and withdrawal to survive the brutality of the Nazis. It is clear through this technique how the visual representation of a scene is vibrant in conveying a message (Øverås, 2013).

Illustration 3. Spiegelman's Maus, Anja's trauma

Throughout the novel, the teacher can also draw the students' attention to another pattern that is visually repeated. That means that the frequency of showing a symbol in a graphic novel intensifies the experience of the characters; also, the size of the symbols depicts their significance in the entire story.

Illustration 4 demonstrates the fact that the swastika is continuously repeated in five panels on page 30. It gradually appeared until it dominated the scene in panels 3, 4, and 5. The recurrence of the swastika is used by Spiegelman to intensify critical historical events. The swastika, in this context, is the ultimate symbol of Nazism. In the four panels, the Nazi symbol is tremendous in the background and is accompanied by continuous oppression and suppression.
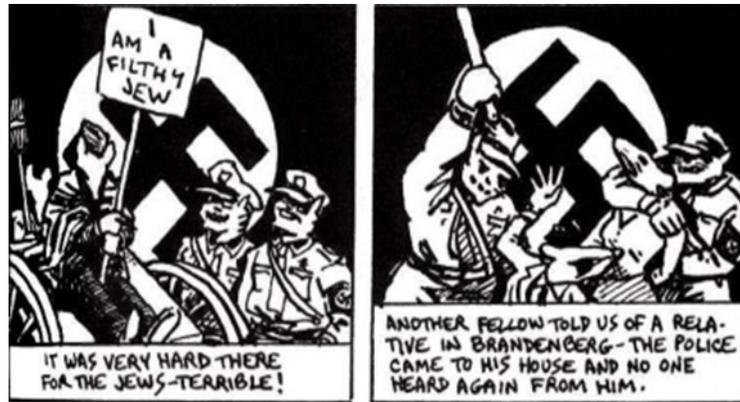
Illustration 4. Spiegelman's Maus, Swastika

Illustration 5 exhibits the first two panels in which Spiegelman is wearing a mask; in addition, he is talking about the Jews, who were gassed during World War II. He also refers to the success and recognition he received when publishing the first part of *Maus*. The students may be asked at this stage about the reason for wearing a mask instead of being incarnated in an animal like the characters throughout the story. According to Wolk (2007), the characters, who are not animals and wearing masks, are trying to be anything else. However, the last frame is big in comparison with the previous ones.

Illustration 5. Spiegelman's Maus, Caught between success and death

In this respect, Spiegelman is speaking about the tremendous success of *Maus*. Symbols are omnipresent in this frame regarding the past, the present, and the future. Spiegelman feels guilty since he thinks that he was not a part of the history of the Jews in Auschwitz; he did not undertake their suffering and suppression by the Nazis. That is why he draws the pile of mice at the bottom of the frame. He refers to the present by mentioning his success, and future by mentioning whether Maus will be adopted in a TV series or a movie. Artie, in this very context, is depressed and caught by both the memories of the death of his people and his mother, Anja, and his success, which he thinks was the result of exploiting the collective memory of the Jews.

4. Conclusions

This study attempted to shed light on the paramount importance of implementing the format of graphic novels in the reading classroom to advance visual and critical literacy in the language classroom; therefore, it underscored the aspects of the graphic novels such as characters, colours, frames, and the repetition of symbols that can be used as milestones to advance the students' interpretive skills for a deep understanding of the plot. Furthermore, the study provided vivid examples from Spiegelman's *Maus* that the teachers of reading can incorporate in their daily teaching to engage the students in decoding a text that is loaded with symbols, metaphors, and references to the past, the present, and the future. Nowadays, graphic novels are available online; hence, teachers can probe the interest of their students and help them develop their reading skills by encouraging them to read comics, graphic novels, and manga.

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