

Using Comic Strips in Language Classes

Scholars and teachers agree that motivation is crucial in language teaching. One well-known way to arouse students' interest can be achieved by bringing something extraordinary and new into the language class. Especially among teenagers and young adults, comic strips can be used efficiently for this purpose. Comics are usually funny; therefore, applying them to methodological purposes will have the same effect as using games in teaching English—it brings a cheerful atmosphere into the class. Comic strips not only amuse and interest L2 students; there are plenty of other reasons to use them in education.

Oller's episode hypothesis

According to John Oller and his episode hypothesis, “texts (oral or written forms of discourse) which are more episodically organized can be stored and recalled more easily than less episodically organized material” (Oller 1983, 44). In other words, it is easier for students to learn a language if they are given connected sentences that have a logical structure and a story line, instead of disconnected, randomly

organized phrases. Of course it has been stated many times before that vocabulary and language can be learnt in context; however, Oller goes one step further and states that context in itself is not sufficient (i.e. a simple dialogue). What is essential is that the dialogue or text should have a logical structure and a logical conclusion (Oller 1983). This way the students can follow the story line step by step and can recall its structure more easily because logic helps them, and they do not have to rely only on memory.

Oller's theory can be applied in the case of comic strips used in language classes. Comics have a story line; therefore, they have a conclusion or at times a punch line. This way the reader, in this case the student, is “motivated to continue reading and to become more involved in the content than in the language” (Brown 1994, 227). Consequently, the student will be eager to know what will happen, what will be the end of the story (as his/her curiosity has been aroused), and will remember the words, expressions, and grammatical forms more easily.

Comics also can be used to facilitate vocabulary teaching. As Brown points out, “the best internalization of vocabulary comes from encounters (comprehension and production) with words within the context of surrounding discourse” (Brown 1994, 365). This way students will associate the words with a certain context, and they can recall and apply it better than just learning a single word with a corresponding meaning. Besides vocabulary, grammatical competence can be improved as well. With the help of comic strips, new grammatical points can be introduced and practiced, and since these grammar points are embedded in a story with a logical structure, students will be able to better recall them later.

The visual nature of comic strips

Oller’s episode hypothesis is further supported by the very nature of comic strips, namely that they are drawn, and therefore visual. This characteristic of comic strips also helps to increase motivation (especially when the comics are coloured ones); and more importantly, if a word, expression, or concept is accompanied by a picture (a visual image in one’s mind), then the learner will memorize and recall it more easily.

The fact that comic strips are visual also contributes to improving communicative competence. In a comic strip, life-like situations and expressions are used in spoken, colloquial language: for instance, idioms, reduced forms, slang, and expressions that require shared cultural knowledge. Consequently, comic strips help students to deal with spoken and even informal language, preventing them from sounding “bookish,” as students might when they are only exposed to written, formal language. Another advantage of the visual nature of comic strips is that they show the gestures and the body language of the characters. This contributes to the development of communicative competence, which includes nonverbal communication.

The importance of using authentic materials

Comic strips are authentic, and using authentic material is very important in language teaching and learning. It has several advantages, among which is the fact that if students comprehend a genuine text successfully,

that can motivate them and build their confidence. However, it should be noted that the difficulty of the language presented to the class should be matched with the level of the students; otherwise the use of authentic materials will only frustrate them. Furthermore, by reading comics in class, “learners are asked to generate personal responses to something in the text, responses which necessitate the production of original discourse” (Hirvela 1996, 128). Consequently, comic strips can be used not only for reading exercises but also for improving the other three skills. Apart from reading, there are various types of exercises that can be used successfully in EFL classes.

Sample exercises

First of all, it is important not to throw away the comic sections of newspapers (especially for coloured comics) so that one will have an abundance of comic strips to use in class for a variety of activities, such as those described below.

Activity 1

The teacher cuts apart the individual panels of a comic strip and puts them in an envelope. The students (either individually or in groups) then are asked to arrange the pieces into the proper sequence to tell the story, either in written form or as a speaking exercise.

For more advanced learners, the task can be made more difficult by giving a different panel to each student in a group and asking students to describe to the rest of the group what is on their panels. The students should not show their pictures to each other until they have figured out the correct order for the panels.

Activity 2

In a variation of the first exercise, the teacher removes the speech or thought bubbles of the comic strips, hands out copies of both the comic strip and the text of the bubbles to the students. The students’ task is to figure out the proper order of the speech or thoughts.

Activity 3

The teacher hands out a comic strip from which the last panel is cut out. Students are asked to continue the story and come up with an ending. Similar to the first activity, this can be a writing or speaking exercise and can be organized as either an individual or a group activity, depending on the needs of the students.

(Naturally, the first exercise could be continued with this exercise as well; however, this way is more challenging than having to continue a story that already has a conclusion).

A follow-up for this exercise could be that the students act out their stories in class. After acting out a story, they could continue it as a role-play activity.

Role-plays are useful for providing the teacher with feedback on how well the students learnt the new language (grammar, vocabulary, etc.). Besides, this activity reduces Teacher Talking Time and facilitates the speech of the students. It is generally true that people are less inhibited to talk when they have a personality “to hide behind,” so when they play a role, they tend to forget about the surrounding circumstances (i.e., the classroom or the presence of the teacher).

Activity 4

Another interesting (and slightly more complex) exercise is to organise students into groups and give them a written story with missing information. First the groups should discuss what might be missing from the text. Then the teacher gives them a comic strip version of the text. They must fill in the blanks in the written story by describing what they see in the pictures. After that, they are asked to think of speech and/or thought bubbles for the comic strip. Naturally, as a follow-up activity, they can act it out and continue the story as a role-play.

The variations of these kinds of activities are almost endless. They can be combined with other activities, or used as supplementary material.

Conclusion

Comic strips are not only for fun in a language class, but there are also methodological reasons for teachers to use them. According to Oller’s episode hypothesis, a text that has a story line and a logical structure is easier to remember and to recall. Comics strips provide the structure and stimulus to which students respond, and, as Brown points out, since stories are universal, students from different cultures can understand their structure and can identify with the characters (Brown 1994), which helps them to acquire vocabulary, grammatical and communicative competence, and provides them with special cultural knowledge as well.

References

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