In the Name of God

دانشگاه علامه طباطبایی

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The Effect of Comic Strips on Iranian EFL Learners' Motivation and Reading Comprehension

MA Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in
TEFL

Advisor: Dr. Mehdi Nowruzi
Reader: Dr. Mohammad Khatib

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We hereby recommend that this thesis by

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Entitled

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....**Reader:** Dr. Mohammad Khatib

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To:

My father
> For all his care

My mother
> For her endless love

My brother and sister
> For all their supports

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to shed light on the nature of comic strips – an ignored genre in Iranian English language textbooks – and to assess the probable effect of using comics as reading materials on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' motivation to read. It was also aimed to find out whether using comic strips has any effect on students' comprehension of comics and accordingly comprehension of other reading materials.

Two groups of Iranian teenage intermediate EFL learners were selected for this study. The participants were 40 first grade students from two state high schools in Songhor. A Nelson Proficiency Test was administered in order to determine the homogeneity of the two groups. Then, the learners were assigned to experimental and control groups randomly and participated in a reading program.

The students' motivation to read was assessed at the beginning and end of the study administering the Motivational Questionnaire (Mori, 2002). Mori's questionnaire was a 30-item seven-point Likert scale questionnaire, measuring how foreign language students feel about reading. We calculated the internal consistency estimate of reliability for the questionnaire, and Cronbach's Alpha was 0.937 which is quite high (close to one) suggesting that the items are very inter-related. The pre- and post-test data obtained from the students' responses to the questionnaire was fed into SPSS and a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to analyze the raw data. The analysis showed that the students' motivation

to read increased significantly at the end of the reading program. Therefore, the experimental group students' reading motivation was highly correlated with reading comics.

We expected that this type of genre (comic strip), if used in reading classes, would influence the students' scores on reading comprehension. To examine this hypothesis we obtained 10 sets of reading comprehension scores from the two groups. The results of the data analysis in Independent Sample T-tests revealed that the students' reading comprehension scores didn't change significantly after reading comic strips.

The study demonstrated the importance of looking beyond the dry and bookish format texts. The findings of this study shed new light on the relationship between the kind of reading genres used in language classes and the students' motivation to read the materials. These findings have important implications for offering new insights to materials developers for the development and inclusion of enjoyable reading materials in English text books. A textbook partly written in comics' format can be a very good choice to make changes in foreign language learners' views toward the text books.

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Chapter I

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Reading, as is true of all aspects of language knowledge and use, is complex and the development of fluent reading abilities by L2 students is a challenging undertaking (Schmitt, 2002). As the importance of reading is increasing in today's education and pedagogy, English language teachers, especially teachers of reading wish for new and engaging texts to enhance learning especially in the formal classroom environments like state schools. On the other hand, publishers try to promote their materials as being authentic, but "many teachers (and more important, students) believe that no matter how appealing texts might be, they still ring of artificiality and are just a representation of the real thing" (Davis, 1997). Therefore, some materials should be introduced into our classes that expose students, both physically and mentally, to the outside world, particularly in EFL settings where authentic models are scarce. In this way, *comics* as a kind of genre can be especially useful in second and foreign language classrooms.

"Comic strips are not only for fun in a language class, but there are also methodological reasons for teachers to use them" (Csabay, 2006, p. 26). According to Oller's (1983) episode hypothesis, a text that has a story line and a logical structure is easier to remember and recall. Therefore teachers can benefit from comics' story line to teach a variety of things—character development, dialogue, transitions, conclusions, etc. Comics are multidimensional—they combine both words and images. Students are often immediately drawn in by the opportunity to play with images and language.

The fact that comic strips are visual also contributes to improving communicative competence (Csabay, 2006). As Csabay (2006) notes, in a comic strip, life-like situations and expressions are used in spoken, colloquial language: for instance, idioms, reduced forms and slang. According to Lin (2003) as technology advances, new ways of transmitting knowledge are developing rapidly. He notes that when we expand our methods of literacy instruction by including drama, multimedia, comics, and other formats, we may be able to reach more students in the language classroom and meet students' different learning styles than would be the case using purely traditional teaching methods (Lin, 2003).

Derrick (2008) believes that one of the ways that ESL/EFL teachers can increase the amount of time their students read is by using "comics" and graphic novels. Apparently comics with their visual nature and usually colorful settings help to motivate students to read.

While comics can make hybrid changes in the second and foreign language classrooms, unfortunately, they are an often-overlooked genre in most ELT classes, especially in Iran. Not only in our formal school classes, but also in our institutional and recreational settings they have been totally ignored. As language teachers, everyday in our classes we are faced with demotivated students, most of them are really tired of reading long texts in a totally bookish format. Hence, we should notice the idea of using comic strips as a learning device and to add an element of fun to our language classes and language learning processes. Having these motivational points in mind, in the present study, we examined the possible effects of comic

strips on Iranian teenage students' motivation to read and also their reading comprehension scores.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

From a classroom teaching perspective, reading is the solid rock around which all other skill-based activities are situated as the structure of the majority of ELT course books show (Arkian, 2008). Reading is the most important language skill (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Derrick, 2008 & Arkian, 2008) and reading comprehension is part of overall language proficiency. Although reading is of such a paramount importance in second and foreign language teaching-learning process, but the reading materials used in most of the present text-books in Iran aren't interesting and motivating. Almost always most of our EFL learners complain about the never-ending task of reading long texts with a boring and tiring format. Therefore, our teachers and materials developers should try to find and apply some new reading texts that appeal students to read more. The suggestion is that since comics are often more interesting than dry textbooks, using them in language classes as a reading material, among other benefits, may also help provide a low-stress environment that encourages learning.

On the other hand we should note that psychological factors along with their components such as affective variables have received great attention from different specialists across the field. One of the branches of science which dramatically has taken these parameters into consideration is the

Applied Linguistics. The psychological factors can influence language learners' performance in the process of foreign language learning, one of which is the motivation to learn.

Motivation does imply some incentive that causes the individual to participate in an activity leading toward a goal and to persevere until the goal is reached. Motivation is affected by students' self-concepts, values, needs, and goals. Motivation may be extrinsic, as in the case of sociocultural influences and social reinforces, or intrinsic, as in the case of anxiety, need to achieve, and aspirations. (Swartz, 1974; Cited in Chastain, 1988)

Having the aforementioned points in mind, in the present study the researcher tried to thoroughly examine the effects of reading comic strips on Iranian EFL learners' motivation and reading comprehension. So we wish to argue that EFL/ESL teachers and materials developers need to begin to experiment with incorporating the genre of comic strips as an alternative multimodal form of text in EFL/ESL pedagogy.

1.3 Significance of the Study

There are several factors which combine in a profile of the successful second language learner; obviously the motivation to learn is important (Yule, 1996). Csabay (2006) believes that "one well-known way to arouse the students' interest can be achieved by bringing something extraordinary and new into the language class" (Csabay, 2006, p. 24). While Brown

(2001) emphasizes on using a variety of reading texts instead of just focusing on variety of reading performances, however, among many characteristics of foreign language teaching course books, problems with reading passages and especially with topic selection is one of the most important. For filling this gap Csabay (2006) states that "especially among teenagers and young adults, comic strips can be used efficiently for this purpose" (p. 24).

Another interesting and of course considerable point regarding the use of comics in EFL/ESL classes is related to the positive sense that this type of genre holds. According to Templer (2009) comics and graphic narrative materials are an excellent means to reduce the "affective filters" of anxiety and lack of confidence blocking student pleasure in learning L2. They can spark student interest, thus increasing acquisition of L2 and invigorating kids to become "autonomous acquirers" (Krashen, 2004b; Cited in Templer, 2009).

Having the aforementioned points in mind, we can conclude that motivating students and still maintaining their motivation is of a paramount importance in EFL/ESL classes, especially in state schools, where the students' choice of activities is very narrow. Comics are usually funny; therefore, it is supposed that applying materials like them to language classes will have positive effects on teaching English. They can bring a cheerful atmosphere into the class, reduce stress, and as a result create a relaxed atmosphere in language classes.

Several studies have been done so far in Iran to study the effects of language games for teaching different language skills and sub-skills (e.g. Naderi, 1996; Abadikhah, 1998 & Alemi, 2001). We also have lots of theses conducted to find the effects of literary texts in the development of reading skills (e.g. Gholami, 1993 & Ahmad Pour, 1997). The researcher has also investigated some theses studying the role of pictures, pictorial contexts and graphics on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension (e.g. Meghdadi, 1997; Ziglari, 1998; Saeedi Shandi, 2001 & Torabi Mehrabani, 2003). But the point is that the use of comics as an important genre has been totally over-looked by Iranian scholars and university students. We don't have any studies dealing with the role of comics and comic strips on Iranian English language classes. Cary (2004) interestingly notes that, "Long-standing concerns about the appropriateness and educational value of comics have made them rare birds in schools. Consequently very few teachers have ever seen comics 'in flight' – enthusiastically read, discussed, written about, and created by students" (p. 42).

Hence, from a pedagogical and of course pragmatic point of view, having a greater knowledge of the subject of motivation and applying new reading materials – like comics – can help teachers, textbook developers, materials designers, and educational authorities to find new ways for improving the quality of teaching and learning English in our educational system.