INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF GRAPHIC NOVELS IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

From a time when Comics and Graphic Novels were considered mere children's stuff, we have come to a stage where recognition that they are an effective tool in Language Learning and knowledge acquisition is increasing. We now see Graphic Novels as a better way to reach out, whatever be the subject or content. A lot of Research on the aspects in which Graphic Novels can be used is going on world wide by Acadamicians at different levels. Accepting Graphic Novels into the English Language Teaching scenario is being explored with positive results. In this light, the present paper discusses "The increasing Importance of Graphic Novels in Communicative Language Teaching" with special focus on its benefits in E S L class rooms and the student centered Techniques which can be implemented with ease.

GRAPHIC NOVELS

Graphic books arose from the comic books of the mid-20th Century. Comic books have been popular in America since the early part of the 20th century, and their popularity grew exponentially over time. The heyday of comics came in the 1940s and 1950s, when superheroes like Superman and Captain America were created. In 1954, psychiatrist Frederic J. Wertham published a book entitled Seduction of the Innocent.

A large underground "comix" movement gained weight in the 60s and 70s. At the same time, mainstream authors began to reimagine their heroes as more three-dimensional characters who were much more self-reflective than the superheroes of the 40s. The combination of these two factors led to the rise of the graphic novel. In 1978, famed comic writer Will Eisner coined the phrase "graphic novel" when he published what is widely considered to be the first of the genre: A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories. This novel was specifically directed at adults, and tells four short stories about working-class Jewish life in New York during the Great Depression.

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The next major step in the history of graphic novels was 1986. In this year, three classic graphic novels were published: Watchmen, by Alan Moore; Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, by Frank Miller; and Maus, by Art Spiegelman.

Since the mid-80s, graphic novels have become more and more popular. They now cover every genre, from non-fiction to classical literature to stories about robots; they can appeal to every demographic; and they are wonderful tools for any classroom.

According to a 1993 study in The Journal of Child Language, the average comic book introduces students to nearly twice as many new words as the average children's book and more than five times as many as the average child-adult conversation.

Graphic novels appeal to reluctant readers (especially boys), give new voices to minorities, teach multiliteracies, and encourage traditional literacy. They attract graphic novels because the limited amounts of text are less intimidating and the images are inviting. The combination of text and images is helpful for new and struggling readers; these texts can offer an alternate path to higher-level texts. Boys in particular find the combination of image and text very appealing, and so these are an excellent way to draw boys into literary activities.One study shows that middle school boys who did more comic book reading also read more in general, read more books, and reported that they liked reading better than those who did less comic book reading.

Minority students may enjoy the many graphic novels that depict the struggles of immigrants and minorities. Many other graphic novels give insight into more recent conflicts and power struggles, and thereby give validation to minority students and their experiences. Graphic novels offer more diverse voices than traditional textbooks do, and they can lead easily into discussions of political and social issues. They present alternate views of culture and history in accessible ways.

In today's media-driven society, young people need more than just the traditional print literacy. They need to be able to understand and interpret images as well – whether on film or tv, in magazines, on the internet, or in graphic novels. Graphic novels teach students how to consider visual elements alongside of literary elements. They allow students to analyze information in different ways. Graphic novels combine visual and verbal literacies, just like films and television do, but they do so in unique and interesting ways. In fact, reading graphic novels may require more complex cognitive skills than the reading of text alone. Graphic novels teach multiliteracies as students examine the medium itself and how it affects the message of the text.

And of course graphic novels can also encourage traditional print literacy. If students are reading graphic novels, they are reading. "Reading comics is reading -- the verb choice is deliberate and accurate. We don't say watching (like we do for movies or TV) or listening (like music or the radio). We call it reading because that's what you do with a comic book or graphic novel. And that implies at least three important things: a medium that can tell any kind of story or instruction or any topic; active engagement with those stories or topics; and a medium that requires readers to interpret words and pictures and the interplay between the two. There are a lot of comics that don't aspire to do anything beyond entertain, and many don't even do that well. But that's true of movies, TV, music, radio... and yes, books. There are plenty of comic books and graphic novels that do much more than entertain, and do it as well as the best books you can think of." --Jim Ottaviani, author.

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Graphic novels are often called a "bridge" between television or video games and books, because they have the same visual impact of the former with the literacy skills required by the latter. I think it's also important to note that graphic novels are a destination in their own right. Journalist Lev Grossman observes: "some of the most interesting, most daring, most heartbreaking art being created right now, of both the verbal and visual varieties, is being published in graphic novels." Stories told in comics can be as engaging and exciting as stories told in any other medium. They combine visual and traditional literacy, and as such should be appreciated for their own merits.

In India, modern comics followed Western counterparts. Political cartoons came first. Indian comics were truly born when Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) was launched by India Book House, in 1967, with the intention of making mythological and religious texts, as well as stories about historical events and figures, more accessible to children.

Thus, when the home-grown Indian comic magazine did make an appearance, it was as an educational and instructional medium, and was seen to be serving the interests of children. Amar Chitra Katha success (12 lakh readership) gave rise to Tinkle and spawned other such initiatives.

If there is a first in India that brought out an indigenous version of graphic novel, it is Orijit Sen's *A River of Stories* (1994), followed ten years later with *Corridor*by Sarnath Bannerjee. We may be heartened by the Comic Con but India to date remains a followers and imitators. Our GN storylines continue to oscillate between themes of mythology and superheroes.

If there is a first in India that brought out an indigenous version of graphic novel, it is Orijit Sen's *A River of Stories* (1994), followed ten years later with *Corridor*by Sarnath Bannerjee. We may be heartened by the Comic Con but India to date remains a followers and imitators. Our GN storylines continue to oscillate between themes of mythology and superheroes. However, there is some change in research in India. Now a days Graphic Novels are used in preparing Text Books for other subjects like Social Studies, Mathematics and Environmental Studies. Though the classroom usage of Graphic Novels is in rudimentary stage, Graphic Novels are widely used outside the class room as an additional resource.

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

The Communicative Approach in language teaching starts from a theory of language as a communication. Approaches represent language teaching philosophies that can be interpreted and applied in a variety of different ways in the classroom.

With no one particular method or theory that underlies their practical and theoretical foundation, CLT methodologies are best described as a set of macro-strategies (Kumaradivelu 1994) or methodological principles (Doughty and Long 2003).

The fundamental principle of CLT is to enable learners to understand and use the target language for communication. Two basic assumptions underlying this approach to language learning are that the core of language learning is the development of communicative competence and that the starting point for language learning is not grammatical rules but context, function, meaning and the appropriate use of the language.

Richards and Rogers identify the distinct characteristics of communicative language teaching as (1986: P.71):

> Language is a system for the expression of meaning.The primary function of language is for interaction and communication function of language. The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses. The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.'

This approach calls for radically different ideas of language teaching. One major shift is that language learning has become student-centered. Lessons are planned in such a way that all the students can engage in interactive activities.

Authentic and meaningful communication should be goal of classroom activities. Group work and pair work are employed to promote communication and getting the meaning across. Authentic materials, such as newspaper articles, radio programs, video-tapes, train-timetables etc., are used to bring the real world elements into the classroom. Situations are simulated but interaction and task complete within real-time are genuine. Role-plays centre on communicative functions.

Fluency is an important dimension of communication. The objective of language learning is to communicate; attempts to communicate are encouraged at the very beginning. Errors are unavoidable but accuracy is judged in context rather in structures and forms. Errors which are concerned with structures are not corrected openly and simultaneously because the main concern is fluency and getting meaning through communication. Learning is a process of creative construction and involves errors.

In a CLT classroom, teachers keep a low profile in their functions, relax their control of the class, resort to gentle correction, organise activities and stand aside, prompt with discretion and offer help only when requested. However, this withdrawal should not mean relinquishing control over the class, and it requires the teacher an extremely high degree of professional sophistication. They need very much more energy and adaptability (Nunan: 1987).

GRAPHIC NOVELS IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING
If any activity can be called 'Communicative', it should satisfy the following three conditions.
1. Language using situations and roles must be real to a learner.
2. There should be a need and a purpose for communication and something to be communicated.
3. Communication means freedom and unpredictability. Language learners need to learn to handle this freedom and tackle this unpredictability that are a part of communication every day.

"These three conditions mean that the target language the learner come into contacts with should be real, that is, authentic, appropriate and global (Li Xiaoju, 1984:62).

"Literature is a relevant resource in the process and the purpose of language learning" (Widdowson, 1984:173).

Sandra McKay (Brumfit and Carter, 1986: 191 – 198) feels that literature provides a basis for extending language usage and use.

The role of literature in promoting vocabulary expansion, knowledge of linguistic rules and language skills has long been recognized. The advantage of using literature to develop language

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use is that literature presents language in discourse in which the parameters of the setting and role relationship are defined. When students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their motivation to interact with a text and thus ultimately increase their reading proficiency.

- A story book approach lends itself to a communicative language method where children are encouraged to use the language from the story either in role play form or games.
- A story book provides a child-centred universe where abstract concepts are symbolised within the text and images. A story-based approach to teaching English is acquisition based, working on the learner's pre-knowledge and taking meaning from context and image.
- It provides an ideal context for literacy practice as well as linguistic acquisition. When the text is authentic and not grammatically sequenced, it exposes the learner to several tenses at the same time, which reflects a real life situation where the learner will have to find meaning through image and context, building on learning strategies.
- Supporting visual literacy is important in order to help children take meaning from text as well as develop aesthetic understanding.
- Providing information through pictures is an important and fast developing method of communication in the global world.

Graphic novels are becoming more and more prominent in CLT, either as stand-alone illustrated readers or as stories integrated into general course books, such as in **Interactive Student's Book 1-4** *(Cambridge University Press). A graphic novel version of a well-known text is suggested on the set books list for* **First Certificate for Schools**. *They are an excellent resource for the ELT classroom for many reasons. Here are a few:*

- o **They're fun!** *Students love the visual, colourful nature of the stories and they provide a change of focus. They're also fun for teachers who can design a whole range of creative tasks and activities.*
- o **They're visual!** *The visuals not only attract the learners' attention, but help support the meaning of the story. The visuals also make the stories more memorable.*
- o **They're flexible!** *You don't have to use a complete story to exploit a graphic novel. With just a few panels you can create a whole series of classroom activities for individual, pair or group work. The same story can be used with different levels and they can provide a nice thread over a series of classes.*
- o **They can be used to develop all four skills** *in an integrated way. Many of the ELT versions are recorded, so the audio can form the basis of listening activities.*
- o **They can be used to focus on language:** *spoken language in the speech balloons, narrative text and discourse markers in the captions, reported speech, language of description to describe the visuals and sound words like Splat!, Boom! and Yikes!*
- o **They can be used to integrate technology**. *There are many digital comic builders that learners can use to create their own comics. For example www.makebeliefscomix.com*
- o **They develop creativity and imagination**.

Here are a few suggestions for activities before, while and after students read the story.
Before: *Lots of prediction work.*

- o *Give the visuals without the speech balloons and students describe them and work out who the characters are and what's happening in the story.*
- o *Give the first few panels with the speech balloons and students predict what's going to happen next.*

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- o *Give some key words from the story and students predict what happens or they listen to the story and make notes about what the characters say and reconstruct it (like a dictogloss).*

While: Students read and confirm predictions.
- o *Give the panels with balloons cut up, students read and order.*
- o *Separate the balloons and visuals and students match or they read the story and order the main events.*

After: This is when students can get very creative. They could…
- o *act out the story;*
- o *carry out a role play based on a situation in one of the panels;*
- o *invent their own ending to the story;*
- o *write a narrative version of the story;*
- o *add extra panels between the given panels;*
- o *retell the story from a version with the speech balloons blanked out;*
- o *retell the story from another character's point of view;*
- o *focus on specific language or pronunciation through a shadow reading technique if the story is recorded;*
- o Activities such as; information gaps, questionnaires and surveys, guessing games or retelling the story.
- o *create their own comics with an online comic builder.*

Thus, a Graphic Novel approach lends itself to a communicative language method and can be used as a major potential resource for ESL class room.

Though the Graphic Novels have reached the Indian class rooms, the majority of teachers are not familiar with Graphic Novels.

So, ESL and EFL teachers need to begin to incorporate the genre of graphic novels and comic books as an alternative multimodal form of text in ESL class rooms.

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