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Engaging English Language Learners Through the Use of Graphic Novels

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Abstract

This paper will examine the benefits of using graphic novels in the classroom to engage English Language Learners. Graphic novels have carried a negative stigma since the publishing of “Seduction of the Innocent” by Frederick Wertham which claimed to find a connection between teenage delinquency and comic books. Teachers have stayed away from using graphic novels in classroom instruction. Many findings show that graphic novels benefit students but especially English Language Learners. Graphic novels require higher cognitive abilities than traditional novels. This research also explores the attitudes of teachers and students towards graphic novels as well as the possible problems and limitations that may arise. The findings conclude that graphic novels pose great educational benefits for English Language Learners and aids them in reading and language acquisition.

Introduction and Background

The ongoing struggle of the modern day teacher is how to keep students engaged in lessons. With never ending new technologies students have become less excitable and more easily distracted in the classroom. As an educator it is important to continue to look for content which students find interesting and engaging. Upon my studies at CSUMB, it came to my attention that graphic novels are one of the tools which can be extremely beneficial to students, particularly English Language Learners. Graphic novels have always held many benefits but they have seldom been used as appropriate instructional material. Graphic novels have held a negative stigma among the public since Wertham (as cited in Coville, 1996) published his study titled *Seduction of the Innocent*. In this study he claimed to have found a direct correlation between crime comics and teenage delinquency. While his studies were poorly carried out the public reception of comics and graphic novels drastically changed. Yang (2006) the author of *American Born Chinese* has become one of the spokesperson for bringing more graphic novels into the classroom. Studies have shown that graphic novels require higher cognitive abilities than traditional novels since they require the reader to associate images with the story (Palvik,n.d.). They have an increasing benefit on students who are learning English because it makes it easier for them to be able to understand the story (Derrick, 2008). As an English Language Learner myself I was interested in further exploring the benefits of this particular approach on English Language Learners. Historically there has been mixed opinions about the benefits and effectiveness of bilingual education for English Language Learners. It is crucial to continue to explore possibilities to aid English Language Learners to be more successful since there is a high population of ELL students in our community. There has always been a debate about the best

approach to teaching ELL students. This particular topic can be of interest to local teachers and school districts in implementing new programs to help ELL students. The research and findings in this research are of great value to immigrant students. There is a high number of ELL first generation students in the districts around this country and this research could help in improving efficiency when teaching English. Throughout this semester, I have been actively looking for research and information about the use of graphic novels to aid English language learners. It was important to gain several perspectives about the attitudes of teachers, students, and parents towards graphic novels. Implementing graphic novels as instructional material would likely be met with push back from parents and administrators so it was important to find out the overall consensus of the community towards graphic novels. More importantly, I wanted to know what previous research already said about graphic novels and what the experiences were of teachers who had already implemented them. The primary goal was to find out how to implement novels to the greatest benefit of the student so it was important to find out in what ways teachers were using graphic novels and if they had any challenges when trying to implement them. Based on initial research I was aware that graphic novels were negatively stigmatized and so it was important to know if implementing graphic novels was even a possibility that would be supported by administration. Therefore, as I performed my research my goal was to seek the answer to some key questions which are as follows:

My primary research question is:

How do teachers use graphic novels to engage English language learners?

My secondary and related research questions are:

1. What does research say about the use of graphic novels to engage English language learners?
2. In what ways do teachers implement graphic novels in their teaching?
3. Are there prospects and challenges for teachers to use graphic novels in their teaching?
At what grade and when should graphic novels be introduced to students? and in what subject matters? (Are visual aids more impactful on readers? Would comic books be more successful than traditional books amongst ELL students?)
4. Are teachers willing to use graphic novels in the classroom? If so, how?
5. Are there resources of graphic novels considered appropriate to use with students in the classrooms? If so, how does the school administration support it?

Literature Review

Throughout my public school education I rarely encountered the use of graphic novels in the classroom. Graphic novels were not considered appropriate material to read for required reading time and teachers typically banned them from reading lists. The attitudes of my teachers towards graphic novels created an unconscious bias that graphic novels were not reputable pieces of literature. When we thought about graphic novels DC and Marvel comic books typically came to mind. While superhero comics have played a huge role in shaping comic books, graphic novels are very different. To best understand how this genre came to be it is important to know the history and evolution of comic books into the graphic novels we see today.

As defined by Webster (1964) a graphic novel is a story which is presented in comic strip format and presented as a book. The term “graphic novel” was first introduced in 1964 by Kyle

(as cited in Coville,1996). The term gained popularity with the comics community after the publication of *A Contract With God* by Eisner (as cited in Coville,1996) and the start of Marvels Comic line in 1982. The public became familiar with the term after the publication of Miller's (as cited in Coville,1996) *The Dark Knight Returns* and Moore and Gibbons (as cited in Coville,1996) *Watchmen* in the late 1980's. However, the book industry did not start using the term until 2001. The term is still loosely defined and often in publishing the term comic book is given to materials which would not be considered a novel if published in another medium. To understand comic books better it is important to recognize there were several important "eras" or "ages" that shaped comic books.

The first was known as The Platinum Age and it lasted from 1897 to 1938. During this time the world was first introduced to several types of comic books which experimented with different formatting and sizing. While most comics were sold on newspaper stands an underground comic arose during this time known as the Tijuana Bibles. Free comics became popular in the 1930s due to the depression. In 1932, Wildenberg (as cited in Coville,1996) decided that comic books would be a good way to advertise and they were a hit, the comic books drew many people to their gas stations.

The next important era of comic books was the golden age which happened from 1938 to 1956. During this era the super hero arose as the protagonist of comic books. In 1938 *Action Comics #1* by Shuster (as cited in Coville,1996) was released and this became the first appearance of Superman. In 1939 *Detective Comics #23* (as cited in Coville,1996) was released and Batman (as cited in Coville,1996) was introduced. He has remained in print ever since. For the next couple of years Marvel and DC continued to introduce many of the superheroes we

know today. While comic books gained popularity not everyone was a fan of them. Dr. Frederick Wertham was a distinguished psychologist who continuously made efforts to have comic books censored because he thought they were bad for kids (as cited in Coville,1996). Dr Wertham's attack on comic books had a huge impact and even forced DC to put together editorial boards with child welfare experts and psychiatrists who backed their books. However, Dr. Wertham was convinced that there was a correlation between comic books and delinquency and he continued to study this and persuade the public to burn comic books.

In fact, a mass burning of comic books did happen on December 20th, 1948 (as cited in Coville,1996). The Canadian government went as far as enacting a law that sought to control crime comics and it became illegal to own, distribute, or read crime comics. In 1950 the US Federal Government began an investigation into organized crime and looked into the effects that comic books had. Comic books became scapegoats for kids who committed crimes since blaming the comic gave them more leniency.

The final blow to the comic book community came in 1954 when Dr. Wertham (as cited in Coville,1996) published *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book in which he stated that after his studies with children he noticed that comic books were a major cause of teenage delinquency. Dr. Wertham (as cited in Coville,1996) went further by stating that he also found that by violating the laws of physics comic books were confusing children about things like homosexuality, especially with Robins attachment to Batman.

Furthermore, he went on to state that comic books like Wonder Woman gave little girls the wrong idea about their place in society. His findings are the reason that until this day comic books have carried such negative stigma. After the publications of Dr. Wertham, DC and Marvel

tried to restart the superhero. While comic books continued to be published they would fail to gain the same popularity for decades to come.

In the modern day classroom, the comic book is still seen as a very negatively stigmatized piece of literature (Palvik, n.d.). Recently, there has been a push to bring more comic books and graphic novels into instruction. One main person behind this movement is Yang (2008) the author of *American Born Chinese*. Yang has demonstrated through his publications providing any evidence that shows the benefits of graphic novels in the classroom. He himself uses comic strips as a way to teach students math. One of his main arguments is that when a student is listening to a lecture they have no way of slowing down or going back but when they have a comic strip in front of them, they have the ability to see the past, present, and future and they can learn at their own pace.

Comic strips and graphic novels could be used in a variety of ways such as to teach history, math, science, or literature (Templer, 2009). While there are some people that argue that graphic novels aren't reputable enough to be used most graphic novels actually carry the same elements that a traditional novel has (Palvik, n.d.). The use of graphic novels in the classroom helps to differentiate instruction and build critical reading skills (Constantino, 2012). This is because there are fewer words so they are strategically placed to have a greater connection with the visuals. Many of the same literary elements that are found in books or poems can also be found in comic books.

Comic books pose a great benefit for English Language Learners. Reading helps students pick up language meaning 10 times faster than intensive vocabulary instruction. Reading has a direct correlation with writing and those who read well in their second language also write better

(Derrick, 2008). Graphic novels provide language learners with contextualized comprehensible input and engage the reader. Comic books help children develop literacy as well as visual literacy. They deal with spoken language differently and so they aid students in understanding the ambiguity of spoken English.

While classroom demographics have become more diverse, teacher demographics remain mostly unchanged (Maples & Maloy, 2016). Graphic novels help address immigrant student's unique needs. They help to diminish the instructional gap and provide a mirror for these students in which they see themselves reflected. Graphic novels have also paved the way to teaching crucial issues in society such as poverty, war, etc (Templer, 2009). Graphic novels deal with issues of identity as well as many other important topics (The Room 241, 2012). They are cognitively appropriate and engage reluctant readers creating a gateway to literacy (Palvik, n.d). Graphic novels have the overall benefit of visual and multimodal literacy which is important to engage with the nature of today's multimedia culture. This makes them more accessible to students and creates a positive connection with reading (Gonzales, 2019). They can also be cross-curricular which means they can be used in many subjects. They are especially helpful to struggling students to create stronger literacy skills. To read a graphic novel a reader must use more skills than if they were reading a print based text.

There is also the argument that some readers will choose graphic novels and never read other novels but if the choice is between graphic novels or no reading at all it is best for them to at least read the graphic novels (Gonzales, 2019).. They also show higher levels of engagement during reading activities (The Room 241, 2012). Graphic novels are more useful tools in promoting active listening. One important thing to remember is to not teach comics as

print-based literature. To really successfully teach them it is important to have some knowledge of the genre.

Initial research found on the use of graphic novels showed positive benefits in their use to engage ELL students. Teachers reported higher engagement of students and there was a better development of literacy skills. Furthermore, graphic novels helped to deal with issues of identity and provided a mirror for students to see themselves represented. However, it was still important to find out if the positive attitudes towards graphic novels could be seen locally.

Methods and Procedures

Becoming aware of the perception of using graphic novels in the classroom may be beneficial in working towards using new tools to aid English language learners. In the next section we will discuss the process and methodologies of this qualitative inquiry. The first step in the basic qualitative guidelines required me to develop questions which would help in offering more insight and perspective on the primary research questions. When developing these questions I took into account those who I would be interviewing and the information which would maximize the benefits of these questions.

The main materials being used for this research would be paper, pencils, and a laptop to compile the data. I envisioned creating three separate anonymous surveys (See Appendices A,B, and C) to get an idea of their attitudes towards graphic novels. The surveys targeting teachers (Appendix A) would be distributed in schools with high numbers of English language learners with the hope that these teachers would be able to offer a better perspective. The surveys for students (Appendix B) would be distributed at CSUMB. The surveys targeting parents (Appendix C) would be distributed to parents of students which attended the same school that the

teacher surveys were distributed at. I would create a translation of the survey in Spanish so that parents who did not speak English could also take part.

The process of distribution and collection of the surveys would take place sometime in March in order to give enough time to compile the data appropriately. After collecting the surveys I would be creating pie and bar graphs which presented the findings in a visual that was easy to interpret. The graphs would help to show the attitudes of the community towards graphic novels and would aid in the discussion of the positive effects of using graphic novels. I decided to survey this particular population because it is known for having high levels of ELL students. The research focused on engaging ELL students particularly and by targeting a specific area I could ensure to gain more perspectives from these particular students. The questions asked in the surveys provided direct feedback and insight on my primary and secondary research questions. In the next section we will be discussing the results and findings.

Results, Findings, and Discussion

Due to situations beyond my control I was not able to perform the planned surveys so what will follow will be a discussion of the findings from other available surveys and data. However, I was able to find various research that directly corresponded with my primary and secondary research questions and the results are as follows.

My primary research question sought to find out how teachers used graphic novels in the classroom. One effective way teachers use graphic novels is to address the particular needs of immigrant students (Maples & Maloy 2016). In 2007 it was estimated that 21% of students spoke a language other than English at home, however teacher demographics have remained the same. Most teacher education fails to train teachers in dealing with more complex issues such as

addressing the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Many teachers are seldom prepared to successfully meet the needs of ELL students in their classrooms. Furthermore, the diversity and lack of training has led to a feeling of disconnection between teachers and students. The culturally relevant literature of graphic novels provided a mirror for immigrant students to feel represented. The use of graphic novels in the classroom helps to differentiate instruction and build critical reading skills (Constantino, 2012). They deal with spoken language differently and so they aid students in understanding the ambiguity of spoken English (Derrick, 2008).

Graphic novels are cross curricular and so they can be used across different subject areas (Gonzales, 2019). Gene (2018) has used graphic novels and comic strips as a tool for teaching math. As a society we can look to Japan to see how comic books would have developed if they would not have been misjudged in the 1950s (Derrick, 2008). Graphic novels have also paved the way to teaching crucial issues in society such as poverty, war, etc. Many ESL students would happily welcome using graphic novels and they can be incorporated in many areas of curriculum such as history or current affairs (Templer, 2009). Graphic novels can be used to investigate themes of social justice and they are more accessible to struggling readers (Maples and Maloy, 2016).

The visual nature of graphic novels provides many benefits to students. This is because there are fewer words so they are strategically placed to have a greater connection with the visuals (Constantino, 2012). The pictures in graphic novels help to downplay ELL students' inability to read in English because they help them understand the story (Maples and Maloy, 2016). Graphic novels provide language learners with contextualized comprehensible input and engage the reader. Comic books help children develop literacy as well as visual literacy (Derrick,

2008). They require the cognitive ability to fuse images and text together and ultimately require a higher level of analysis (Palvik, n.d.). The wordless nature of graphic novels gives ELL students the chance to be able to practice the new language and literacy skills in a way that is comfortable for them (Maples and Maloy, 2016).

There are both prospects and challenges for teachers when implementing the use of graphic novels. One of teachers biggest ongoing challenges is maintaining students engaged during instruction. This can be especially difficult when reading literature (The Room 241, 2012). Many teachers reported higher engagement in their students when using graphic novels (Constantino, 2012). Graphic novels engage reluctant readers creating a gateway to literacy (Palvik, n.d). They are multimodal so they facilitate a students ability to understand and are much easier to read. She also argues that this makes them more accessible to students and creates a positive connection with reading (Gonzales, 2019). Reading graphic novels helps students pick up language 10x times faster than intensive vocabulary instruction (Derrick, 2008).

The biggest challenge teachers face when implementing graphic novels is the pushback from the negative stigma they carry. There is the common misconception about comics that they are a cop out to traditional print based books when in reality they require more depth since they have less text (Gonzales, 2019). Furthermore, many of the same literary elements that are found in books or poems can also be found in comic books (Constantino, 2012). There is also the argument that some readers will choose graphic novels and never read other novels but if the choice is between graphic novels or no reading at all it is best for them to at least read the graphic novels (Gonzales, 2019). Some people hold the argument they contain inappropriate content, but there are plenty of reputable sources and many modern novels have graphic novel

versions (Palvin, n.d.). There are also many classics that have been translated into graphic novels. There are plenty of resources out there which provide reputable graphic novels that can be used for classroom instruction. ESL resources (2009) provides the names of some of the classic novels that have been translated into graphic novels such as “The Odyssey”. When teaching graphic novels it is important not to teach them as traditional literature. To really successfully teach them it is important to have some knowledge of the genre (Gonzales, 2019).

Being able to find enough information on the use of graphic novels in the classroom was crucial in answering my primary and secondary research questions. While I had envisioned carrying out my research in a specific way problems and limitations arose along the way which I will be talking about next.

Problems and Limitations

The biggest problem I encountered while attempting to complete this study was the outbreak of COVID-19. Due to the outbreak the state of California issued a shelter-in-place order which subsequently led to all instruction being moved on-line and the cancellation of our in-person surveys. Furthermore, the order also resulted in the capstone festival being held in May to be cancelled. Due to these circumstances me and my classmates collectively experienced discouragement due to the fact that our studies would not be able to be completed the way we envisioned them. Adding to the limitations all non-essential businesses were asked to be closed including schools and day care. Personally, this resulted in my unemployment and lack of daycare for my son. All of these factors made it increasingly difficult to complete by capstone research to my satisfaction.

Recommendation

After a careful analysis of the data compiled it is clear that implementing a lesson plan that successfully incorporates graphic novels could prove to be very beneficial to English language learners. While common core standards require lessons to be rigidly structured I recommend for teachers to find ways to incorporate more graphic novels. Graphic novels are multimodal so they facilitate a students ability to read and are easier to understand. To successfully incorporate graphic novels it is important to understand all the parts of my following recommendation

Know the Genre

One very important thing to remember when incorporating graphic novels into a lesson plan is understand the genre of graphic novels. While graphic novels carry a lot of the same literary elements as traditional forms of literature it is important not to teach comics as print-based literature. Graphic novels not only require an understanding of literature but also artistic perspective. A graphic novel requires the reader to be able to make a connection between the art and the literature. They require the cognitive ability to fuse images and text together and ultimately requires a higher level of analysis. There needs to be multiple interpretations happening at the same time. To successfully teach using graphic novels a teacher should prepare their students by creating art activities in which students get to interpret art. This will prepare them to be able to make the connection between art and literature. Teachers should also allow students to express themselves creatively so that they are able to recognize some of the cues hidden in the art.

Get Creative

It is important to remember that graphic novels are cross-curricular so they cross many subjects. This means that an educator has a lot of opportunities for successful implementation. Teachers and educators should move to implement the use of graphic novels in other subjects outside of literature. Teaching a history lesson using graphic novels could be very beneficial to English language learners because they have visual aids to help them understand. They can also use graphic novels to bridge issues of identity and meet the needs of students.

Provide Hard-copy Graphic novels

Many kids nowadays spend most of their time on their smartphones. Having hard-copy comic books provides an experience that is enjoyable and makes reading appealing. Students who would benefit from comic books tend to live in lower-socioeconomic areas that do not have access to so much technology so it is important to provide access to hard copy materials that will help them relate to their classmates.

Graphic novels provide a substantial list of benefits when engaging ELL students. The only struggles that arose from the use of graphic novels were the pushback from the misconceptions of faulty research. Since the 1950s most research has shown a positive connection between engagement and the use of graphic novels. This is increasingly true for students who speak a native language other than English. Provided all the benefits graphic novels pose teachers should immediately begin to implement them as instructional material for the success of ELL students.

Conclusion

Comics present themselves daily to us in many forms whether it be in instructional manuals, periodicals, etc. In the information age and with new technologies students are

becoming less likely to engage with material in the classroom. Graphic novels are a tool that has shown increasing benefits for ELL students. However, because of Wertham's (as cited in Coville, 1996) research they have gained notoriety as being a cop-out to traditional forms of literature. However, this could not be further from the truth.

Graphic novels engage students at a much higher rate than traditional forms of literature. For students who English is not their first language they help downplay their difficulty to read and create a more positive experience. They help to engage reluctant readers and are a gateway to literature. There is a direct correlation with reading and writing and creating reading comprehension means that ELL students are also gaining writing comprehension.

Graphic novels are successful in addressing complex issues of identity and culture and help provide for mirror immigrant students to feel represented. They are cross curricular and can be used to teach social justice issues as well as various subjects. They carry many of the same elements as traditional forms of literature. However, they actually require more cognitive abilities to interpret visual and print based context. There are fewer words throughout which means they are strategically placed and require increased critical reading skills. The benefits of graphic novels are clear and all teachers should begin to implement them as instructional materials to help English Language Learners be more successful.

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Appendix A - Survey to Teachers

Grade: _____

Years teaching: _____

ELL: _____

Age: _____

1. Have you ever used graphic novels in the classroom? Yes _____ No _____

If so, how?

2. What are some of the challenges of using graphic novels?

3. How do you feel about using graphic novels for instruction?

4. Do your students react positively to graphic novels?

5. Would common core standards allow for the usage of graphic novels in instruction?

6. What are some of the positives of using graphic novels?

7. Personally, do you prefer graphic novels or traditional novels?

8. Do you believe that there are enough reputable graphic novels that can be used for instruction? Yes _____ No _____

Can you name a few?

Appendix B - Survey to College Students

Grade: _____

ELL: _____

Age: _____

1. How often do you read? Often _____ Sometimes _____ Never _____

2. When did you first discover graphic novels (comic books)?

3. Personally, do you prefer graphic novels or traditional novels?

4. What are some of the positives of graphic novels?

5. What are some of the negatives of graphic novels?

6. Have graphic novels ever been used by teachers for instruction during your educational journey?

7. How do you feel about graphic novels being used for instruction?

8. Do you consider graphic novels as equally reputable as traditional novels?
 - a. If not why?

Appendix C - Survey to Parents

Age: _____ Number of kid: _____ Grade levels: _____ ELL: _____

1. Do your children read graphic novels (comic books)?

2. Have you ever read a graphic novel?

3. How do you feel about graphic novels?

4. Would you support your children's teachers using graphic novels for instruction?

Why?