

## THE EFFECTS OF COMICS ON THE READING COMPREHENSION OF ESL LOW PROFICIENCY LEARNERS

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### ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to investigate the effects of comics on the reading comprehension of ESL low proficiency learners. Sixty students of Diploma in Business Management in Universiti Selangor were selected to participate in this study. They were segregated into three groups of 20 respondents each. Each group was assigned to read one of the three reading materials – comics (C), text (T) or comics with text (CT). After reading, all the students were instructed to answer reading comprehension questions. Coefficient of variation (COV) was used to compare the reading comprehension scores between the three groups. The findings revealed that students who read comics with text (CT) performed better in reading comprehension than the groups who read comics only (C) and text only (T). In addition, twelve students were selected to provide their responses to an open-ended questionnaire. The findings indicated that the students preferred reading comics only or comics with texts due to these reasons – enjoyable, realistic, multiple inputs and triggers empathy towards the characters. In contrast, students preferred less in reading text only due to its dullness and rigidity. Finally, the findings of this study are discussed within the lights of Paivio's Dual Coding Theory, Repetition Theory and the Mental Model Theory.

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### 1.0. INTRODUCTION

The progress of communication technology has seen the demand to build multiliteracies among the current generation who are exposed to various channels of communication such as Internet and social media. Therefore, teachers have to be creative in order to create a paradigm shift in their teaching approaches. Teaching practices which are too exam-oriented and teacher-centred is not conducive for students' cognitive development and not interesting enough to lead the students into reading habits.

David Crystal (2003) explains the concept of 'using English' which in his opinion transcends beyond the idea of knowing the linguistic structures only to enable one to form sentences and conversations, but one must also know how to use English appropriately in certain context as well as how to respond to creative uses of language. One of the reading sources which could be used to provide context in learning English language is comics. Once being read for leisure by many teenagers as well as adults around the world; comics currently have gained its place in many classrooms.

Echoing the previous researches conducted by Short et.al. (2013), Pan & Pan (2009) and Liu (2004) who have explored the use of comics in classrooms, therefore, this study was

conducted to investigate the potential of comics in assisting the reading comprehension of low proficiency students in University Selangor.

## **2.0. OBJECTIVES**

Sixty students from Remedial English classes in Universiti Selangor (Unisel) were involved in this study. Students were taught to read expository and narrative texts which were written in linear form. However, students faced uphill challenges in understanding the texts due to their limited knowledge of vocabulary, lack of motivation and low engagement in reading. Hence, efforts were taken to use comics as reading materials in order to aid the student's reading comprehension.

The objectives of this research are based on the conviction that comics have the potential of engaging readers' interest and thus enhancing their reading comprehension. In line with this belief, the objectives of this research are as stated below:

- 1) to determine the outcome (scores) in low proficiency ESL learner's reading comprehension of content area when they are engaged in reading the comics, text, or a combination of both forms.
- 2) to identify low proficiency ESL learners' responses towards the above reading materials in terms of helping them improve their reading comprehension.

## **3.0. WHAT IS COMICS?**

According to Mc Cloud (1994), the term 'comics' is plural in form and is used with a singular verb. Mc Cloud (ibid) also defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and / or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (p.20). In addition, Cary (2004) explains that most comics "tell a story with words and drawings and have an identifiable beginning, middle, and end" (p. 10). Cary (ibid) has grouped comics into four categories: "cartoons, comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels" (p.10).

There are differences between cartoons, comic strips, comic books and graphic novels. A cartoon only has a single panel and it humorously depicts the happenings in our daily lives. It uses caption that corresponds with the sketch to tell the joke. A comic strip is quite similar, but it normally employs three to five panels. It frequently appears in newspapers. The comic book, on the other hand, is much longer. It can stretch between 20 to 40 pages. Comic books are produced in two ways: a one-time only story or a continuous story. If the story is continuous, then the same characters are depicted again but with different plots and settings. The last category, graphic novels, is comics that have elaborate storylines and development of characters. These stories are also lengthy, similar to novels.

Thompson (2008) categorised comics into two different genres (fiction and non-fiction). The non-fiction genre has comics that specialise in content area. Examples of content area include statistics, reptiles and science, history, and etc. In addition, Thompson (2008) includes two other types of comics : trade paperbacks and manga. The former are popular comic book issues which are re-printed as anthologies. The latter, which has a similar format as the

graphic novel is known as ‘manga’. The characters in manga are illustrated in Japanese style drawings.

#### **4.0. DEVICES USED IN COMICS AND THEIR BENEFITS TO READERS**

Comics is about presenting pictures (accompanied by words) to convey meaning. According to Duncan and Smith (2009), a picture in comics is static; each panel in the comics has a picture which represents different moments in the story. The story in comics is presented in image-panels that flow in a narrative structure: conflict, rising action, climax, resolution and denouement.

The most important details of the story are chosen and ‘encapsulated’ in the panels. Encapsulation is a term used to describe the process of choosing the “prime action” and depicting those actions as dramatic sequential scenes to make up a story. Besides that, image-panels help create a focus for the reader because each of the panels have something important to convey.

Duncan and Smith (2009) explain that this process as “retention as well as attention”, that is, readers would be able to remember the scenes and they would be focused while reading them (p. 132). Collectively, these moments would tell the entire story to the reader. The artwork in comics supersedes the words in conveying meaning to readers. The artwork also impacts readers emotionally because the vividness and realism of pictures enable readers to experience the story.

Since pictures have a major role to play, cartoonists have developed various techniques to help readers experience the static pictures that they are engaged with. To create the experience and context for the enjoyment of readers, cartoonists use devices such as expressions to show the emotions of the characters, clothing, background (objects, places and geography), colour and lighting, sound and action, space and size, visual metaphors, intertextual images and narrator’s commentary.

Cary (2004) explains that comics are part of popular culture and are able to entice learners’ interest. Learners would immediately have a liking for such a medium. Thompson (2008) mentions that low proficient learners would more likely read comics rather than academics texts; comics motivate their reading and provide platform for the improvement of their language skills. Cary (2004) also explains that the abundant pictures in comics and the reduction of text would encourage second language learners to read. Cary (2004) also discusses that out of the many intelligences propounded in Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence (1983), it is the visual sense that drives many low proficiency learners in their quest to learn a language. Visual intelligence is the capability of learners to learn from visuals.

#### **5.0. SYNERGY BETWEEN PICTURES AND WORDS**

Duncan and Smith (2009) explain that for the pictures to convey the meaning effectively, there must exist a synergy between the pictures and the words. The words correspond with the pictures to convey meaning to the readers. The words appear in speech balloons and depict the action in the image-panels. According to Duncan and Smith (2009), it is this combination which is the fundamental of comics communicating meaning to readers.

This interdependent nature between picture and words is crucial particularly when one cannot stand alone and is dependent on the other to effectively convey the message.

Though at times considered an overlap, the repetitive nature of picture and words sends out the message with impact and therefore guides readers to understand the story better as well as creates fun and excitement in them.

In addition, Duncan and Smith (2009) explain that readers' emotions are also drawn in when engaging with the comics. This is due to the experiences that are conjured up when readers relate the pictures that they see in the comics with that of their schemata. In their explanation, Duncan and Smith (2009) say that readers bring into play their background knowledge when they see the pictures in comics. Take for example of how darkness makes us frighten or how the open calm sea enlightens us. Our schemata are stored with countless experiences from the past. Pictures conjure up these moments and bring about either positive or negative feelings in us. Therefore, the domain of affect (feelings) works in tandem with the domain of cognition (thinking and interpreting) in helping readers comprehend comics.

The explanation above is parallel with the following reading theories : Dual Coding Theory, Repetitive Theory and Mental Model Theory.

### **5.1. DUAL CODING THEORY AND REPETITIVE THEORY**

Sadoski and Paivio (2004) put forth the Dual Coding Theory, advocating that when making meaning while reading, the reader can use more than one way to understand what is being read: verbal decoding and nonverbal decoding. Verbal decoding is language based, whether from written or spoken sources. Nonverbal decoding stems from the five senses of human: sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste. If a visual stimulus such as comics is used as reading material, the reader decodes from the words (dialogues and monologues) and also from the pictures. The words and pictures together guide the readers in meaning-making. Thus, comprehension of the comics is based on dual inputs: meaning derived from the words and meaning derived from the pictures. Each supports the other in helping readers in their understanding. An important point mentioned by Sadoski and Paivio (2004) is that the nonverbal decoding is able to trigger reader's emotions because it prompts their senses. As mentioned earlier, emotions help readers empathise with the characters and appreciate the story better. The Repetitive Theory (Gyselinck and Tardieu, 1999) is similar to the Dual Coding Theory: the words and pictures convey the same meaning, thus being repetitive in nature. Such repetition enhances reader's understanding (cited in Liu, 2004).

### **5.2. MENTAL MODEL THEORY**

Johnson-Laird (1983), in his Mental Model Theory, explains that readers are faced with a cognitive load when they are reading. This is because of the cognitive activities taking place in the minds of readers which involves the process of interaction between a reader and the text: decoding, deciphering, thinking as well as connecting what she reads to her previous knowledge, predicting, assessing the ease or difficulty in reading the texts, and engaging herself in the reading activity.

Due to this cognitive load, Johnson-Laird (1983) and Glenberg & Langston (1992) explain that pictorial based reading can reduce the reading stress because pictures convey the more

important details in a more concise manner than the corresponding text, thus facilitating the forming of mental models that assist in reading comprehension.

## **6.0. RELATED STUDIES**

Short, Randolph-Seng and McKenny (2013) used graphic novels in teaching business management concepts. They found that graphic novels provide high levels of learning experiences. They also compare the impact of graphic novels with traditional text books and find that verbatim recognition was superior with graphic novel texts.

Pan & Pan (2009) conducted a study to gauge whether pictures could help low proficiency learners of EFL perform better in their reading of text parallel to their proficiency level, and reading of text that is above their proficiency level. The results indicated that pictures helped low proficiency learners in their reading comprehension immaterial of whether they were engaged with the low-level text or the high-level text.

Liu (2004) discussed other researcher's claims (Gyselinck and Tardieu [1999]; Levie, Anglin, and Carney [1987]) that texts which are accompanied by pictures (figures, charts, tables, or sketches) assist in reader's comprehension of the text. This is because the pictures repeat important details of the text and help reinforce reader's comprehension of the text's factual information. Both text and picture support one another in helping readers in their comprehension.

## **7.0. METHODOLOGY**

The following two research questions have been formulated in order to carry out this investigation:

1. How effective are the comics, text and a combination of both in improving low proficiency ESL learner's reading comprehension?
2. What are the learner's responses towards the above reading materials in terms of helping them improve their reading comprehension?

A mixed method was used in this study: the first research question was dealt with quantitatively and the second was conducted qualitatively.

### **7.1. Data Collection**

In order to answer research question one, data was obtained from a reading test. The test was to assess the respondents on their levels of comprehension. To answer research question two, data was obtained from an open-response questionnaire.

### **7.2. Preparation of Reading Materials**

Prior to the data collection, three reading materials were first prepared: a comic book, a text that conveys the same content area details as in the comics, and a combination of the comics and the text. The comics chosen for this study is entitled Positive Thinking, written by Eddie See. It was taken from the Kokko and May comics collection produced by Ge Mei Lia Studio.

This comic book was chosen because the theme is related to Malaysian business culture and ethics which connects to the students' background knowledge and relevant to their field of study i.e. Diploma in Business Management. The language level of the comics is between simple to average; thus, it is considered suitable for low proficiency students.

### **7.3. Preparation of the Text**

The content of the comics was then produced in text (written) form. Since the text is for use in an academic setting, that is, for students undertaking Diploma in Business Management, the structure used to write the text was typical of academic writing: a cause-effect rhetorical model, a definition as the introduction, a thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting details and examples, discourse markers, and a conclusion.

### **7.4. Preparation of the Comics Accompanied With the Text**

This variable, which is a combination of the comics and the text were included in the research to gauge whether low proficiency ESL learners' reading comprehension would improve if there were extra details to assist them in their reading. To prepare this reading material, the researcher first eliminated some of the image-panels in the comics. Then, the remaining image-panels containing the most important details were put in groups. The sequencing of the panels was reorganised to correspond with the flow of the text. The entire text (in smaller parts) was employed to support the grouped image-panels: the text was used to complement the comics and vice-versa.

### **7.5. Procedure in Conducting Reading Comprehension Test**

The reading comprehension test was designed according to Barrett Taxonomy (1968) which assessed the students' reading comprehension in terms of literal comprehension, reorganisation, inferential, evaluation and appreciations.

Sixty students were divided into three groups which consist of twenty students in each group. Since the respondents were all homogenous, they were randomly assigned to read comics, text and comics with text respectively. After the reading task, all the students were instructed to answer the reading comprehension test.

### **7.6. Procedure in Administering the Open-Response Questionnaire**

Twelve respondents were chosen from the 60 respondents to answer the open-response questionnaire. Each respondent was provided with all three of the reading materials. Then, they were asked to give their responses to the materials. Six questions were asked which need the students to explain which of the material they preferred, how the preferred reading material assisted the respondents in their comprehension if compared to the other two materials, which reading material facilitated systematic reading to the respondents and how this helped them comprehend the main ideas of the story if compared to the other two materials. Besides that they need to answer which reading material allowed them to empathise with the characters. In addition, their reasons for not preferring the other materials were also elicited.

## **8.0. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Comparison between the reading comprehensions scores of the three groups are shown in the following tables:

TABLE 1: Statistical Values According to Groups

		Comics	Text	Comics Text
N	Valid	20	20	20
	Missing	0	0	0
Mean		22.525	21.475	23.28
Median		23.750	20.500	23.00
Mode		14.0	20.0	23
Std. Deviation		6.1633	6.1140	5.197
Range		19.5	23.0	19

Table 8.1 indicates that Group C has the highest median of 23.75. Group CT has the second highest median of 23, and Group T has the lowest median of 20.5. Next, Group CT has the highest value of 23 for mode, followed by Group T with a value of 20 and Group C with a value of 14. On the other hand, the standard deviation is lowest for Group CT with a value of 5.197, while Groups C and T have values of 6.1633 and 6.1140 respectively.

The above illustrations pertaining to values for central tendency indicate that the respondents who engaged with CT performed the best among the three groups, whereas the respondents who engaged with T had the lowest performance. Group C has values approximate to Group C. To further compare on how effective is the three reading materials in helping students in their reading comprehension; data are further analysed via Cross Tabulation as in Table 2 below:

Table 2 : Cross Tabulation – Level of Effectiveness of Reading Comprehension

			Level of Effectiveness of Reading Comprehension				Total
			Less Effective	Effective	More Effective	Most Effective	
Reading Comprehension	Comics	Count	6	4	5	5	20
		% within Reading Comprehension	30.0%	20.0%	25.0%	25.0%	100.0%
		% within Category	35.3%	22.2%	45.5%	35.7%	33.3%
Text		Count		7	2	4	20
		% within Reading Comprehension	35.0%	35.0%	10.0%	20.0%	100.0%
		% within Category	41.2%	38.9%	18.2%	28.6%	33.3%
ComicsText		Count	4	7	4	5	20
		% within Reading Comprehension	20.0%	35.0%	20.0%	25.0%	100.0%
		% within Category	23.5%	38.9%	36.4%	35.7%	33.3%
Total		Count	17	18	11	14	60
		% within Reading Comprehension	28.3%	30.0%	18.3%	23.3%	100.0%
		% within Category	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The reading comprehension scores are categorised according to 4 levels of effectiveness: Less Effective, Effective, More Effective and Most Effective.

Within the 'Most Effective' level of reading comprehension, group CT and group C shares the highest percentage with both equally made 37.5% from the number of respondents. The lowest percentage of readers who scored within this range is group T.

Eventhough group CT and C share equal percentage within the 'Most Effective' level, but comparison within the 'Less Effective' level shows that group CT scored the best compared to group C and group T. within the 'Less Effective' band, only 23.5% of respondents are from group CT, followed by group C (35.3%) and the highest percentage of respondents (41.2%) are from group T. This shows that generally, group CT performs the best among the three groups.

The overall comparison among the 4 levels of reading comprehension shows that between the extreme range of 'Less effective' to 'Most Effective' levels, the majority of the respondents (30%) scored within the 'Effective' level compared to 28.3% of respondents who scored within the range of 'Less Effective' level and 23.3% who scored at the 'Most Effective' level. The slight differences in the percentage of respondents who scored within the 'Less Effective' level compared to the 'Effective' level and to the 'Most Effective' level shows that with the correct approach, the combination of comics and text (CT) has a great potential in improving students' reading comprehension.

To conclude the findings for Research Question 1, it could be ascertained that CT as well as C have managed to enhance low proficiency ESL learners reading comprehension if compared to traditional academic text. This could be attributed to the realistic and dramatic pictures inherent in both CT and C. This finding could be explained in relation to Sadoski and Paivio's (2004) Dual Coding Theory. Both CT and C have provided the respondents with rich contexts which aided their cognitive process of forming mental representations and thus guiding them in making sense of the story. C had the benefit of pictures and dialogues to support each other in helping to convey the message to the respondents, while CT has a further advantage, that is, the pictures and dialogues are further supported by excerpts from the academic text. This value-added element in CT would have given more boosts to the respondents to comprehend the story as the excerpts from the text provide repetition of the main ideas of the content depicted in the comic. The Repetitive Theory (Gyselinck and Tardiey, 1999) explains that repetition enhances reader's understanding because the readers are exposed to the story's details twice.

### **8.1. The Responses of Low Proficiency ESL Learners Towards Reading the Comics, Text and the Combination of Both**

The findings below also serve as interpretations to support the statistical findings in Research Question 1. The findings showed that seven of the twelve respondents preferred C. The remaining five preferred CT. However, none of them chose T as their preference. From these findings, it could be concluded that the comic's devices in both C and CT do play a significant role in helping low proficiency ESL learners improve their reading comprehension. Below are some of the responses by the students that has been categorised according to the following themes :

### 8.1.1. Sense of Enjoyability

The responses of the students were coded as the followings:

- R5, R6 and R8 said that they enjoyed the colourful pictures in the comics and as such were entertained while reading.
- R7 and R12 added that they enjoyed taking on the roles of the characters in the comics. For example, R12 mentioned, "...it (comes) makes me enjoy reading...sleepy no more...I feel like that I'm one of the characters."
- In addition, R6 said,"...(comics) got colourful images...I can understand more about the story. I really enjoy reading comics.

### 8.1.2. Vividness and Clarity of Image-panels

- R10 stated that through the pictures in comics, he could see the scenes for himself: what transpired at Ted's (the main character) workplace, at this home, and the incident (extortion) at the market place. He also added that he could comprehend the criticality of the events.
- R2 said that "the pictures tell what is going on in the story" and therefore was "easy to understand".
- R11: the presence of the dialogues provided clarity because the dialogues were conversational, that is similar to the language she uses in her daily life.

### 8.1.3 Empathy

Many respondents also mentioned that they could empathise or feel for the characters. This was because the pictures and dialogues in the comics depicted the character's reactions and emotions to the unfolding events.

- According to R6, empathising helped her to understand the main ideas of the story better. For instance, R6 said, "...the images (are) with reaction, so I empathise with the characters very fast."
- R3 and R7 added that the depiction of characters was as if in real life and thus they were able to feel what the characters in the story were experiencing. R7 explained, "I take on the character's role and imagine that I am going through the situation myself."

## 9.0. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study clearly point to the notion that comics, as well as comics with text, can be employed to help the low proficiency ESL students. Comics that are accompanied with texts have an advantage because of the multiple inputs that the learners can rely on to comprehend the story. Enjoyability, realism, empathy, dual coding and multiple inputs are the findings which indicate that comics and the combination of comics with texts are worthwhile to be tapped upon as resources for assisting weak learners.

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