

THE USE OF COMICS TO PROMOTE ENGAGEMENT IN YEAR 9 WORLD LANGUAGE CLASS

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Abstract

Motivating adolescent boys to learn a foreign language when restricted by fixed curriculum content can be a challenge. This action research project used a graphic novel as a tool to increase engagement by creating a context within which the learners would want to use key subject material. The research was conducted with a Year 9 French class (13-14-year-olds) over the majority of the Autumn Term. Data were collected at various points over the project from sources that included: questionnaires; interviews; teacher log; feedback sheets. Overall, the boys felt that the use of the graphic novel improved their engagement, gave them an opportunity to be more creative, and generated an environment that promoted dialogue. The results, whilst anticipated, highlight the range of benefits that come from using a stimulus that is open to interpretation. Not only does it have the potential to improve learner engagement, it also promotes a number of other desirable language-learning skills, such as independence, collaboration, and creativity.

Introduction

Engaging in stories and storytelling in a foreign language can seem a daunting prospect. Even when studying Languages at University, translations are often used in favour of the original texts. Bringing stories to beginners of a world language can, therefore, seem like a step too far. After all, you have to have a very good understanding of a language to not only appreciate the content, but also the nuance and subtext.

I've often felt that the themes studied in Modern and Foreign Language classrooms can undermine the intellectual curiosity of learners. Most General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) courses (pupils aged 14-16 years-old) focus on topics such as holidays, hobbies, and homes. Many students have been exploring these topics since they started studying the language and may no longer find them so captivating.

The idea of using comic books came from a desire to rectify the lack of interest provided by the core topics of the course and the difficulty of accessing a traditional source of engaging literature. Comic books are, typically, less text-heavy than prose books and the images support

a reader's understanding of the events, making them easier to follow - even if you do not understand every word. Yet, like prose books, comic books often deal with important subject matter and are open to analysis and interpretation by the reader. This is particularly so in the case of graphic novels, the "big brother" of comic books in terms of their length, completeness and complexity of the narrative.

Two of the aims of the Cambridge International Education (CIE) International GCSE, the course studied at Harrow School, are to:

- encourage positive attitudes towards speakers of other languages and a sympathetic approach to other cultures and civilisations
- provide enjoyment and intellectual stimulation

It was with these objectives in mind that I chose to use the graphic novel *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007) as the stimulus for this project. It is a graphic novel that highlights the challenges of emigration by putting the reader in the shoes of the migrant. The comic does not use any written language and is set in a phantasmagorical world, meaning the reader has to work out what things are at the same time as the protagonist.

While I felt the intervention would be interesting, stimulating, and engaging for the boys, I appreciated that they do not always have the same tastes as me. The hope was that the graphic novel would be a more engaging teaching tool than more traditional methods, as well as being a medium through which one could teach more mature material. With these aspirations in mind, I developed the following research question: *How can Year 9 boys' analysis of graphic novels affect engagement in a World Language class?*

To answer this question, action research felt like the most appropriate methodology to use. To study levels of engagement, I needed an approach that would allow me to collect qualitative data through questionnaires, interviews, teacher logs, and recordings. These data could then be interpreted and analysed based on what I had perceived in the classroom. Compared to other methodologies, an action research model fit best considering the time-scale and nature of the project.

Literature Review

My project focus, how using a graphic novel as a primary stimulus might help aged 13 to 14 year-old boys engage more with the material presented to them in a World Language classroom, drew on two distinct areas of academic research. The first involves current ways of exploiting graphic novels or comic books in an academic environment and the perceived

benefits of certain pedagogical strategies. The second is the idea of engagement by learners and what that means in a world language classroom.

Comics is not a new medium to the teaching profession. In 1979 in the United States, *The Reading Teacher* published an article about comics entitled “The Forgotten Medium in the Classroom” (Wright, 1979). This title may still hold true today, 40 years on. Wright puts forward the benefits of graphic storytelling in terms of acting as a motivational tool for young readers. He cites a number of articles (Burton, 1961; Murphy, 1961; Haugaard, 1973; Alongi, 1974) that posit, “comic books turned children on to reading” (Wright, 1979, p. 161).

Equally, in France in the 1970s, a book by Antoine Roux (1973), *La bande dessinée peut être éducative [The Comic Book can be Educational]* raised enthusiasm for the format as a pedagogical resource (Derder, 2013). Derder states that over the following decades the pedagogical value of the comic book became apparent and the format slowly entered the French National Curriculum at various levels as a way to aid teaching certain subjects, such as History. Yet, in spite of the growing literature surrounding the subject, it is certainly a format that has struggled to be widely and regularly used in academia (Derder, 2013).

Taking this point forward, educational research into the use of comics in the classroom is gaining traction. Krusemark (2017) discusses the advantages of comic books for critical thinking skills and cites a number of recent academic articles on the successful use of visual stories as a learning tool (Albers & Harste, 2007; Botzakis, 2011; Doering, Beach, & O’Brien 2007; Roswell & Walsh 2011; Scanlon, 2015). The authors highlighted in Krusemark’s article display learner progress in a range of different fields: critical thinking; social engagement; motivation; retention of information. Krusemark’s study focuses on the concept of developing critical thinking strategies, comparing the use of comic books with traditional (non-visual) literature in the analysis of leadership. The conclusion drawn from this research demonstrates a similar or greater development of critical thinking skills when using comic books over traditional texts (Krusemark, 2017). This finding is particularly relevant as it indicates there is no negative influence of using visual stories. In a classroom where the language of instruction is not the mother tongue of the learners, books are often inaccessible as a valuable resource until much later in their instruction. Graphic novels or comic books could, therefore, act as a way of developing important skills, such as critical thinking, as the learner can rely on images to aid their understanding.

While the use of comics in education is a domain in expansion, there is a solid academic basis from which to build. The specific strategies and techniques on how to effectively use the

medium to develop targeted skills, however, seems to be less academically rigorous. A number of teaching blogs (education.cu-portland.edu/blog), journals (*The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language*), and newspaper articles (theguardian.com/teacher-network) posted online helped generate potential ideas on classroom interventions and activities. McGrail and Rieger's (2016) research focuses on using comic books to develop understanding and social acceptance of individuals with disabilities, whereby they outline a number of exercises to help abled-bodied learners. The study is based around the concept of bibliotherapy, a strategy of supervised reading where children "read and discuss children's books that address challenging and uncomfortable topics or social issues" (McGrail & Rieger, p. 37). The exercises outlined in the study by the researchers helped learners improve awareness of issues surrounding disability through the use of "comics literature" (p. 38). The authors conclude that the medium gives an often-marginalised group, the disabled, a valuable platform from which they can pass a message.

Student engagement is a serious topic in education. Indeed, the UK government and press have tried to create links between decreasing student engagement (higher exclusion rates) and an increase in knife crime (Richardson, 2019). While this assumption of causality can be easily debunked, it certainly brings attention to the potential importance of students engaging in learning.

In the research literature, engagement is often broken down into three subsections:

- Emotional engagement
- Behavioural engagement
- Cognitive engagement

These established elements of engagement are defined in a variety of ways, but Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) give a broad overview of what each category refers to. They describe emotional engagement as related to the learners' positive or negative reactions towards their learning environment (teachers, classroom, work etc.), while behavioural engagement encompasses the idea of student participation, whether in the classroom or through extra-curricular activities. Lastly, cognitive engagement is based on the principle of investment in learning and considers whether a pupil is willing to put in the effort to understand something more challenging (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). It is important to note that these categories are not independent, stand-alone concepts, but are very much interconnected and influence each other.

Engagement is a crucial factor in education as it “is explicitly associated with student achievement” (Parsons, Nuland & Parsons, 2015, p. 24). It is also a factor that must be focused on as teachers can influence many aspects of it, particularly relating to behavioural and emotional engagement. Creating an engaging learning environment, considering the way material is presented and the types of activities undertaken, and building positive relations with learners are all within the control of the educator. Research conducted by Perry, Turner and Meyer (2006) suggests that the style of academic tasks assigned to students is central to influencing student engagement. Tasks containing authenticity, collaboration, and choice are all considered motivating factors (Perry, 2006). Authenticity in this regard refers to whether a task is relevant to their lives or real-world experience.

Following on from the prior research, comics clearly have the potential to be used as a tool to enhance engagement in a boys’ French class. The correct choice of comic book has the potential to promote key skill development within boys (critical thinking, social engagement, etc.) while providing scope for authentic, collaborative tasks containing elements of choice.

Research Context

The research was undertaken at Harrow School, an independent all-boys boarding school on the outskirts of London that welcomes boys from Year 9 to Year 13 (13-18 years old). The school promotes a well-rounded education, providing the expertise and facilities for boys to achieve their potential, whatever the domain. The school’s purpose states that, “Harrow prepares boys with diverse backgrounds and abilities for a life of learning, leadership, service and personal fulfilment.”

The research project was conducted with a group of 13-14 year-old boys (Year 9) who had chosen to study French as one of their two world languages options in their first year at the school. Typically, learners at this stage have previously studied French for a number of years to varying levels. The class contained 20 boys of varying abilities and varying levels of exposure to French. Generally, Year 9 boys are highly motivated, particularly in the first term as they are new to the school. This made them an ideal group to undertake a research project, despite their more limited knowledge of the French language and the fact that they might be still adjusting to life in a boarding school.

Specifically, regarding the French classroom in which the intervention took place, I place value on communication. Many students are not used to fully (or optimally) immersive teaching environments in World Language classrooms, so find it harder to participate as they would in lessons where they are speaking their native language. This can clearly have a

potential impact on their engagement in lessons and with the material, so it is important for the class to establish a positive learning atmosphere and clear expectations upon their use of French in the classroom. The establishment of this environment made up the bulk of the teaching prior to the intervention so the boys would be capable of demonstrating authentic engagement. I felt that, before the intervention started, the emotional engagement of the boys was positive.

The Action

I designed the project around the graphic novel *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2007), an Australian artist. *The Arrival* depicts a man's journey to a new city, leaving behind his wife and daughter in a search to build the foundations for them to start a new life away from danger. I chose this graphic novel because of the themes raised throughout the story and the absence of text. The themes tackled in the graphic novel had the potential to promote behavioural and cognitive engagement. Additionally, due to the concentration on immigration as a theme, authenticity could be a key part of each task. This was due to the fact that immigration may have been a lived experience for some boys (particularly the boys from overseas), they may have read about it in the news or, on a different scale, it might have been relatable due to their own separation from their family home since joining a boarding school only weeks before.

The intervention took place over approximately 5 weeks, with 3 lessons per week. Not every lesson was exclusively dedicated to the study of the graphic novel, but it acted as the core stimulus for every activity over that period. Cognitive engagement was encouraged through the way tasks were constructed and ordered. The comic-specific activities ranged in style and level of independence, generally moving from activities with high levels of support or structure, to activities encouraging much more autonomy. Additionally, the complexity of the types of questions being addressed increased throughout the intervention. Initially, activities would concentrate on areas with distinct answers (e.g. physical descriptions of characters) but moved to higher-level thinking (e.g. reasons for migrating). The graphic novel activities focused on active linguistic skills (writing and speaking), although passive skills were developed by sharing ideas within class.

Below are some examples of activities undertaken during the project:

- Describing characters (physical attributes, hypothesising on characteristics)
- Matching scene descriptions with images and ordering them sequentially
- Comparing life in the graphic novel with personal experience

- Creating the dialogue for scenes
- Writing letters from the protagonist's perspective
- Discussing why the author used certain techniques

Data Collection

The data collected were primarily qualitative in nature. The use of surveys and questionnaires to measure participants' engagement was a key area of data collection. By surveying the boys pre- and post-intervention, I could use baseline data to measure change in engagement levels.

Additionally, the participants were recorded to promote student voice and engagement in the project. These recordings highlighted particular strengths in the project, while also giving boys the opportunity to reflect on aspects they deemed to be less successful.

Throughout the project, I kept field notes on my immediate perceptions of the successes and failures of certain tasks. These notes were used to modify and improve the intervention in future cycles.

Data Analysis

Once collected, I looked for common themes that could be found in the data. For the initial pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, this consisted of comparing the two and assessing how attitudes had shifted over the course of the term. For the more qualitative data, such as the comments, feedback, and interviews, I categorised information according to themes that became apparent. I transcribed recordings and noted pertinent comments. The teacher log helped to focus the initial search for themes, although other areas became clear through the boys' comments and their use of key words.

Discussion of Results

Having analysed the data, three key themes emerged: improved engagement; promotion of creativity and independence; and development of an environment that encourages dialogue. The first theme answers the initial research question directly showing that graphic novels can affect engagement in a positive way in a World Language classroom. The second and third themes could be considered positive by-products of storytelling. By promoting the importance of the voice of a protagonist, the opinion and perspective of the learner is promoted implicitly.

Shifting Attitudes: Graphic Novels Engage Learners

Comparing the data collected from the pre- and post-project questionnaires demonstrated a generally positive reaction towards the intervention. In summary, the boys felt more positively about comics and were more convinced that the medium could be used as an effective teaching tool.

Although the majority of the boys (12 of out 20) stated that they already liked comic books before the intervention, four more said they felt more positively towards comic books following the project, with no one having a stronger preference before than after.

Interestingly, the views on the readership of comic books changed from a large number saying they were designed for children or teenagers, to a greater proportion feeling they were for everyone (16 of 20 boys). Linked to this, the number of boys that would feel embarrassed about reading a comic book decreased, with four more boys feeling more confident about reading them.

After the intervention, 12 boys felt absolutely convinced that comics could be used as an effective learning tool, with 18 of the cohort being either absolutely or quite convinced that the graphic novel was effective. Importantly for this intervention, 17 of the 20 in the class had strongly enjoyed using the graphic novel as a learning stimulus, with 15 of them convinced it had helped them learn effectively as well.

Through reading the comments the boys made following the intervention, a number of areas were highlighted as particular benefits of using a graphic novel as a teaching tool. The first is the increased levels of motivation and subsequent increase in behavioural engagement of the pupils. Boy M wrote:

“Comics are a great tool as they are really fun. If you are learning from something that you enjoy, from experience, you tend to get more involved and pay more attention than if you were studying with a text book.”

Boy I shared, “I believe that this course has helped students get more engaged with their learning and really gets them involved more,” and Boy D wrote that he felt it was “[a] useful way for the classroom to be more engaged.” These comments demonstrate that many of the boys felt that by simply using a graphic novel as a stimulus, they were more engaged with their learning. From my perspective, this was certainly evident from the participation of the boys during different tasks.

Graphic Novels Spark Creativity and Independence

A second aspect that became clear in the boys' comments was that the learners felt that they were given a greater sense of linguistic independence and could, therefore, be more creative with their work. Boy O wrote that he preferred the graphic novel to using a textbook as it was more enjoyable "for finding new and strange words that [he] wouldn't have otherwise used," while Boy T wrote that he felt the graphic novel "helped to stimulate the imagination." In addition, the most popular activities during the intervention were those that allowed the boys the most creative freedom: writing a diary entry from the protagonist's perspective, and creating the narrative based on the images. An interesting insight from Boy D was that the graphic novel promoted "a more open-ended input from everyone."

The fact that the boys were willing to extend themselves and find "new and strange words" shows a high-level cognitive engagement. Put in a different way, two of the boys commented that the graphic novel allowed pupils to work at their own pace or level. Boy E framed this in a more positive way than the other: "I thought it was really good as we could express our level of French in the appropriate manner," while Boy G wrote that it allowed learners "to stay in their comfort zones". By creating activities that learners can access regardless of their level, teachers run the risk of the lesson lacking challenge for the most able students. However, if a teacher is confident that learners are engaged behaviourally, cognitively and emotionally in the tasks and the learning environment, this should not be a concern, but an example of good practice.

Graphic Novels Promote Dialogue

The last theme to explore from the boys' comments is the idea of class collaboration. As the facilitator, it was very clear to see the boys sharing ideas and reusing the vocabulary or structures that another boy had used in a previous lesson. Boy L felt that one was able "to expand your vocabulary of French by listening to other people's descriptions and interpretations of the comic book story." Boy D felt that "it allowed you to give and receive different types of language ... everyone was learning off of each other in a positive learning environment with input from everyone in the class." The reciprocal learning occurring in the classroom was a huge highlight as it showed that the students were confident expressing themselves, even when there wasn't a definitive right or wrong answer. Typically, students can be reluctant to share an idea with their classmates if they are not sure it will be the "right" answer. Moreover, the boys were sharing these ideas in a second (or third) language which often creates a higher level of anxiety.

This last finding points out the efficacy of the communicative tasks, which can often be harder to evaluate. The boys' ability to collaborate in French clearly improved, which helped to establish and promote their emotional engagement, as can be seen through the language used in the quotes.

Conclusions

The results of this study highlight the positive effect the graphic novel had on the engagement of the boys in my Year 9 French class. The graphic novel achieved its key goals of making the course content more relevant and interesting, while increasing the boys' engagement in French lessons. There were numerous by-products of the increased emotional, behavioural and cognitive engagement, such as the perceived rise in creativity. It can often be very hard to be creative in a foreign language, particularly if one wants to stay accurate grammatically or idiomatically. The linguistic scaffolding combined with an appropriate level of challenge seemed to help boys feel confident enough to try out new language and discover words for themselves. This is clearly an example of cognitive engagement being mixed with behavioural and emotional engagement as the pupils felt confident enough in their learning environment and interested enough in the stimulus to take positive learning risks.

Graphic novels, therefore, have the potential to be used to positively affect the engagement of Year 9 boys in a world language classroom. Not only can they be said to promote engagement and participation by being more enjoyable, they can encourage high levels of cognitive engagement, when tasks are appropriately structured.

As a practitioner, I will certainly continue to use comics (either graphic novels or comic books) in my teaching as I felt it gave the boys the opportunity to explore themes that are generally not covered in World Language classes until much later in their linguistic development. My next project will be to choose a comics text to see how that can be adapted to promote engagement, while still encouraging interpretation and creativity.

Within my own department, I plan to produce a checklist of things to consider when choosing a comics text to study and subsequent techniques or tasks that can be implemented to fully exploit the material at various levels.

Reflection Statement

While the intervention was generally effective, there are many ways in which it can and should be adapted. When designing the project, I ensured that I was including the material that the other classes in the cohort were studying so as not to put my class at a disadvantage in their

end-of-term test. While it is important to ensure that pupils cover examined material, the intervention would have been more succinct had the external material not been built-in. The obvious next step is to create a series of projects that cover the essential exam material more seamlessly.

As a process, action research is an excellent model to follow to improve teaching practice. While it can sometimes seem like an unwelcome addition to an already busy work-load, it forces you to create a space to be reflective about current trends in education or perhaps give validity to a teaching technique you have been adapting over a number of years. As with most things, the key is to set aside time every week to the project and be disciplined about using that time effectively.

One of the main highlights of the project was the connections made with other teachers around the globe. Sharing ideas and teaching strategies with international colleagues has helped generate a different approach to challenges faced in my own teaching environment.

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