



COMICS: A TOOL OF TEACHING LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE

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Abstract: With an ever-increasing access to more forms of literature, language can be taught in more innovative and engaging ways. Language is a subject based on rules and can often cause monotony. If a teacher only sticks to the rules, it can cause students to lose interest, composure and hence cause errors. Comics can be very effectively used to teach language due to multiple reasons – It has pragmatic intelligence as comics generally have a narrative, plot, or emotion captured in very few frames, it can be used in multiple ways such as role plays, writings, etc. and it also has colloquial language which is beneficial to introduce, even mundane concepts. These aspects of comics brand it as a source of literature. This paper focuses on how comics, which are a source of literature, can also be considered as a reliable tool in language teaching. The pedagogy used in comics promotes target language through student centered work and group work, and it also promotes use of higher-level thinking skills such as analysis by comparing panels, and synthesis by creating a comic. A comic strip can be used in multiple ways and promote different skill sets such as fill in the blanks (grammar and vocabulary), jigsaw (analytical skills), creating comic (creativity), sentences (grammar and vocabulary). Comic books also provide authentic material to depict how grammar is used in conversations as opposed to sentences without background. They are funny and will engage the students. It also promotes learning different cultures as comic books are used across the world which will further boost vocabulary.

Keywords: Literature, Pragmatic intelligence, Pedagogy, Grammar, Vocabulary, Culture.

Themes: Comics is a source of Literature and an effective tool of Language Teaching.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is the spine of any civilization. It is a mode of communication and expression used by people to present their thoughts, views, feelings and emotions. Language forms a significant aspect in everyday life of individuals. Language forms the platform for imparting knowledge to people in same time frame in different parts of the world or even to people in different time frames. It is a pathway through which information travel across different timelines and different geographical boundaries. Thus, it is language teaching and learning which escorts correct rules and regulations to convey information. In today's world everything is controlled and monitored and linked through language. In order to be a part of this fast running society one needs to be in touch with everything that goes around and language is the only tool which divulges that awareness.

Language is an effective tool that any individual can use to one's advantage. Strong command over language can provide many benefits, some of which are discussed below:

- 1) **Employability:** - Language helps individuals develop strong communication skills and communication skills are considered a hygiene factor for any employer. If an applicant possesses good communication skills, one would have an advantage over others as people with good communication skills tend to be high performers.
- 2) **Cognitive skills:** - According to major studies carried out across the globe, strong language skills have been strongly correlated with better problem solving skills, creativity and multi-tasking
- 3) **Exposure to the Global World:** - A multi linguist would be able to access more literature, more art form and thus more information from across the globe. Knowledge is power and it can be

harnessed by language. It provides one with more opportunities to learn from other people's experiences and gain perspectives.

4) Cerebral Exercise: - Language learning, to a surprise, improves the cerebral functions and is also quite effective in treatment of Alzheimer's. It enhances the brain usage and thus is efficient way of brain exercise.

In the modern world, there has been a continuous development in the field of language teaching tools. A number of tools such as smartphone applications, online sites etc. have been designed to teach language to the learners. Language teaching has become a field with a lot of scope for research. With increasing researches, it has been found out that literature in different forms is used as a tool for teaching language to the learners across boundaries. Traditional methods such as Grammar translation method has been substituted by new developments such as fictions, songs, videos, gaming and comics.

II. LITERATURE AS A LANGUAGE TEACHING TOOL

Literature as a tool in a language classroom gives a lot of scope to the learners for discussion, debates and presenting themselves. Literature is closely related to language and it plays an important role in language classrooms. Literature is available in various forms- fiction, non-fiction, biographies, autobiographies, historical accounts etc. The characteristics of literature which mark it as an authentic tool for language learning are as follows:

1) A work of literature has a huge collection of words that exposes the reader to different types of registers used in different workspaces.

2) In literary pieces, the art of narrative formation, structure of sentences and dialogues give an in depth knowledge to the learners about correct speaking and writing skills.

3) Literary works have a sophisticated way of language usage and sentence formation. Writers or authors use language to their fullest to engage the readers in their world of fiction. This style of holding the reader's or listener's attention can be best taught through literature.

4) A fiction or non-fiction source of literature converses about different scenes from the lives of the characters or lives of the author himself. These scenes stand as examples of various situations that a learner himself might come across and how to vocally respond in such circumstances.

5) Literature discussions in classrooms offer space for everyone to present their point of views as such writings are open to interpretations. So, thus it becomes very easy for the teachers to engage the whole class together in one activity. Also, these make learners an active participant and autonomous.

With all these credentials attached to literature, it has become one of the major tools of language teaching. The most important question that arises is if all the sources of fictional work can be considered as a reliable source of literature for teaching language or not. One such medium that has undergone several debates and discussions is Comics. Comics are graphic novels which convey stories using pictorial format and are enjoyed by students a lot. In the coming sections I will focus on the reliability of comics as sources of literature and their usage in second language classroom.

III. COMICS AS A SOURCE OF LITERATURE

Not all comics can be considered as art, much like all film and photography cannot be considered as art. But, can comics be considered as literature? Comic books are text-based stories, which are sold in bookstores, quite likely, under the graphic novel section. They are reviewed in book review sections and even discussed in academic journals.

However, there are many that will argue against the validity of treating comics as a source of literature on various grounds such as – there are comics which are not literature in the sense that they are not well structured, unified or the characters do not have depth, treating comics would mean that their visual elements are ignored, and lastly that treating comics as literature implies ignoring its distinctive form. The argument that some comics are not literature and therefore comics cannot be literature is a propositional fallacy. The view that some comics are literature makes much more sense. Secondly, there is historical evidence where illustrated literature has been recognized and accepted. Treating a work of art as literature cannot preclude attending to its visual elements as depicted by treating George Herbert's poem 'Easter Wings' and children literature. Finally categorizing comics as literature does not imply that its distinctive features can be ignored. Comics can be treated as literature the same way poetry is treated as literature by appreciating its distinctive forms and by evaluating it as a work of literature.

Douglas Wolk points out that ‘they use words, they’re printed in books, they have narrative content’ (223)¹. David Carrier argues that ‘book size scale’ of comics is one of its essential features (225)². However, to truly evaluate comics as literature, one needs to examine the wide range of proposed definition of literature which I have synthesized as follows:

‘A work produced in a linguistic medium that possesses aesthetic, cognitive or interpretation centered value’

Since some comics do possess aesthetic, cognitive or interpretation centered value and are produced in linguistic medium (they contain text as opposed to only images), it is safe to argue that some comics can indeed be considered as literature, which I have highlighted through the following examples:

Alan Moore’s ‘Watchmen’ is a precisely and effectively structured comic that explores the decisions mankind’s last superheroes must make to save humanity from ripping itself apart. Geoff Klock writes about Watchmen that ‘the building density of tradition becomes anxiety; the superhero narrative becomes literature’. It was so well received that 2 critics from the Time magazine placed it in the top 100 English language novels. It was later adapted into a major motion picture.

Batman – The Dark Knight Returns is another example of a comic book that was very well-received, addressed moral issues, and was also adapted into a major motion picture.

On the other side of the spectrum, Maus is a comic series by Art Spiegelman which depicts Spiegelman interviewing his father about his experiences as a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor. The work employs postmodernist techniques and represents Jews as mice, Germans as cats, and Poles as pigs.

Thus, the best argument would be to include ‘some comics’ as literature. It would be necessary to view comics as a hybrid art form which employs visual aids and narrative cues with a plot at its heart. Levinson suggests that:

“If art form C has emerged as a combination of A and B, then we appropriately understand or gauge the A-aspect of a C-work . . . against a background of norms, styles, and concerns, attaching to the preexisting practice of an A.” (239)³

It indicates that we must learn to appreciate a new art form that has its own attributes without force-fitting it into a category. After all, what purpose will be fulfilled if we do successfully classify comics as literature? The critical underpinning argument is that comics are a hybrid art form that can be successfully used to communicate written words, texts, stories, moral concepts or any other knowledge, and that is all that matters.

IV. COMICS AS A TOOL OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

Comics can be used in language classrooms as a medium of instruction in order to increase learner’s understanding of language usage. These graphical novels have all the elements which are desirable to attract the learner’s attention in a language classroom. The pictorial presentations of characters, situations, observations and scenarios make it engaging for the readers. The typical fun element of comics surpasses any other technique in holding the interest of learners. The learners many a times get to know about the culture of the target language which makes learning easier and interesting.

Comics similar to any other source of literature provide opportunities for role play. The learners can adopt any role of their choice and perform it with their friends. Comics provide a number of scopes for language learning. The language of these graphic novels offers a range of variations. Comics are usually meant to entertain the readers, so, their language is usually high order skilled and full of literary devices like pun, onomatopoeia and irony. This gives readers a prospect to delve into many aspects of the target language. Nowadays, pragmatic intelligence in comics has emerged as an important area of research. It has been evidently found that pragmatic intelligence plays an important role in the development of language skills.

Pragmatic intelligence comprises of sharp play on words. Bewildering scenarios, unforeseen responses and unpredictable consequences is what makes comics a source of pragmatic intelligence. Comics increases reasonability, communicative skills (verbal non-verbal), practical skills and judgment abilities. These make comics a prodigious source to develop pragmatic intelligence. These vivid narratives provide an insight into everyday lives and make the readers competent enough to use that information in their daily practical use.

As we have discussed in the previous section of this paper that some comics can be treated as a source of literature, these upcoming narratives are quite efficient in conveying the awareness of daily life problems and making the readers reasonable enough to use the possible solutions provided in their daily course of action. In many comics it is often found that superheroes always help people in danger and this leaves an impression that good ones are always ready to help those who are in need. Students and learners get encouragement from these literary texts and they envisage these qualities in their day-to-day lives.

¹ Meskin, A. (2019). *Comics as Literature?*

² Meskin, A. (2019). *Comics as Literature?*

³ Meskin, A. (2019). *Comics as Literature?*

Pragmatic language of comics helps the learners to improve their communication skills which further enhance clear transmission of thoughts and opinions. Also, pragmatic skills help in correct evaluation of the message that has been conveyed. In simpler words, a proper communication, which involves conveying as well as receiving of opinions, can only happen if both the speaker and the listener are aware of the right communication skills. Moreover, since, comics have visual graphics, so, it becomes easier for learners who have hearing difficulties to view pictures and learn from there. Pragmatic intelligence comprises of overall development of body language, etiquettes and gestures along with communication skills. The talent of a good judgment depends on the aforementioned knowledge of speaker as well as listener. In comics it can be seen that miscommunication takes place because of lack of prior knowledge of anyone of the associates involved in conversation.

It is a noteworthy fact that pragmatic intelligence doesn't only comprise of overall communication skill development rather it guides the learners towards a smarter and keener observation of society and respond to the googlies thrown by populaces around us in an apt but polite manner. Pragmatic skills are a typical feature of literary works like novels and dramas which is an elementary part of comics as well.



Fig: *The Illusion Of Work* (Issue 18th Jan 2017, www.dilbert.com)

A problem which is faced by every individual in their professional life has been shown here. Here, an employee tries to escape his extra burden of workload in a very courteous and polite manner. So, the apprentices while going through such comics strip learn how to refuse an extra work load in a polite and intelligent manner. This is what pragmatic astuteness actually means- conveying oneself in a very lucid, precise, polite and ingenious manner.

Graphic aid such as pictures and images is an essential approach that can be used with children with problematic social skills. In these circumstances, Comic books emerge as a winner in proving appreciable role models along with role playing situations to benefit children with lowly pragmatic skills and facilitate them to exercise apposite conducts.

Apart from rational skills that comics offer, they are also helpful in learner centered teaching. A number of group-tasks such as role playing, jigsaw puzzle, sequencing and dialogue completion can be given to students to check their command and understanding of the language. Through comics, a different approach can be set towards the learning of target language. These tasks compel the students to practice their thinking skills. For jigsaw puzzles, one simple task can be that learners are given torn scripts of comics and are asked to arrange the scripts as per their understanding. Also, each group of students can play roles present on one strip of comics in an irregular order and other students have to guess the correct sequence of the incidences. Third task can be- show original comic strips to the students and give them the same comic script in torn form. The students would be asked to draft another story using the same torn script.

Using dialogue completion can also be taught to teach second language. Comic strips with blank spaces can be given to students to fill in the blanks with grammatically accurate words and apt vocabulary. Also, another task of direct-indirect speech can be given to the advanced students. Usually, in comics, dialogues are written in direct speech, so students can be asked to convert those direct speeches into indirect speech. To improve the vocabulary of students, a very interesting task can be performed- group the students into pairs and give each pair comic script of different genres (adventure, gothic, humorous, crime, heroic etc.) and ask them to cull out important terms which highlight the genre of the comics. For example- students can highlight the terms such as fearful, scary, and terrifying under gothic genre.

In order to improve writing skills students can be asked to write the entire story of the comic book in their own words. Also, this story writing can be twisted for advanced learners as writing the entire story from the perspective of one particular character. The learners can be divided in groups and can be asked to make comic scripts for the short stories that they like. These activities improve and test intellectual skills of students and give them an opportunity to showcase their creative talent.

All the four skills of language can be effectively taught using comics. As we have seen above that writing can be taught using comics by the method of story writing, speaking can be taught by the method of role-play and discussions on the stories and characters, reading can be taught by individual reading of the pieces of language. Speaking skills can be taught to the students by playing a voice recording of the comics which is prepared by the teacher.

In addition to all these skills, which include pragmatic intelligence, listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary and communication, comics as a source of language teaching tool offer to a learner; it also enhances the cultural knowledge of pupils. Comics seem to be quite helpful in creating awareness about the values, culture and traditions of the target language. Similar to any work of literature, comics establish the cultural trends of a particular society in a particular time period. The problems that are faced by people in their day to day lives are usually reflected in the literatures produced by people in that area. Also, the trends of popular culture of society get a place in the comic scripts. For example: a place where baseball is played, the comics produced by the people belonging to that place are less likely to talk about other games. So, the learners passively acquire the favorite sport of that country.

CONCLUSION

Comics which are pictorial form of narrative are emerging as an important tool in teaching language. Although all the comics can't be considered as the source of literature, so, those which are a good narrative can be used in classes to teach second language students about various aspects of target language. Along with basic skills in a language, learners have the edge of getting pragmatic intelligence which is a rare element in other teaching tools. Comics surpass traditional language teaching methods because they are more engaging and interesting. They are helpful in grabbing the attention of students through visual elements. Also, those students who have difficulty in listening can understand language usage in a better way through comics. Despite being pushed back and being considered as an unauthentic medium to teach language, comics have gained superiority in second language classroom because of its diversity and engaging power.

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