

THE ROLE OF COMIC READING MATERIALS IN ENHANCING THE ABILITY TO READ IN EFL

By

ZAHRA SADAT ROOZAFZAI

The Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research (ACECR), IUT branch.

ABSTRACT

Reading is an extremely active, complex, mental and personal process that concerns both the reader and the text. It is now generally believed that a range of reader with text factors affect the reading process to a considerable extent. So, teachers of EFL need to be aware of the important role of teaching materials. Thus, this study investigated the impact of comic reading materials on reading comprehension. Six general texts and pictures were given to the control group and six comic materials were presented to experimental group in usual English classes during 20 sessions. At the end, a general reading comprehension test was administered to both groups and the results were subjected to relevant statistical analysis, t-test. The findings of this study revealed that teaching reading ability through comic texts and pictures is more efficient than teaching it through general texts and pictures.

Keywords: Comic Strips and Texts, Reading Comprehension.

INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the world, reading knowledge of a foreign language is often important to academic studies, professional success, and personal development. This is particularly true about English, as much professional, technical and scientific literature is published in English today. Reading ability is often all that is needed by learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and other foreign languages. First of all one's overall scholastic success depends mainly on the ability to read. More important, however, are the demands of our modern world which directly relate to this ability. As we are in the age of science and advancement, we must be able to read critically. In addition, it is beneficial to read for recreation and relaxation it brings. It takes you to so many places and provides you with many experiences which you, otherwise may not have. So, today in the age of communication and exchange of sciences and information between nations and civilizations, reading ability is a need for everybody specially students.

Background

Traditionally, reading researchers have attempted to analyze the reading skill into a series of sub-skills that relate to one another within a taxonomy or hierarchy of skills. Many different taxonomies or lists have been drawn up varying in

content. Typical one of such taxonomies is that of Barrett (1968). Barrett reportedly distinguishes five skills: "literal comprehension, reorganization of the ideas in the text, inferential ability, evaluation and appreciation. However, one point to be made about the tradition of research into 'skills' is that it is based upon the assumption that texts have predictable meanings, which can be extracted if only the reader is sufficiently skillful."

Widdowson (1979) suggests that text does not have *meaning*, but is *potential for meaning*, which will vary from reader to reader, depending upon a multitude of factors, but crucially related to purpose and knowledge. Texts allow for variety in interpretation governed by factors such as different readers' background knowledge, cultural and social inheritance, age, preferred reading strategy, linguistic competence, purpose and affective involvement.

Awareness of the existence of other levels of meaning, per se, or of different interpretations of a text, can help readers by directing their attention to other aspects of comprehension. Visuals, like comic strips can also serve as a stimulus for interpretation of text. They can guide readers through text path, as traffic signs, towards writer's intended meaning. In other words, pictorial information provides a guide for interpreting the words and phrases that the

passage contains. Some theorists (e.g. Craik and Tulving 1975) argue that the activation of additional knowledge will facilitate learning as long as this knowledge is semantically consistent or congruous with activating readers' imaginal knowledge.

An important tool for teachers in planning and performing an effective instruction is appropriate reading materials. The task of an instructor is to translate information into a format appropriate to the learners' current state of understanding. Curriculum should be organized in a spiral manner so that students continually build upon what they have already learned (Kearsly, 2005). An additional dimension to the role of a language teacher is to make language learners aware of cross-cultural differences in communication. The language teacher can make use of appropriate reading texts as a starting point to give cultural awareness, including genre-based reading materials like comics.

The goal in teaching reading is to teach a level at which students have confidence in their ability to overcome temporary or partial lapses of understanding and continue reading until they understand the writer's general meaning. They need to reach a reading speed that will enable them to use the reading skill realistically as a source of information or enjoyment. Coady (1979) suggests a model in which ESL readers' background knowledge interacts with their conceptual abilities and process strategies to produce comprehension. In this approach, the readers' background knowledge plays a significant role in the comprehension process. However, according to Carrell (1983a), foreign language readers are linguistically bound to a text; that is, they may not create connections between text and relevant background. So, some EFL readers may only use top-down approach and some others bottom-up.

Interactive reading model recognizes the interaction of both bottom-up and top-down processes throughout the reading process. As Rumelhart (1985) explains, reading is both a perceptual and cognitive process. A skilled reader must be able to make use of sensory, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic information to accomplish the reading task. Poor readers are so involved in getting the meaning of unfamiliar language forms that they don't give much time

to higher cognitive predictions (Ramirez Verdugo, 2003). Fluent reading, as Carrell (1985) and Carrell et al. (1988) suggest, first depends on students' ability to avoid making accurate identification of forms and then start guessing on the basis of their prior knowledge.

In transactional socio-psycholinguistic model of reading, readers begin the act of reading by recognizing that they are reading, sampling and selecting from the visual array (letters and words) based on their predictions of what they expect to find. As readers read, they confirm or disconfirm their predictions by using their knowledge of their different language cue systems to detect when meaning breaks down. When a break-down in meaning occurs, readers go back and correct, again employing different language cue systems which are appropriate. Goodman (1994) calls these actions by the reader 'cognitive strategies.'

Reading within this theory is not linear but cyclical. Visual, perceptual, syntactic and semantic cycles are constantly in play. In addition, it is goal-oriented with the goal of getting the meaning. Using inferences and predictions, the reader can continue to move toward meaning without completing the optical, perceptual and syntactic cycles (Purcell-Gates, 2005).

Human beings generate mental images all the time. In cognitive linguistics the term image implicates perception in all acts of conceptualization. The locus classics of image schema theory is Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Theory of Metaphor (1980). Since then, image schema theory has helped Johnson establish an epistemology and moral philosophy (1987, 1993), and has helped Lakoff articulate a Theory of Categorization (1987). Subsequently, image theory has played a major role in areas of study, such as psycholinguistic investigations by Gibbs (1994) and Gibbs and Colston (1995), Cognitive Development by Mandler (1992), Poetics by Lakoff and Turner (1989), Literary Criticism by Turner (1991), Linguistic Theories of Grammar by Langacker (1987) and Talmy (1983), mathematics (Lakoff and Nunez, 2000) and computational modeling by neural theory of language group.

Dual Coding Theory

Visuals may have helped improve comprehension because they provide "additional contextual information"

(Hadley, 2001, p.150) which is consistent with Dual Coding Theory (DCT). DCT concerns the nature of language and imagery. In DCT, the linguistic coding system can be called the verbal system and the nonverbal coding system can be called the imagery or visual system. The verbal and visual systems can be activated independently, but there are interconnections between the two systems that allow dual coding the information and cuing from one system to the other (Rieber, 1994; Simpson, 1995. Cited in Erlendson, 2001).

According to Sadoski and Pivio (2001), unlike schemata theory, DCT assumes that the verbal system is organized sequentially and the non-verbal system is organized non-sequentially, resulting in different constituents in processing. In reading comprehension, Liu (2004) explains how DCT accounts for hypothesized bottom-up and top-down processes. He says regarding bottom-up processes, DCT assumes that language units derived from a natural language are organized and mentally represented in various sensory modalities. Based on familiarity and the effects of context, the reader may use these representations to perceive grapheme-phoneme correspondence, and the visual, auditory, and/or articulatory configurations of letters, words or word sequences. He continues, regarding top-down processes, DCT provides a broader and more specific account of meaning, coherence and inference effects. Activating both verbal and non-verbal mental representations of text helps readers create alternative, interconnected contexts for generating inferences and integrating texts.

With regards to DCT's implications for designing graphics for instruction, Meyer and Gallini (1990) suggested that designing visual aids for instruction should satisfy four conditions in order to be useful: "(i) The text is potentially understandable by students; (ii) The visuals are designed and evaluated in terms of learner understanding; (iii) The visuals are used to explain information provided by the text; (iv) Students have little or no previous experience with the content" (cited in Rieber, (1994, p.51). Although researchers have investigated the effects of different types of visuals on reading comprehension, "in L2 context, it is not clear which type of visual organizers help which kind of

learners" (Liu, 2004).

Comics

As argued by McCloud (2000), comics merge words and images together in ways that are unprecedented by any other media thus far. He further states that comics have revolutionary potential for understanding pictorial and textual narratives. In the world where multimedia and the Internet are major forces in communication as well as entertainment, the skills required to fully comprehend comics will be fundamental in understanding the way in which information is conveyed through new technologies.

Will Eisner (1996) has noted that there is a language of iconic gestures and expressions that comics draw upon as part of an understood range of meaning. This system acts as a deep structure of visual narrative, showing icons that are derived from actual human behavior or expression. "Each of these symbols exists without sequential meaning; that is, we don't know what came before it, or what is to come after. However, as a reader we could make an educated guess that from which to make sense of the action before and after one of these icons" (Christiansen, 2000).

McCloud (1993) contends that "cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled". Through the simplification of form, comics echo our own simplified ideas, and the form utilizes "repetitive images and recognizable symbols" that create their own language through their very repetition.

Alison Sivak (2003) believes that there are layers of mediated forms that the reader must move through in order to feel involved with the story. The creation of comics is vastly different from textual narratives in that the writer of text alone can theoretically write quickly with no revision, thus creating a spontaneous result. Sivak (2003) states that reading comics is more than the material in hand. It involves a certain immersion into the culture of the comics that one reads. It involves any number of choices to be made. These choices include whether the author, the visual style or the knowledge of the story first attract the reader.

Comic materials catch many researchers' attention because they combine aesthetic perception with intellectual pursuit (Harvey, 1994; Inge, 1990; O'Sullivan,

1971; Swain, 1978; Waller, 1991; cited in Liu, 2004). Wright and Sherman (1999) after analyzing the readability of various comic strips argued that comic strips can be used effectively to build reading skill. Williams (1995) also investigated how comic books can be used as instructional materials for ESL students with low intermediate level of English skills and limited discourse and interactive competence.

Wade and Moje (2000) have proposed an approach, participatory approach, to examine thoroughly the role of text in classroom. It is based on constructivist or socio-cultural views of learning and teaching. Participatory approach relies on a wide range of texts, including published print materials such as textbooks, reference books, picture books, novels, journals, magazines and comic books; and electronic texts and oral texts. Texts are viewed as cultural tools that shape not only what people know but how they know and learn. Moreover, Krashen (1993) suggests that comic book reading and other kinds of light reading may serve as an important bridge from every day "conversational language" to what Cummins (1991) terms "academic language".

Motivation

One of the most crucial tasks in a reading class is the transformation of second learners' attitude toward reading from indifference or active dislike to avid reading. Significant gains in reading ability often result when the reader begins to read pleurably. Atwell (1987) supports the idea that ordinary pleasure reading is a large factor in reading fluency. So, the significant role of the teacher is to develop a positive attitude toward reading and an interest in it, by creating assignments and projects that take students' personal needs, interests, aspirations and attitudes into consideration.

The basic principle of successful work in developing reading interests has been summarized as consisting of "a lure and a ladder" approach (Betts, 1976). The lure may be considered a variety of ways of enticing students to begin pleasurable reading. The ladder involves proving suitable reading that will intensify the reader's interest in reading, and an opportunity to progress gradually to more challenging reading material. In this case using comic

materials and visuals can be a big help for employing these two tools.

Research Question

The purpose of the current study is to investigate if there is a difference between teaching comic materials and general materials on Iranians EFL students' reading comprehension. In other words, does teaching comic materials (texts and visuals) develop students' reading comprehension more effectively than general materials?

Methodology

Based on the topic and purpose of this study, an experimental design was used where comic materials were taught to the experimental group and general texts and visuals were used as reading materials to the control group. To determine ex- and co- groups, 60 adult female English learners, aged 18-30, of a language institute in an urban area in Isfahan city at pre-intermediate level were selected and divided into two groups. To determine their level of English language proficiency, students passed an interview comprising some questions to test their pronunciation, language use and usage, fluency, discourse, ability to communicate, vocabulary and grammar.

Both groups participated in quite similar classes, studying same units of the same book, one of EFL teaching series of books at pre-intermediate level as their course book, in equal number of sessions, 20, in the same method (CLT), working on all 4 skills. The difference between ex- and co-groups is that for teaching reading skill, the control group was treated by reading section of their course book, but experimental group was treated by comic materials, consisting of some comic strips and some stories and pictures of the book "Steps to Understanding".

In the end of the experiment, a test containing 8 items for listening, 6 items for grammar, 6 items for vocabulary, 20 items for reading and a topic for writing was given to both groups. Reading section of the exam consists of 10 true-false and 10 multiple-choice questions based on two general passages. The reliability and validity of the test had already been measured by the headquarters of the language institute.

Scoring and Data Analysis

In this study, the input of statistical analysis consisted of scores of students' answers to multiple choice and true-false reading comprehension questions. For reading part, students received one mark for each correct answer. Table 1. shows the obtained scores of the subjects in reading comprehension of both co-group and ex-group. The frequency of scores is also enclosed in the table. Scores are out of 20.

Information about the mean, standard deviation and standard error of measurement of the two groups are shown in Table 2.

The higher mean of experimental group, with mean difference 1.4333 implies that they have outperformed on reading test over control group. Besides, experimental group's lower standard deviation score shows that their scores are less dispersed from the mean value than that of control group.

Then, a t-test was used for assessing the difference between the means of scores obtained by the two groups. The type of utilized t-test is independent or uncorrelated because the two sets of scores come from two different samples. So, it is used to calculate whether the means of two sets of scores taken from experimental and control groups are significantly different from each other. Table 3. illustrates the results obtained from the t-test application.

Control Group	Frequency	Experimental Group	Frequency
16	4	17	3
15	2	16	5
14	6	15	7
13	3	14	4
12	7	13	4
11	2	12	3
10	3	11	2
9	1	10	2
8	2		

Table 1. Students' Reading Comprehension Scores

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Measurement
SCORES	1.00	30	14.0667	2.0331
	2.00	30	12.6333	2.3116

Table 2. Group Statistics

		T-test for Equality of Means				
		t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
SCORE	Equal variances assumed	2.550	58	.013	1.4333	.5621

Table 3. Independent Sample Test

As the t value for equal variance is 2.550 which with 58 degrees of freedom has the two-tailed significance level of 0.013 which is less than two-tailed probability value; i.e. 0.05, the mean reading scores of students taught through comic materials (M=14.0667, SD=2.0331) is significantly higher (t=2.550, df= 20, two-tailed p=0.05) than that of students taught through general materials (M=12.6333, SD=2.3116).

Discussion

One way to interpret the result of this study could be the higher efficiency of comic pictures which play a pivotal role in comic materials and leads to better development of participants' reading skill. Besides, as comic pictures are more interest-getting and enjoyable they draw readers' attention more considerably and stir their imagination more efficiently. Motivation, the most important factor in comic materials, is of more assistance towards enhancing the learners' reading comprehension. By this study, it has been reproved that one of the best ways to create motivation in reading is choosing interesting and readable texts. This investigation is in line with Nuttall's idea (1996) that comic texts among all sorts of reading materials are the ones to which teachers attach more importance.

Moreover, it is said that good readers actually make more use of context in their reading, while struggling readers make more use of pictures. So, it can be induced that comic pictures can help slow readers to reach the good readers' reading pace more effectively. However, it needs more research and investigation to be firmly confirmed.

In addition, as already mentioned, words mostly activate textual schemas, whereas pictures mostly activate image schemas. Thus, it can be concluded and supported in this study that comic visuals make readers' image schemas and mental imagery work more powerfully.

Furthermore, this study is in line with Paivio's DCT. He propounds that text information is much easier to be understood and retrieved when dual coded; i.e. both verbal and imagery systems work and have interactions. He believes that image codes are superior over verbal codes and if some reading materials have more interesting visuals it enables readers to comprehend the relevant texts more successfully. And this study supported his belief.

Another serious effect of visuals is that they reduce the degree of abstraction of texts. So, as comic texts are framed, comic pictures can present and depict their text pattern sequentially and according to this study, it might have helped students more effectively in reading comic texts than general ones.

Readability index is a text variable which by itself consists of some other factors. In line with different researches and studies like Wright and Sherman's (1999), this study implies that comic passages might be more readable than general ones. Wright and Sherman (1999) suggest comic materials as one of the best instructional ones and mentioned that the main reason why teachers should use comic strips in language art classrooms, apart from their high motivation level is their high readability level with words and sentences which are linguistically suitable for elementary and middle school readers.

There must also be some other learners and text variables, such as higher exploitability, employing thinking-level (Versacia, 2001, and Sherman and wright, 1996), noticing effect (Schmidt, 1990), cognitive and affective effect (Cohen, 1998), text-based situational interest (Hidi and Anderson, 1992), etc. which lead to fostering effects of comic materials. So, it is possible to assert that comics are multi-dimensional. They merge words and pictures, on the one hand; and humor and reasoning, on the other hand. They work on almost all human aspects; i.e. mind, cognition, mental imagery and psyche to enhance students' reading ability in EFL more efficiently.

One of the most outstanding characteristics of comics is employing both reasoning and emotion. So, the result of this study can imply the effect and nature of this cooperation of mind and emotion. Humor reduces stress makes a course more interesting and even enhances recall and learning. Humor has the ability to relax people, reduce tension and thereby create an atmosphere conducive to learning and communication. Berk (1996, 1998) claims that humor has the ability to decrease students' anxiety, improve the ability to learn and boost self-esteem. Friedman & Amoo (2002) also in their study conclude that humor can create a positive learning environment, reduce stress of both teachers and students,

improve communication between students and teachers and can increase the amount of information absorbed by students, and this study can be another supporting evidence for the positive effect of humor in education.

Conclusion

As the matter of importance there have been a huge number of researches on more appropriate materials for teaching reading skill in EFL. After some methodological and statistical treatments, it was revealed that comic materials are more influential than general materials for teaching reading ability. As the results of this study indicated, the experimental-group participants who were treated by comic materials outperformed the control group who were taught reading through general materials.

Implications

This study provides us with better understanding of the effectiveness of one kind of genre, that is comics, on improving students' reading skill. So, teachers of EFL reading materials need to be aware of the important role of comics. Moreover, many research studies have shown that reading ability is strongly related to reading materials (Krashen, 1993). Thus such findings will help those who have a share in EFL enterprises, such as material developers, curriculum designers and language teachers with their efforts to promote the quality and output of teaching ability.

On the account of the fact that "one of the major goals of language education should be to encourage free reading" and the statement that "comic books lead to other reading" (Krashen, 1993), it can be proposed to curriculum designers to introduce comic reading materials for extensive reading or outside-the-class activities and persuade students to make use of them. It can also be noted that a syllabus which includes comics will provide a motivating medium for improving reading while fostering the development of thinking skill that is needed for L2 academic literacy.

The findings of the present study can also be a helpful guide for studious, avid language learners in their self-directed and self-selected reading scheme to consider illustrated comic books in their reading list. Students, by reading comic materials will be able to get a sense of pleasure which will, in turn, increase their interest and

reading ability.

Limitations of the Study

This study, like any other study, tolerates some limitations and constraints to make the study practical and to increase the internal validity of the study. Followings are some factors which were either controlled or out of control but constant.

- The age average of all the participants was 20-25.
- All of the participants were female.
- All of the participants belonged to pre-intermediate language proficiency.
- All of the participants were Iranian with the same mother tongue and similar cultural background.
- Neither comic, nor general materials had cultural points for Iranian students.
- Educational conditions such as class time, teaching method were the same for both groups.
- All of the participants were selected by means of a placement test, however, they might have come from different English background experience.

Further Research

To increase the internal validity of this study some factors such as participants' age, sex and language proficiency level were controlled. So to make the result of this research more generalizable and to increase its external validity further studies in this domain are required. Since all the subjects in this study were adults, one research could test various age groups to see if younger students who have not formed a reading habit will gain more from comic materials than adults.

Another research can be implemented with similar procedure to this study but with considering sex as an additional independent variable to see the impact of comic and general materials on both male and female students' reading ability.

Another study can be done on various levels of students' language proficiency, ranging from elementary to advanced, to find out if language ability and comic materials would have any impact on students' reading ability.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zahra Sadat Roozafzal holds an M.A. in TEFL and is a Ph.D. candidate has been Faculty Member at Academic Centre for Education, Culture and Research, IUT Branch (ACECR). She is interested in socio cultural and psychological studies in SLA.

