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Graphic Novels for Multimodal Learning: Equity for English Learners

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Graphic Novels for Multimodal Learning: Equity for English Learners

KATHERINE SUENDER AND SUSAN PIAZZA

English Learners (ELs) are among the fastest-growing student populations in the country, which poses a significant responsibility for educators to find new ways to support adolescent literacy and language learning (Clark-Gareca et al., 2020). As broadening definitions of literacy move from traditional print to more multimodal conceptions of literacy, graphic novels have gained the attention of educators and researchers for their potential to support ELs (Barter-Storm & Wik, 2020; Pishol & Kaur, 2015). Improving adolescent literacy through the multimodal use of graphic novels has created further implications for instruction in middle and secondary schools, particularly for ELs (Danzak, 2011). This article explores the pedagogical strengths of graphic novels in support of ELs. It includes examples of how these multimodal texts can help increase motivation and engagement, addresses issues of equity while aligning with English Language Arts (ELA) and English Learner Proficiency Standards (ELPS) (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2014; Lee, 2019).

In this article, we use the term English learner (EL) to represent non-native speakers of English, multilingual, and emerging bilingual learners. These students attend primarily English-speaking middle or secondary schools and are actively included in all general subject-area classes while continuing to learn English. The challenge of learning content, along with a new language, has been described as a double burden for ELs (Olson et al., 2015).

Time, experience, and instructional scaffolding are required to help ELs become proficient in English and new knowledge (Goldenberg, 2008). Given the double burden of learning language and content at the same time, the effectiveness of multimodal texts for supporting language learners is recognized across both fields of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and the field of disciplinary literacy education. Graphic novels provide

abundant opportunities to merge non-linguistic and linguistic modes of communication during instruction, which supports the dual goals of learning language and content (Park, 2016). Making use of multimodal features in this way helps to make academic curriculum more accessible to ELs (Echevarría et al., 2017).

First, we provide an overview of how graphic novels, through multimodal literacy experiences, are supported by research and theory. Second, we provide a rationale for how graphic novels may increase equitable literacy instruction that is more culturally and linguistically responsive to the specific needs of many ELs. Finally, we provide four illustrative cases to demonstrate how select graphic novels may be used with adolescent ELs to increase success across the following four areas: (a) motivation and engagement, (b) authentic dialogue, (c) examining visual information, and (d) multimodal composition.

The Instructional Promise of Graphic Novels

Graphic novels may be fiction or nonfiction, and each novel is typically a complete book. They feature hundreds of individual panels in sequence, each drawn to illustrate nuances of the plot that words alone could not accomplish. The heavy use of visual information makes graphic novels a genre that is appealing to readers of any age (Monnin, 2010). In addition, the inclusion of multiple modes of information offers opportunities for more profound meaning-making with texts (Pishol & Kaur, 2015). Research that crosses disciplines has shown that the use of multiple modes of communication and visual information will increase ELs' comprehension and overall literacy outcomes (Echevarría et al., 2017; Piazza et al., 2015) while also providing more equitable learning experiences (Cappello, Turner, & Wiseman, 2015).

Together these two theoretical frameworks, multimodal

literacy, and equity-focused literacy are supported by the ELPS for ELs, as national standards incorporate the use of visual and digital information along with opportunities that include background knowledge and experiences. Overall, these theories are instructive for research and practice that “turns a deficit view of ELs from lacking linguistic resources needed to participate meaningfully in content areas into an asset view that capitalizes on the diverse meaning-making resources they bring to the classroom” (Grapin, 2018, p. 35).

Multimodal Literacies

Multimodal literacy theory pushes the boundaries and expands traditional definitions of literacy that privilege print-based information by including aspects of multiple modes of communication including signs, symbols, visual information, gestures, and design features (Lenters, 2016; New London Group, 1996; Serafini & Gee, 2017). Definitions of literacy that expand beyond print-based texts acknowledge that literacy and language are social practices used to communicate ideas, values, and beliefs. This broader definition of literacy provides more opportunity for ELs to make sense of and interpret information within its social context.

Multimodal meaning-making is dependent on modes of expressive and receptive communication forms. The New London Group (1996) advocates using multiple semiotic modalities such as images, symbols, text features, and the like as ways to motivate and engage ELs to use their various senses, connect background experiences, and improve overall metacognition. These multiple modes of expressing and interpreting new information acknowledge the impact of images, space, visualization, and sign systems (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001).

The use of multimodal literacy and visual information is beneficial for ELs who may have conceptual knowledge to understand the information but lack linguistic knowledge to interpret the texts (Goldenburg, 2013). Research on the use of multiple modes of communication and varied forms of comprehensible input within the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model (Echevarría et al., 2017) demonstrates positive outcomes for increasing both ELs' content learning and language proficiency (Piazza et al., 2020; Short et al., 2012). When adolescents learn to interpret multimodal information and express themselves through multiple modes of communication, it provides greater access to equity and builds their repertoires of literacy (Cappello, Turner, & Wiseman, 2015). Culturally and linguistically sustaining practices emphasize the value of multiple modes of

communication and view literacy and language learning as a social practice (Gee, 1999; Kress & Rowsell, 2018).

Equity Focused Literacies

Building on the notion of literacy as a social practice (Gee, 1999; Kress & Rowsell, 2018), equity-focused literacy instruction addresses prior cultural experiences, ways of knowing, and various forms of using languages or dialects. ELs must be allowed to connect their background and language experiences to the curriculum and learning activities in school (Au, 2011; Warren & Ward, 2019). Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching provides opportunities to interact with multiple teaching materials, inclusive of background experiences (González et al., 1995).

A few studies have focused on using graphic novels combined with multimodal writing projects with adolescent ELs (Bitz, 2004; Danzak, 2011). The Comic Book Project (Bitz) featured a robust mentor/mentee model while highlighting students' funds of knowledge (González et al., 1995), or specific home and community literacy practices. Multimodal images provide additional lenses for ELs to uncover alternative perspectives or power relationships in texts and between characters. For example, positions of power may be analyzed in relation to characters' eyes and posture (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Graphic novels provide opportunities to problematize bias, racism, and equity issues while making connections to lived experiences.

Examples of How to Use Graphic Novels with ELs

Students have found that reading graphic novels while reading related content in textbooks increases understanding (Lalremruati, 2019). Teachers may worry about how to support graphic novels since they have less personal experience with this genre (Connors, 2015); however, this should not be a concern. Some students who have extensive prior knowledge of graphic novels need no introductions (Jiménez & Meyer, 2016). Educators should select graphic novels that are a good fit for their students and work through them together, modeling questioning techniques and *ah-has*.

There is great value in teaching ELs about graphic novel symbolism and organization.

Showing students how to read graphic novels as mentor texts will help accessibility and connections to background experiences (Warren & Ward, 2019). Several excellent resources focus on using mentor texts, visual grammar, relieving anxiety, and increasing participation. (Jimenez &

Meyer; Warren & Ward, 2019). Using the suggested guidelines found within *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (McCloud, 1994) and *The Meaning of Lines: Developing a Visual Grammar* (Bradley, 2010), ELs will have access to the tools that will help them understand hidden meanings within the artwork and comprehend texts (McCloud, 1994).

Motivate and Engage

Graphic novels may be used as companion texts to motivate and engage ELs with required grade level reading material such as *Jane Eyre: Graphic Classics* (MacDonald, 2020), *The Great Gatsby: The Graphic Novel* (Fordham, 2020). Many more adapted graphic novels are now available from the English Language Arts Reading Standards on the CCSS website (2021) related to the representative texts illustrating complexity for grades 6-12. Over 20 graphic novels as adaptations of award-winning novels or classics are currently available.

Graphic novels can be a “hook” teachers use to increase student engagement during ELA instruction (Danzak, 2011). They often feature insider views of actual, historical events that connect to students’ lives and current events (Carter, 2007b; Cary, 2004; Hall, 2011). In addition, Monnin (2010) claims matching graphic novels with traditional materials increases accessibility and engagement with universal themes. For these reasons, narratives and historical fiction graphic novels work well with ELs.

For example, ELA standards suggest *The Great Gatsby* (Fordham, 2020) as an example of an early-twentieth-century text. The graphic novel version contains major events portrayed in the original classic. The illustrator uses images from the 1920s. Just like when a book is turned into a film, some of the details in the graphic novel version will have minor differences. ELs may be asked to compare the two genres and decide which parts of the plot they feel are important and which parts were left out in the other version.

To motivate more significant analysis, readers may create Venn diagrams to contrast the classic text, graphic novel, and the movie. Students may engage in a shared presentation of their collaborative findings. Educators may pose questions about equity or elitism and why these issues were significant during that historical period. Perhaps there is a connection to current-day problems. Building instructional time for viewing a movie in English, speaking, and listening to others, while also valuing responses in students’ first languages bring about more enjoyment and learning engagement.

Authentic Dialogue

Culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms incorporate opportunities for students to create community and dialogue. Dialogic pedagogy stems from sociocultural and critical theories of literacy that provide learners with opportunities to use language to mediate thinking, actions, and interactions (Kress & Rowsell, 2018; Meehan & Sorum, 2021). Encouraging students to express their understandings socially supports multilingual learners’ vocabulary development, which honors equitable approaches to learning (Meehan & Sorum, 2021). Placing value on ELs’ background and experiences, and personal connections during reading makes content more interesting and understandable (Echevarría et al., 2017; Lee, 2019).

Park’s (2016) study demonstrated increased student confidence during interactive dialogue within book clubs. Students learned to distinguish between an account versus an event. This skill led students to realize when the author left out essential parts of the historical narrative of Hiroshima. This invitation to talk through a sequence of events proved helpful for ELs’ understanding of history and honored the diverse ideas of student participants.

Graphic novels support meaningful classroom conversations about historical events and issues of equity. For example, *They Called Us Enemy* (Takei, G., et al., 2019) and *Ann Frank’s Diary: The Graphic Adaptation* (Folman, 2018) facilitate personal connections through multimodal representations of human experiences. Within the book, *They Called Us Enemy*, one of the main characters does not speak English proficiently, which helps build awareness of cultural and linguistic bias through a discussion of Japanese internment camp experiences in the U.S.

Ann Frank’s Diary: The Graphic Adaptation (Folman, 2018) provides relatable content for ELs about a significant event in world history, while also allowing readers to connect with her as a teenager experiencing jealousy and a mix of adolescent emotions. Creating in-depth dialogue around a curriculum that includes lived experiences improves engagement and feelings of belonging. In doing so, all voices are valued, and literacy and learning are indeed inclusive and social processes.

Examine Visual Information

Multimodal literacy research supports the efficacy of visual information as an essential part of equitable pedagogies

(2015; Cappello, Turner, & Wiseman, 2015; Echevarría et al., 2017; Piazza et al., 2015). Visuals found within graphic novels support ELA content knowledge such as, but not limited to, understanding plot, authors' messages, timelines, spatial information, symbolism, and the examination of critical issues. ELA and EL standards require scaffolding for learning about receptive and expressive modes of communication and how data is organized for particular purposes and audiences (Jaffe & Hurwich, 2019).

Scaffolding techniques such as how many panels are dedicated to a scene and understanding the types of speech bubbles will improve plot understanding. Many visual components are found in graphic novels that convey meaning, such as tone, sequence, layout, color, lighting, and page layout. The heavy use of illustration supports logical and sequential patterns. Giving students a few quick mini-lessons about the structure, visual, and symbolic nature of graphic novels will offer ELs the vocabulary to use during classroom discussions about their observations.

For example, *A.D. New Orleans After the Deluge* (Neufeld, 2009) provides vital visual information that supports argumentative writing when paired with scientific texts about natural disasters. Neufeld's graphic novel features people who chose to stay and wait out a hurricane, some for financial reasons, and some sentimental. The realities of death and destruction are depicted through changes in the background color to communicate mood and experience. For example, when heavy rain begins, diagonal lines show movement, and they appear like daggers hitting the land or giant spider webs. In addition, illustrations give the reader clues to the severity of conflict (McCloud, 1994).

Other visuals in Neufeld's graphic novel feature aerial frames of the hurricane's path and floating debris, including cars that turned into boats. The visuals switch to close-ups, and some scenes show characters on a diagonal, which signals imbalance (McCloud, 1994). Residents may return to their homes for short periods to find devastating destruction. Soon, the whole city is under reconstruction, which makes getting water, food, and building supplies difficult. There are instances when the characters second-guess their decisions, which elicits deliberation about why some stay or leave during disasters. This scenario would assist ELs in making argumentative claims related to hurricane safety based on the visual cues provided.

A second recommendation for examining visual information with an emphasis on issues of equity is *New Kid* (Craft, 2019), which features an adolescent Black male awarded a scholarship to attend a predominantly white private

school. The visuals illuminate racial tensions, racist behaviors, and bullying related to socioeconomic status. The illustrator reveals complicated feelings as the character attempts to navigate his new school. He experiences microaggressions from several White teachers. There are images of emotions and behaviors that may support critical discussions around race and class based on observations and visual interpretations. These discussions may be whole group, small group, or more privately shared through writing.

A shared writing tool such as Google Docs may be used to ask ELs to record visual clues and elicit responses from peers. This collaborative approach gives ELs more time to think about comments and critically respond in their own time. After online interaction takes place, whole-class dialogue or Google Hangouts may facilitate more open critical conversations. When examining visual information with ELs (Meixner et al., 2018), they learn to transfer new knowledge across contexts both in and out of school. Incorporating visual information across disciplinary learning improves ELs' comprehension and overall learning outcomes (Echevarría et al., 2017). Once students are engaged with visuals and talking about their critical understandings, they are more likely to begin seeing themselves as multimodal readers and writers.

Multimodal Composition

Graphic novels encourage students to become better multimodal writers. Multimodal reading and writing are recursive processes that support one another and should be taught together (Graham et al., 2019). Thus, graphic novels are ideal pedagogical resources to promote multimodal composition while also providing access to understanding and questioning critical social issues (Carter, 2007a; Cook & Kirchoff, 2017).

Leckbee (2005) examined how students created a simulated diary in the role of a character, including feelings, observations, and relationships. The simulated diary activity increased student engagement and the use of language and literacy. A sample diary illustration might look like the art featured in Figure 1. With immigration concepts in mind, Dominic Coccozza created this multimodal illustration titled *Exposure* during his high school art class.



Figure 1 Exposure by Dominic Coccozza, 2018.

Note: Coccozza granted special permission to reproduce this image.

Research has documented that multimodal teaching expression has produced benefits, including increased 21st-century writing skills (Hughes et al., 2011). When looking at writing and illustrating a few pages of text in graphic novel style, the artwork alone can be an intimidating task. Online programs may ease student reluctance to create illustrations by hand. Many adolescent ELs are self-conscious about their drawing skills. Online multimodal approaches help build confidence (Connors, 2015). Dalton (2012) suggests that teachers not wait to become experts before asking students to compose online projects. Such projects may include concept mapping, note-taking, annotation, and screencasting, which increases student collaboration and understanding (Castek & Beach, 2013).

Permitting students to share online apps and expertise is empowering. The use of online resources for organizing story elements and major events helps students organize their knowledge before and during the composing process. In addition, these app skills transfer to other disciplines, which can help write and manage class projects (Castek & Beach, 2013), creating an exciting atmosphere for student choice, enthusiasm, and high-quality writing (Warren & Ward, 2019).

The multimodal composition may address similarities and differences within a student's own life compared to books. For example, while tutoring an adolescent male refugee named Sami (pseudonym), Katherine noticed that he never talked about his past in the refugee camp. However, he welcomed the conversation when they did a paired reading of the graphic novels *When the Stars are Scattered* (Jamieson &

Mohamed, 2020) and *Illegal* (Colfer & Donkin, 2018). Sami shared that his mother and brother are still living in a refugee camp in Malaysia. Previous lessons never elicited such personal information sharing about his family. Teaching students to write multimodal memoirs using mentor texts has proven helpful for students (Meixner et al., 2018).

In Sami's example, he composed a retelling of challenges related to refugee camp living. He concentrated on the facial expressions and illustrations of daily experiences like waiting in line for water and feeling hungry most of the time. His family shared amongst themselves the best they could, but there was never enough food to go around. The characters in these books represented young boys who were unaccompanied minors living in refugee camps. Jamieson & Mohamed's graphic novel is based on a true story that recounts a time in history when his family was in the refugee camp before resettling in the US in 2009. These powerful narratives invite critical reading and writing experiences.

We also examined *Illegal* (Colfer & Donkin, 2018). He connected to the boat illustration in this graphic novel because he traveled on a ship from Bangladesh to Thailand. The month-long journey was long and painful, with almost nothing to eat or drink for the travelers. He confirmed that his boat was crowded like the one portrayed in the novel. The close-ups of the character's parched lips while in the desert seemed particularly touching to Sami. He took a second look through the illustrations as he told his story. He spoke his narrative as I typed. We used graphic novels to assist us in creating the digital presentation, some of it shared in his first language. This experience honors students' culture, language, and background knowledge. Once students feel comfortable with the graphic novel format, multimodal writing activities may support disciplinary literacy and build vocabulary.

Conclusion

Incorporating graphic novels in ELA and across disciplines is an exciting way classrooms transform into motivating and engaging learning spaces. Research demonstrates that reading, discussing, and multimodal composition helps ELs gain literacy knowledge while also improving English proficiency. Due to the multimodal features of graphic novels and the culturally responsive nature of this genre, they are ideal reading materials for adolescent ELs.

Whether graphic novels are used to understand historical events, science, or exploring lived experiences, visual information invites reluctant learners to engage with texts more deeply. The diversity of people, culture, images, and

issues found within graphic novels provide opportunities for ELs to connect with universal ideas. Using graphic novels is a standards-based and evidence-based approach to improve adolescent literacy for ELs. Studies and examples highlighted in this article provide a road map to motivate and engage, facilitate authentic dialogue, examine visual information, and encourage multimodal composition with ELs. These are rewarding strategies for teachers and students that lead to more equitable learning outcomes.

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