

Interfacing with Sequential Art

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Abstract

This research report covers the development of a sequential art class for second, third, and fourth year students who participate in a program called Interface. The students who enter the Interface program are told that they will experience different aspects of international culture and communication in different cultures. Sequential art or comics is one form of communication which is overlooked in most cultures mostly due to people thinking that comics are for children. However in recent years, comics have been used to teach adults various subjects such as automobile maintenance, medicine, storytelling, and visual arts. The questions the author intends to answer are: Why teach sequential art as both a cultural interface and as an English as a Foreign Language course? How are sequential art classes taught in both English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language situations? What content should be taught in a course involving sequential art at Saga University?

[Keywords] Comics, EFL Communication, Intercultural Communication, Interface, Sequential Art

Background

Sometime in 2012, the lead instructor in the Interface program invited the author to volunteer to teach one of three native speaker classes in the program. At that time, the topics were undecided and the native speaker instructors were allowed to choose which area of their individual expertise would fit well in the program. In general, the Interface program is meant to introduce students to certain aspects of other cultures which they may not be familiar with. For these classes, this author feels that three definitions of the word “interface” can be used. First, there is the idea that students will have a common boundary or interconnection with the topic with which they can communicate or interact. Second, is that the class will be a situation which allows students to interact with an element from another culture even though they might feel some incompatibility toward that element. Third, used as a verb, students will be able to meet or communicate directly by using components from their own culture to communicate in a way that is similar to another culture.

After a time, the two other instructors chose the topics Cooking in English and Outdoor Education in English as ways in which their students could interface with other cultures. In choosing his topic, this author thought back to his elementary school days and remembered how he and his English as a second language classmate read comics. In retrospect, reading, sharing and sometimes trading comics seemed to have a few beneficial effects. First, for both of us, the comics reading seemed to increase our

vocabulary and our love of reading other types of literature. Next, as we shared our opinions about the comics we shared, it appeared that it helped to develop our communication skills. Finally, while trading comics, we assigned value to certain things, such as valuing a certain artist over another or a certain type of story over another. These were the author's initial thoughts. However, could these same type of results be translated into an English as a foreign language situation? Can students in L2 be won over by comics and learn to evaluate them as native speakers do? In the end, the author choose Sequential Art in English (i.e. comics) as the topic of his course. The following section further discusses the reasons why.

Rationale

Even though it might not be the case here in Japan, teaching through comics, teaching about comics, and teaching how to do comics has proliferated in the United States in recent years. Yang (2009), in an editorial entitled History of Comics in Education, stated that "over the next decade (the 1990's), comics began gaining ground in the world of education...slowly finding its way into the course catalogs of American higher learning institutions." Over the course of the decade, several subjects were often taught by using comics as the medium of instruction. History seems to be the most popular subject tackled by comics in those days, but nowadays philosophy, mathematics, the Bible, and music are also often covered topics. After encountering a few examples of this over the years, this author looked for reasons in the academic literature to explain comics' positive educational value after many years of being placed in either a "juvenile" or "reviled" category. In general, the three most cited reasons seem to fit into the categories of reader accessibility, reader enjoyment, and reader creativity.

In terms of reader accessibility, many researchers have concluded that comics are helpful for learners in a myriad of ways. As mentioned before, as an elementary school student and continuing on through intermediate and high school, the author felt that he experienced a surge of increased vocabulary learning and total amount of reading done which he owes to reading comics and which led him to read the "harder stuff" such as adventure novels, science fiction, and poetry. This casual hypothesis is borne out through a few recent studies. Many of these studies refer to reading comics as a dual channel of input, incorporating both the words and the pictures in helping the reader try to understand the information presented. For example, Manno (2014) cites that with children, including emergent, beginning, and struggling readers, comics tend to help them take their learning from a lower level (say from using picture books) to a higher one in which they begin to follow a sequence of a larger story in sequential art books or magazines. One author also states that comics can be thought of as literature and thus be a powerful "foundation of learning for all students." (Wilson, 2008). He goes on to add that not only is the duality of comics essential, but that comics make use of the multiple intelligences that Howard Gardner discusses in his book, *Frames of Mind*. The words are present as they are in any

novel, the pictures are there to assist and help convey meaning, and together they provide an additional layer which the reader reacts to. As a result, the reader of comics can have also have a stronger visceral reaction to the material compared to only reading the words. This general ease of accessibility to reading material through comics may also lead to increasing reading enjoyment.

This enthusiasm for the reading material is also an excellent reason why comics are a good educational tool. If a reader “gets into” comics, they become a sort of “gateway drug” into reading of other types, as this author discovered when he was a primary school student. After an introduction to reading comics, many readers become voracious readers which, of course, aids speedily in the development of their reading comprehension. In a 2003 article, Cummins stated that the amount of time a student actually spends reading is the most significant factor in that student’s reading skill development. Not only do comics tend to lead to increased reading of other material, but compared to other students, a reader of comics might read more than their peers. Krashen (2009), found that middle school comic book readers tend to read more than their classmates. In addition, Krashen noted that his findings supported an earlier study he conducted in 1993 in which he discovered that “comic book readers like reading more and read more.” In another study, this time involving elementary school students, the Maryland State Department of Education partnered with researchers in the University of Maryland Psychology Department, Disney Educational Productions, and Diamond Comic Distributors to pilot a program called Maryland Comics in the Classroom (Sonnenschein, S. et al, 2006). In evaluating the program, Sonnenschein and her co-authors stated that the majority of both the students and the teachers found the program very interesting. The program utilized comics that Disney had created 40 to 50 years ago, but used them to teach vocabulary, onomatopoeia, and reading comprehension. In concluding, the authors said that both teachers and students alike found the program to be innovative and enjoyable.

Speaking of innovation, reading comics also tends to spark readers’ imaginations. The author remembers that reading comics and other literature somehow caused him to try to create his own stories with varying degrees of success. The crucial point being however that reading with both the words and the visual encourages readers to attempt to create on their own. In a group of interviews summarized by Wax (2002), teachers found that comics-based educational projects are experiencing a resurgence and most teachers also added that it is a great way to get children to use their imaginations and creativity.

To sum up the strengths of using comics as educational tools, Elder says the Three E’s of Comics are engagement, efficiency, and effectiveness. Effectiveness and efficiency correspond with the aforementioned reader accessibility and engagement corresponds with reader enjoyment and imagination. Teachers at all levels of education have discovered that comics or sequential art has some benefit for their students. The next question to consider is how to apply this finding. In what ways can

comics be used in language education classes? Can the findings in the studies cited above which dealt with primary and intermediate education be applied to the EFL (English as a foreign language) and higher education classes, particularly at Saga University? Derrick (2009) makes the logical connection that since reading input plays an important role in second language acquisition and comics are a way to increase reading input, that teaching about and using comics or graphic novels is an excellent way of providing “contextualized comprehensible input.” Then, this input will lead the students to pursue or explore more graphic novels, magazines, newspapers, and other sources of reading. Armed with research to support the hypothesis that comics are a viable tool for use in the language classroom, it was time for the next step. In order to prepare to teach a course in sequential art at this university, the next consideration is how to teach the course by looking at how similar-themed courses were taught at other institutions or through comic resource books.

Survey of Sequential Art Teaching Methods

After deciding to teach “comics” at Saga University, the author began to investigate ways that the topic was taught at other schools. In order to create a syllabus and provide the students with the best possible learning opportunity, he wanted to use the best options for his students to interface with the topic. An overview of the literature concerning the teaching of sequential art basically divides the subject matter into two distinct categories. The first category is the types of individual activities that are used in class during the coursework. The second is the types of textbooks that instructors use in their sequential art classes.

The types of activities that are used in comic book art classes are both myriad and diverse. In the literature, teachers have listed their favorite activities and their various functions or purposes that can be presented in a sequential art lesson. Derrick (mentioned above), provided a list of seven activities which may be given to students as “one-in-done” activities or which may be used in preparation to read either a comic book or a longer graphic novel or used for students to create their own comics. Her list is as follows: Understanding Visual Symbols, Reading-Order-in-Comics, Comic Jigsaw, Fill-in-the-Text, Creating Pictures, Putting-Panels- in-Order, and finally Creating Comics. All of these activities seem to be useful in either introducing first-timers to western hemisphere-style comics or in helping students utilize the language they are learning. In the former instance, for example, these activities can show students how comics in English are read from left to right, not right to left as in Japanese manga. In addition, the Comic Jigsaw and Putting-Panels-in-Order activities can help reinforce the knowledge of the English language the students already possess. In the latter case of utilizing the language, the Fill-in-the-Text, Creating Pictures, and Creating Comics activities are very useful toward encouraging students to use new vocabulary or improve their storytelling skills.

With some duplication of Derrick's list, de Ryckel (2006) also makes a list of possible sequential art activities for the classroom. However he also asks some pre-activity teaching questions such as "What do we want the student to learn?" and "Do we want the student to focus more on vocabulary, syntax, understanding, or speaking?" He also asks some deeper, teacher reflection-type questions such as "What specific key concepts do I want the students to focus on?" and "Are there any obstacles to the comprehension of the comic(s)?" All of these are the type of questions that should be considered before teaching a sequential art course. Later in his article, de Ryckel further categorizes each activity into three general styles of communication: oral, written, and visual. Thus, his final list reads as follows: Riddles, Put-the-Panel-Frames-in-Order (sections 1 and 2), Find a Title, Same-Story-Different-Point-of-View, Rephrasing Text, Empty Speech Balloons, Speech-Balloons-to-Pictures, Summary to Order, and finally Panels-with-Missing-Frames. Most of the activities appear to be focused on written and visual communication, but a few, like Riddles, focus generally on speaking activities. In any case, the activities would give the average L2 English language input in the L2, plus a chance to use the language to complete a certain task. So, as with Derrick's list, these individual activities seem to encourage the student to use the target language in creative situations.

Smith (2006), in asserting that comics that can improve students' reading skills, expand teachers' resources, and "bring English language arts into the 21st century" also offers up a list of sample lesson activities. They are: Reading Aloud, Titles, Character Deductions, Set-the-Scene, Cross Media Analysis, and Order the Panels. As you can see, a couple of the activities overlap with Derrick's and de Ryckel's (Titles and Order the Panels), but with the addition of a few more difficult activities better suited for intermediate or advanced students. For beginners, the Reading Aloud activity would help them with oral English such as pronunciation, enunciation, intonation, and so forth. For intermediate and advanced students, Character Deductions would provide them with a chance to do literary analysis, critical thinking, and inference. In Set-the-Scene, students are expected to actually perform whatever scene takes place in any particular comic. Beginners can just follow the narration, conversations, and sound effects, but Smith suggests that as they progress the task can be made more challenging by incrementally taking out portions of the text so that students are finally only left with dialogue. Finally in Cross Media Analysis, because of the prevalence of comic-book related films and television shows these days (such as Ant-Man, Arrow, Avengers, Flash, and Jessica Jones), students can compare them to the comic book or graphic novel source material. Advanced students can be challenged to answer questions such as "How are the comic and the TV show/film different?" "What led directors to choose to remove some scenes or add others?" and "What should be considered when transferring a story from a comic to a film?" As you can see, these activities can be quite versatile, able to be used starting with beginners and also all the way up to the advanced level. All of the previously mentioned comic-related

activities can also be combined to create an entire sequence of activities designed to attract students toward their target language.

Because of the variety of activities which can be developed from sequential art, instructors now use it for its multi-dimensional aspects. In his classes, Randall Davis (1997) uses an uncaptioned comic strip to have students predict how stories will begin and end. In this project, which is carried out over three classes (four and a half hours), students begin the process by working in groups to discuss and describe the comics strip pictures, compare each other's ideas, and then eventually select the most creative ideas. In Davis' opinion, this process is "definitely a way to get your students hooked on learning."

Related to Davis' lessons, there are also instructors who use sequential art in what are called process projects. These projects contain activities which build upon each other. One of these instructors is David Fay (2007) who uses comics to teach students how to tell a story using comics. He utilizes a step-by-step program to help individual students or groups of students explore the art form. In order, the steps include: Exploring sequential art, Establish project groups, Choose a topic, Research the topic, Develop the story, Structure the story, and finally, Share the finished project. Fay feels that, after they go through these steps, the students should have an enriched view of the target language and their own culture.

There are some instructors who seem to focus entirely on the generality of their comic-based activities. In 1992, at a conference workshop entitled Using Comics to Teach Language, Steinberg told of his experiences in using comics in the classroom to create his own textbook, *Whatcha Gonna Learn From Comics?* He had compiled a number of comic-related picture-and-text activities designed to increase students' interest, comprehension, and also "help to establish period, setting, physical appearance, emotions, costumes, facial expressions, and gestures in each reader's mind." In the workshop he offered a wide-ranging array of activities with some examples, but warns that a teacher should carefully select each activity based on how it will benefit each class and each student. Some examples of the activities he endorses are in the very general categories of vocabulary, word study, punctuation, oral reading, interviews, songs, advice column, stereotyping, headlines, and creative writing. He felt that all of these activities are aided by the use of comics.

Another textbook writer who advocates the use of sequential art in the classroom is Stephen Cary (2004). Cary produced a resource book for use in the English as a second language or foreign language classroom called *Going Graphic: Comics At Work in the Multilingual Classroom*. The book is both a theory and research book and a book of activities. The activities include those similar to Derrick's and de Ryckel's such as Make-a-Title, Add-A-Panel, and Missing Panels. The activities section of the text also includes a guide to using other more advanced activities such as Between-the-Panels and Character Interviews. O'Neill (2006), in his review of the textbook says that *Going Graphic* reflects the

experiences of other second and foreign language learners and is good support for the argument that instructors should be encouraged to make an attempt to use comics in the classroom.

To sum up, as can be seen from the previous citations, there are many instructors who feel that the activities associated with comics-related topics can be a boon to many students learning a foreign language. Encouraged by the literature, the author felt empowered to move forward in designing a sequential art course at Saga University. Before moving on however, he also felt the need to be aware of other possible textbooks he could employ besides the aforementioned *Whatcha Gonna Learn From Comics?* and *Going Graphic*. What other textbooks might provide a week-by-week guide toward introducing a foreign language student to comics and help them to interface with American culture through comics?

Though written for native speakers, there are a few other sequential art textbooks or course books that that should be considered before moving on to design a sequential art class syllabus. The reason for this consideration is to provide a teacher with an overview in order to make a more informed decision on syllabus design. The first book considered is the oldest, Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985). Like Steinberg, Eisner based his textbook on previously used lessons from a course he taught. In this case Eisner's course was at New York's School of Visual Arts. The book was created not only for that class, but also for anyone having an interest in either comics or film. It contains detailed principles of comic book or graphic art storytelling. Another couple of texts to include in any kind of preparation for teaching a sequential art course are *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1999) and *Making Comics: Storytelling secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels* (2006) both by Scott McCloud. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud presents a process approach for understanding why comics can be as important as film. He also reveals that comics are over three thousand years old and that there are secrets, energy, and power contained within them. Perhaps even more useful is *Making Comics*, as it provides detailed guidance in how to create comics. It also gives practical suggestions for the tools an artist or writer can use to enhance creativity. The final book to use as a reference is Alan Moore's *Writing for Comics* (2003). Over the years it has been shown that story is the basis for comic creativity and the better one knows how to write a story, the better the comic will turn out to be. As will be shown later, this author feels that students who can grasp the principles of writing and telling a good story will also gain in knowledge of the target culture and language.

Application

Going back to the beginning of this paper, the author was asked to volunteer for and design a course for the cultural Interface program. After deciding to teach a course on comics the sequential art, he proceeded to investigate the success of using comics in the classroom and how comics are used in the classroom. The next step is applying the knowledge gained from the above survey of the teaching with

comic art literature and the overview of sequential art textbooks to make a syllabus for a sequential art class. The syllabus would include the purpose of the course, the requirements of the class, the textbook used (if any), a tentative course schedule, and a list of assignments. Of course, what and how one teaches a course on comics is limited by several things.

One of these limitations is how much time the instructor has to cover the material. The Sequential Drawing in English course (as it eventually came to be known) at Saga University is a 15-week course, meeting only once a week, for 90 minutes. Another limitation is the English language level of the students who might enroll in the course. It was suggested that the students would have an average TOEIC score of about 500. Still another in-house limit or perhaps more of suggestion is that the students who take an Interface class not only have to gain knowledge, but also gain some kind of practical experience in doing something with what they learn. With those limitations in mind, the author examined other university course syllabi in which the instructors taught about comics or sequential art and came up with a syllabus. Going step-by-step through the elements of a basic syllabus and looking at syllabi of other courses also enabled the author to develop a stronger grasp of how he would teach the course.

Certainly the purpose of the course would be to teach the students about comics and their cultural value. In the case of this particular course, the author chose to focus on American comics since he grew up reading them and has since gained a lot of knowledge about them and appreciation for them. In terms of class requirements, in trying to satisfy the Interface program's suggestion for practical application, the author decided to require not only a mid-term and final exam, but also a project in which students either write a short comic book script or draw a short comic book story. Next, in considering a textbook, because of the students maybe having only a 500 average in TOEIC the author chose not to use a textbook. In place of a text, weekly handouts would be used to supplant the lecture-notetaking and other classwork the students would do. As for the course schedule, after looking at several sequential art and writing syllabi at the university and extension level, the author decided to use a process creative writing-type syllabus, while also including a weekly "What are American comics?" informational component. The weekly process writing topics are as follows: What is Sequential Drawing?, Vocabulary of Comics, Examining Story Ideas, Brainstorming Story Ideas, Examining Story Structure, Creating a Story, Examining the Environment, Looking at Words and Pictures, Storyboarding, Examining Dialogue, Scripting a Comic, and finally, Finishing the Project. These components comprise about twelve weeks of the course. In every class, students were given assignments including such tasks as taking lecture notes, comparing notes, taking quizzes after a lecture, comparing the results of brainstorming, and explaining their work to their classmates. They also had to review the lecture material in preparation for a mid-term review test and a final review test. Of course, they also had to finish either the script or comic book drawing project. On the last day of class, the

students should present their projects to a group of classmates and discuss them. Hopefully, this variety of activities will do what the research suggests: provide the foreign language students with additional promptings toward learning English, with ways to cultivate their creative abilities, and with knowledge about the American comic culture.

Results and Conclusion

The above syllabus for the Sequential Drawing in English class was employed at the beginning of the fall 2014 term and later during the fall 2015 term. As in any class, some adjustments had to be made, but overall the instructor followed the general design of the original syllabus. In general, the adjustments made had to deal with the type of students who registered for the course, the drawing aspect of the project, and the average amount of time that students took to complete the project. On the first day the instructor was surprised by the number of international students who registered. It was quite more than the instructor expected. Thus, adjustments had to be made to make the class more challenging for the international students whose English levels were quite a bit higher than the Japanese students. Next, an adjustment had to be made for those students who either couldn't draw or for whom drawing was a struggle. The allowance the instructor made was giving students the choice to either draw a comic or write a script for a prospective artist to draw. As the final project deadline approached the instructor noted that many students wouldn't be able to complete the initial requirements for how many pages they had to write or draw (10 pages). The requirement was then adjusted to either complete, as the minimum, a five-page story. In the end, most of the students got their projects done on time and the quality was fairly high. In their written (not online) evaluations of the course, many of the students said they enjoyed the chance to use their creativity and tried to emulate the way American artists drew comics (as opposed to trying to draw how Japanese manga is drawn). They also seemed enlightened by the history of American comics and often discussed the source material present in many of today's "comic book movies." In fact, many students requested in the evaluation to have more historical content. Quite a large number of the students also seemed to enjoy sharing their work with their classmates. The last day presentations were probably one of the liveliest aspect of the class.

To conclude this study, even without the advantage of empirical or measurable results, it appears that using sequential arts in the classroom can be quite a motivation for both instructors and students. The students seemed to be able to absorb the new comic-based vocabulary and apply it to their projects. They also gained knowledge in the differences between comics in their culture and American culture. In the future, the author hopes to statistically explore further the advantages of using comics in the classroom.

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