

Teaching Literature and Language through Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

It is high time to theorize what is popular as the number of texts produced and circulated in the title of popular culture are of great magnitude than that is circulated in the title of 'high culture'. And there are a whole lot of things to explore in popular culture. Kant draws a binary between high culture and the popular. According to him high culture which provides true pleasure is sublime and beautiful while popular culture or mass culture which provides immediate, physical pleasure is only charming or agreeable. Nevertheless, the consumption of popular culture is going on around us every now and then in form of films, television programs, reality shows, video games, magazines, chick lit, comics, pop music, rap, hip-hop and in hundreds of other forms. And this, in turn, inaugurated new vistas in teaching English language and literature. Teachers are being besieged with demands for improving their medium of instruction and teaching literature. This article attempts to view two different narratives, which are part and parcel of popular culture, as tools to teach language and literature. Literature can also be taught through popular culture as postmodernism decentralizes canonical literature and foregrounds the importance of mass culture or popular culture. The first part of this article proposes comics as a tool to make the learner understand the language with all its subtleties and nuances from the perspective of psycholinguistics. The second part is a discourse on Harry Potter narratives which helps children to learn various moral stages which are central in character analysis in literature.

KEYWORDS

Popular culture; Comics; Harry Potter narratives; Teaching tools.

“A creation is actually a re-creation, a rearrangement of existing materials in a new, different, original, novel way.” — Steve Ditko (Schumer, 59)

Comics as a Tool

“If people failed to understand comics, it was because they defined what comics could be too narrowly... The world of comics is a huge and varied one. Our definition must

encompass all these types” (McCloud 2004, 2-4). Comics can be used to teach the English language not only to primary school students but also undergraduate students. The instructional use of comics is widely accepted these days. It serves as a new tool or medium to teach the nuances of English language. Moreover, comics appeal to large numbers of children and enhance the reading habit of

reluctant readers. I advocate the use of comics to aid language pedagogy and learning.

Different comics were found to be useful for teaching:

1. vocabulary and expressions;
2. grammar;
3. conversation and composition;
4. culture; also pronunciation, intonation and listening comprehension

There are various types of comics. The selection of which is to be made based on the learners' age. There are five major publishers of comic books in the U.S. Archie Comic Publications which publishes humorous comic books about Archie and his teenage friends. D.C. Comics, Inc. specializes in adventure, mystery, romance, western and war comics. D.C. Comics is known for its superheroes and superheroines, like Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman. Harvey Publications specializes in humour. Casper the Friendly Ghost and Sad Sack are two of the company's major titles. Marvel Comics Group distributes adventure, mystery, romance, cowboy and war titles. This company specializes in superheroes such as Spiderman, Captain America and the Hulk. Western Publishing Company publishes Gold Key Comics, which feature funny animal characters such as Bugs Bunny, Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, Mighty Mouse and Woody Woodpecker. From this wide range of popular comics, those with animal characters appeal to primary school students and while that of superheroes appeal to adolescents. Comics dealing with animal stories, adventure, science, history, geography, biography, and literary classics are all welcomed.

Several writers have described the benefits of using comics in the classroom. Burton (1961), Murphy (1961), Haugaard (1973) and Alongi (1974) have associated the motivational value of comic books. Each writer agreed that comic books turned children on to reading, and that comic books had much to offer as a source of recreational reading.

Psycholinguistic theory must give an account of what information language conveys. It aims to understand the mechanisms of language use. It aims to understand the mechanisms of language use. Psycholinguistics focuses on understanding language. And comic books offer an excellent ground to understand language. Several subprocesses like word recognition, parsing, semantic interpretation, model construction and pragmatic interpretation involved in understanding language. Comics have the scope to engage the learner with these processes of understanding language.

Comics are about, in a rather general sense, how the world is, was, will be or might be. It describes fictional worlds whose representations can be created by analogy with those of the real world. They contain people, things, and events and thus providing an ideal setting for dialogues which can be read by students. They contain a variety of useful and lively words and expressions which the learners can absorb easily. Comic books such as Lucky Luke, Tintin and Asterix present a variety of vocabulary and expressions that can be studied more systematically than in the simpler strips. Certain scenes in the comics that visually and dramatically reinforced the use of moods and tenses are very useful in teaching grammar. However, in the comics, the pictures do not replace the need for words. There are both pictures and words. The printed and visual contexts mutually explain each other, thus supplying the language trainer with a ready-made tool for emphasizing elements of language that he chooses to present.

Language learners can assume the role of various characters and read the dialogues aloud. This provides a suitable ground for the language teacher to explain the meaning of new words and can teach appropriateness of the use of words and phrases. Using comics or graphic novels in the classroom contextualizes

the featured language in ways that aid English language learners in learning how to use the language. As Krashen (1989) pointed out, the visual narrative that accompanies the text in comic books “can provide clues that shed light on the meaning of an unfamiliar word or grammatical structure” (402).

Making the learner read comics will help him to derive meanings from visual as well as sound patterns. Use of comics as read-aloud in classrooms is advisable. In word recognition, comics provide both perceptual as well as contextual information. Much communication is in the form of commands, questions, requests, promises, and so on. All of these elements are abundant in comics. Several graphic novels with substantive content are accessible to English language learners and thus can enable them to engage in critical discussions in ways that are not always possible with only written texts, due to their scaffolding of textual meanings through their rich visual modes of representation. Because meaning-making has become increasingly multimodal, our definition of literacy needs to encompass not only the textual, but also the visual, the spatial, and the aural. And thus paves way for the use of the graphic novel in teaching the English language.

English language learners often face formidable barriers in a written text without any accompanying visual context. In the context of teaching comic books, researcher Patricia Duff observed that “students noted that the colourful pictures, contextualized vocabulary and interesting content provided a compelling hook into reading” (qtd in Norton & Vanderheyden, 217). Moreover, the novelty of reading a graphic novel in the classroom, its unique modality of visual puns and metaphors, and its compelling narrative all combined to increase the students’ level of reading engagement.

Using comics in the classroom can help explain how language works both for and

against people and enable students to acquire an appreciation for critical literacy. These multimodal texts can be used for both fostering students’ critical literacies and addressing the needs of the many English language learners present in today’s classroom.

Harry Potter Narrative as a Tool

This part of the article deals with another popular narrative, the Harry Potter Series in order to trigger classroom discussions.

Moral development refers to the process through which a person progresses from an egocentric, individual to a socially responsive and responsible person. The larger framework of Kohlberg’s theory can be used to describe the main characters in the Harry Potter series in terms of their predominant stage of moral development.

Kohlberg’s first stage of moral reasoning which can be described as heteronomous morality or punishment and obedience orientation is exemplified by Dobby in Rowling’s second and fourth books. Whenever Harry breaks a rule, Dobby reprimands himself by engaging in self-injurious behaviour. For Dobby, the rationale for his behaviour is clear; any misdeed should result in physical punishment. There is no reference to internal, psychological motivations or intentions. According to Kohlberg stage one, justice involves punishing the bad guys in terms of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”.

Draco Malfoy, Harry’s archenemy, best characterizes a stage two reasoned displaying an individualistic, instrumental purpose orientation. For Malfoy, what is right is that which will satisfy his personal, concrete needs. This is illustrated in his continued focus on the accumulation of house points for their own sake with little regard for moral cooperation and human relationships.

Moving beyond this focus on individualistic, egocentric concerns at stage two is the movement to stage three reasoning, the interpersonal cooperation orientation. Ron, Harry's trusted and loyal friend is illustrative of this stage. Ron will do anything for Harry in order to preserve their close friendship. For instance, Ron will risk expulsion from school to appease Harry by joining him on his unauthorized adventures. These actions exemplify lucidly the characteristics of the trusted, loyal associate who have typical stage three qualities.

Kohlberg's stage four of moral reasoning which can be described as the law and order orientation is aptly portrayed by Hermione. Moving beyond an emphasis on maintaining an interpersonal relationship, Hermione is characterized by a stage four because of her emphasis on maintaining the functioning and existence of the system as a whole with its rules and regulations. She detests any violation of school rules because such acts fail to maintain the system of which they are part. Her belief that rules cannot be disobeyed because they will result in chaos typical of stage four reasoning. Hermione continuously attempts to maintain the social order by abiding by school rules and becomes very upset when Harry and Ron continue to break them.

Stage five moves to the highest and most mature stage of moral reasoning which is of social contract/intrinsic rights orientation. We can place Harry Potter in this stage because of his focus on fair dealings and social and individual rights. For example, Harry will defy all school laws and risk his own life in

order to sustain order and peace over chaos. Specifically, in the second book, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, dark evil was threatening to take the school over from the head schoolmaster Professor Dumbledore. Harry, however, restored order in the school. Harry's belief that rules can be broken in order to meet the needs of his fellow classmates typifies stage five functioning.

Harry Potter stories could be used as a vehicle to promote moral development in pre-adolescent children because many of the characters in these stories exhibit stages of moral reasoning to which this age group can relate. It has been posited that children in their pre-adolescent years typically reason at stages two and three. Many examples of moral dilemmas that may be developmentally appropriate for pre-adolescents are found throughout the Harry Potter series. For example, Ron faces many dilemmas during his adventures with Harry, one of which occurs in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. The teachers, as a precautionary measure against dark evil, order all students to remain in their dorms unless they are in class. Harry Potter, however, desperately needs to go and talk to his friend Hagrid, who lives in a small cottage away from the school. Though Ron tries to dissuade Harry at first, in the end, he follows Harry. This dilemma could be used as an entry point into a moral discussion about what would be a more morally sophisticated decision-abiding by the rules or appeasing a friend.

Thus both comics and Harry Potter narratives emerge as tools useful in classroom teaching.

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