

The Harmony of the Visual Message and Graphic Narratives in a Heterogeneous Classroom

Ranim Hajjar, Ph.D. Scholar
Jain-Deemed-To-Be-University
Bengaluru, Karnataka 560069, India
h.ranim@jainuniversity.ac.in
+91 7204647062

Abstract

“Consisting of dissimilar or diverse ingredients or constituents.” This is how the word *heterogeneous* can be best defined. Before we start writing an essay to discuss the topic of the visual message in graphic narratives, we have to fully understand the meaning of the term ‘heterogeneous classroom’. A heterogeneous classroom is where you- as a teacher- have a big number of students who possess different linguistic abilities and different learning styles along with various backgrounds. This research article delves into the meaning of graphic narratives and explains how a visual message accompanying a text has an impact on readers. This impact has triple sides: informing, educating and persuading. Each side is going to be examined closely, separately and with suitable examples that apply to the different kinds of learners.

Keywords: Graphic narratives, visual message, heterogeneous classroom, teaching, learner-type

There are three main learning styles for students: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Students with a visual learning style tend to learn and retrieve information best if they see it (a word, a picture, a moving animation, or a written caption under a graph). Auditory students remember most of the information they hear like a song, a pronunciation of a word or a speech. Kinesthetic students on the other hand learn best if they try things by themselves. Acting a role-play or touching items and making models are some of the best ways such students can learn through. We have to bear in mind that some students are audio-visual, and others are visual-kinesthetic. All of these kinds of students found in one classroom will approach English language learning in different ways. Imagine teaching a graphic novel in a class containing all these students!

‘A teacher working in a heterogeneous (mixed-ability) class should adapt the tasks to individual learner needs. Such individualization turns a lesson into a mixed variety of the individual-fit activities and is sometimes described by teachers as impractical.’ (Millrood, 2002). This research article is addressing the idea of the mixed ability classroom from a novel perspective: namely graphic texts. In terms of graphic texts, students have their own different ways in

interpreting a text by using their own technical and conceptual resources. Some students will depend on the language by reading the dialogues in the speech bubbles. Some others may understand a graphic text by looking at the drawings and analyzing the body language of the characters. Others may code the movements and sounds of the actors in a graphic film more easily than reading the words in the speech bubbles.

So, what is a graphic text in the first place? This is the question that we need to answer in order to see how students use their resources in order to interpret a graphic text in hand. Graphic texts are a literary medium that has its own devices. It is a printed text accompanied by pictures, graphs, or tables. In his book *Understanding Comics* (1993), McCloud defined graphic texts as ‘juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and /or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.’ The first work that has been regarded as a graphic text (specifically a graphic novel) was *A Contract with God* by Will Eisner which was written in 1978.

The Triple-sided Impact of Graphic Narratives on Readers

Informing

When a person reads a given graphic text, they see pictures and words on the page. The pictures or drawings **inform** the readers with the meaning and add to the significance of the message. If the text is tragedy, the colours used are of a great help to shape the tragic scene. If the text is comedy, the way characters are drawn helps readers feel the fun. One touching example is a panel taken from *The Complete Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi when Anoosh- Marjane’s uncle- was being tortured in jail. The drawings show how much he was in pain when burned by an iron in a way that enables readers to hear his screaming when he was beaten by those aggressive monsters (Satrapi, 2000, p. 45). If you notice, the panels are even without walls or borders because Satrapi did that on purpose in order to make it clear to the readers that the negative effects of the torture are everlasting and exceed boundaries. (see figure 1 below)



Figure (1) Anoosh being tortured in prison.

For graphic novels to **inform** the readers, the text accompanying a picture is not a must. As said ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ Is it possible that some kinds of graphics are without a text? Yes, it is. The Arrival is a wordless graphic novel which was created by Shaun Tan in 2006 and published by Hodder publishers. It is divided into 6 chapters and is 128 pages long. It talks about the life of an immigrant in an imaginary world. It is designed with a purpose to build a kind of empathy in readers. In her article *Comics as Literature*, Hillary

Chute mentioned the idea of wordless novels that appeared in 1930s, the idea that stresses the fact that we can understand a graphic text even if it does not contain words or sentences. ‘Wordless novels had already appeared; beautifully rendered woodcut works that served a socialist agenda and that incorporated experimental practices.’ (Chutes, 2008)

Educating

Now we move to the next idea related to how graphic texts **educate** readers in general and students in specific. I can say from a teacher’s point of view that if a graphic text does not teach you anything- which is impossible; it can teach you at least vocabulary. Flashcards are great tools for teaching vocabulary in English language teaching classes where an association is made between the new word and its graphic representation in reality. Graphic texts have already made their won flashcards where the reader can see both the picture and the word. If we want to discuss how vocabulary is learned by beginners reading a graphic text, a simple illustration is made by David Small in his great memoir *Stitches* which was written in 2009 about a sick boy who was later diagnosed as a cancer patient and lost his vocal cords because of the cancer operation. The illustration shows how vocabulary can best be taught through graphic texts. In figure (2) if we read the caption, we find that all the words mentioned are actually illustrated in the panel (drove, work, public parking, down, ramp, entrance). Thus, a student in the beginner or elementary level in an English class can learn vocabulary from the graphic novel.



Figure (2) David picking up his dad with his mom

Persuading

It is not only about informing readers or educating them. Graphic narratives which provide a visual message along with the text have an impact on **persuading** readers. *Skim* is a graphic novel written by the Canadian writer Mariko Tamaki. Skim is the name of the protagonist of this graphic novel who is a 16-year old girl. This teenager is suffering from a feeling of inferiority because she is plump. She falls in love with her female theatre teacher and starts questioning her sexuality. One day, Skim was kissing her teacher under a tree! By taking a look at the drawings of skim reflecting on her relationship with that teacher, you as a reader can see the fear in Skim's eyes clearly (Tamaki, 2008, p. 44) (see figure 3 below)



figure (3) Skim reflecting on her relationship with her teacher.

In addition to personal issues, humanitarian issues are clearly depicted in graphic narratives. Kathryn Strong Hansen mentioned the idea of a text accompanied by a visual representation saying that 'Imagery and drawings are not inherently less valuable than verbal literary art.' She also adds: 'In fact, images often convey a richness and depth of ideas that require . . . high-level critical thinking skills' (Hansen, 2012)

Maus (1986) is Art Spiegelman's masterpiece which tells the story of a family's struggles to survive the Holocaust by the Nazis. This graphic novel won a Pulitzer Prize and introduced the sophistication of comics to the academy. It moves back and forth between the second World War era Poland and New York City between 1970-1980s. In one sample panel (125), two mouse-headed characters walk on a route in a park. The panel shows the how Nazism is controlling the atmosphere, because even the path the mouse-headed characters are walking on is shaped like the swastika symbol (Spiegelman, 1986, p. 125). This **persuades** the reader of the horror imposed by the Holocaust which the mice are trying to escape. (see figure 4)



Figure (4) Two mice-headed characters walking in the park.

Can We Learn about Culture from Graphic Narratives?

Another example about the same point is that graphic texts help spread culture and demonstrate it. A prominent theme is the graphic novels of the immigrants. In her journal article *Graphic Novels as Tools to Improve Literacy*, Kelly Conelly proposes that graphic narratives demonstrate contemporary culture and make students feel they are respected by others. This respect leads to students being more receptive to reading and makes the students of other cultures aware of the cultural differences (Conelly, 2014).

Approaching a Graphic Text in a Heterogeneous Class

In order to interpret a graphic text, students may employ different graphic devices found in graphic texts. They may look at the camera angle in the panel to see where the camera stands in relation to the subject. Is it a bird's view? Is it a high angle, an eye level or a low angle? All of these will have an effect on the reader's understanding of the subject matter presented in a graphic text. The figure below (figure 5) is a panel taken from *The Complete Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2000) showing a conversation between little Marjane and God talking about her future plans. We can notice the high-level angle of the camera that indicates how much Marjane is overwhelmed by her talking to God and how she is questioning her inner thoughts (Satrapi, 2000, p. 7). A reader can tell the context of the scenario by seeing how the angle of the camera is high.



Figure (5) Marjane talking to God about her future plans.

Other kinds of students in a heterogeneous class may understand the meaning through the graphic weight and the amount of contrast in an image. When Craig Thompson described the cold



"SHARED" is the sugar-coated way of saying we were TRAPPED in the same bed, as we were children and had no say in the matter.

Figure (6) Craig sleeping with his brother in a winter night.

nights in his graphic novel *Blankets*, he used a lot of black with shades of grey and a little white in order to portray the cold nights and the discomfort he felt when he was sleeping with his brother in the same bed (Thompson, 2003, p: 10). A visual learner will, for sure, understand the miserable winter conditions in which Craig was living just by analyzing the deeper meaning of the amount of contrast in the panel below (figure 6). McCloud (1993) sees panels as 'the most important icon and a general indicator that time or space is being divided' He also sees them as 'the most basic aspect of comics grammar' (as cited in Chutes 1993, p. 454).

Students can also interpret a graphic text by looking at the body language of the characters. One good example of this is *Stitches*, a memoir written by David Small about his own life and how he grew up from a sickly child to an artist. The panels on page 20 show how sick and scared David was while having a check-up at the doctor's and having an injection (Small, 2009, p:20). By mere looking at his facial expressions one can tell the situation even without reading a single word. (see figure 7 below)



Figure (7) Sick David having an injection.

Graphic Films Have a Role Too

What about films? Are not they graphic texts? Of course, they are! In a way they can be considered texts because they have subtitles. So, just like reading a graphic novel, students can do the same by watching a graphic film. The only difference is that the pictures are not static as it is the case in a graphic text and the sounds can be heard. A graphic film is the best option for a heterogeneous classroom because it suits all tastes and fits all abilities. *A Silent Voice* (Yamada, 2016) is a suitable example for a graphic film. It was produced in 2016 and it talks about the story of a girl with hearing disability who is bullied at school. She is bullied mainly by a boy called Ishida in addition to other students in class. She moves to another school escaping the stress she faces in her previous school but Ishida -the bully- feels so guilty that he starts looking for Nishimya in order to apologize from her. Moreover, he learns sign language in order to prove to her how much he respects her.

Harmony Is Not Only Drawn, It Is Written

Is it only by drawings, colour weight, contrast, and facial expressions students are able to interpret a graphic text? The answer is certainly not! **Language** is there. Language is another way for interpreting a graphic text. Since we are talking about heterogeneous classrooms, we are referring to different linguistic levels among students. This means that each student is going to use their linguistic competence to approach the graphic text. In Craig Thompson's *Blankets*, there is a panel on page 527 that has one single sentence. This very simple sentence summarizes everything about Raina's relationship with Craig and how much heart-broken he was when she left him. The sentence says: 'Everything Raina had ever given me, I'd burned' (Thompson, 2003, p. 527). Any

student with a beginning level of English can understand how badly Craig was feeling at this moment.

Students with a higher linguistic competence can make use of the more complex sentences which carry a deeper meaning. ‘It is incredible what time does to you’ is a sentence said by Marjane Satrapi in her graphic masterpiece *Persepolis* in the chapter entitled *The Horse*. This sentence is said to describe how much grey hair Marjane saw her mother had upon meeting her in the airport after 19 months of not seeing her. This very sentence is simple in structure but complex in reference. We can tell the sorrow she felt when she saw her mother getting older and older. On the surface, the sentence does not imply any hidden meaning; however, deep inside there is a metaphor that can be understood by students with a higher linguistic level.

From a teaching point of view, I see that a visual message accompanying a text is of great benefit for students especially the weak ones and those whom we call *reluctant readers*. Such students do not find it a burden to read in English and they are encouraged by the pictures especially if the pictures are in colours. This is why the field of graphic narratives is so vast to the extent that you feel it is a universe by itself. There are graphic texts for children like *Ben Dunn: Welcome to Middle School* (2014) by E.T. Aardentee, and *Anya’s Ghost* (2011) by Vera Brosgol. There are also graphic novels for teenagers that deal with issues pertinent to their ages like *This One Summer* (2014) by Mariko Tamaki which talks about a teenager whose parents are going to get divorced and *Sheets* (2018) by Brenna Thummler which talks about a teenage care giver whose mom is dead and who is running the family business while doing her studies. One of the great graphic novels for adults or those students who do well at school which carries deeper meanings and tackles humanitarian issues is *Palestine* (2001) by Joe Sacco that talks about war in Gaza Strip. There is also *Arab in America* (2008) by Toufic El Rassi which demonstrates the difficulties and discrimination against Arab immigrants in America as the title suggests.

Conclusion

In conclusion, informing readers, educating, and persuading them can happen simultaneously. This means that one graphic text can do all tasks together which proves how effective graphic novels are and this has been a little fraction of the myriad of examples of graphic narratives in the market.

It is worth mentioning that the magical element in graphic texts is the element of ‘picture’ or ‘graph’ which is not found in any other genre. An experiment was carried out at Avon High School in Indianapolis where 20 students were asked to read graphic texts in their free time. Sixteen of them reported liking the books because of the images there. They said that pictures helped them better understand the text. Colorful graphic texts in my opinion have a double effect

especially for young students and reluctant readers. However, this does not eliminate the essential role of language and the structure of the sentences.

The ideas mentioned in this article and the examples of graphic texts given are not meant to suggest that one graphic text is better than the other or that one technique for approaching it is more practical than the other. The purpose here is to shed the light on the different kinds of students in a heterogeneous class and to encourage English language teachers to teach a variety of graphic texts; not just one. Katheryn Strong Hansen talked about the benefits of graphic texts and in specific graphic novels in her article, *In defense of graphic novels* for those students with a limited linguistic competence: ‘graphic novels can aid low-level students and non-native English speaking readers through the twining of words with images’. In addition, she also included the other students in her view: ‘[they] can challenge higher-level readers to expand their analytical skills to include consideration of visual elements’ (Hansen, 2012)

References

- Chutes, H. (1993). PMLA. Comics as literature? Reading graphic narrative. 123, p:452-465
- Conelly, K. (2014) Graphic novels as tools to improve literacy. Retrieved from: <https://www.healthyteennetwork.org/blog/graphic-novels-tool-improve-literacy-5-facts/>
- Hansen, K.S. (2012). In defence of graphic novels. *English Journal*, 102(2), 57-63
- McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Harper: New York.
- Mariko, T. (2008). *Skim*, Greenwood Books: Ontario.
- Satrapi, M. (2000). *The Complete Persepolis*. Pantheon Books: New York.
- Small, D. (2009). *Stitches*. Norton: New York.
- Spiegleman, A. (1986). *Maus*. Penguin Books.
- A Silent Voice. Directed by Naoko Yamada, Kyoto Animation, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhHKIIQpm54>
- Millrood, R. (2002). Teaching Heterogeneous Classes. *ELT Journal*, 56, 128-136.
- Thompson, C. (2008). *Blankets*. TopShelf Production: Canada

Ranim Hajjar, Ph.D. Scholar

Abbiah Reddy Layout, Puttenhalli Road. J.P. Nagar 6th Phase, Behind Inchara Hotel
Bangaluru-560078

Jain-Deemed-To-Be-University

h.ranim@jainuniversity.ac.in

+91 7204647062