

Teach English with Comics

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It may be a challenge for English language learners (ELL) to read authentic texts written by native English language writers for native readers. One way to introduce this literature in a more accessible manner is via comic books. Students can use the visual cues from the drawings to decode the written words on the page. This paper introduces the new pattern: "Teach English with Comics" for English teachers, provides examples, outlines challenges, and connects with preexisting patterns. In essence, the strategy combines the use of visual storytelling with language learning, which can make reading in a second language more approachable and enjoyable for ELLs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Learning how to read English can be challenging for some students in courses for ELL (English language learners) [1]. These non-native speakers studying English as a Foreign Language [2] may start with illustrations aiding comprehension in English books around kindergarten. Others begin reading in elementary or junior high where they may encounter textbooks featuring graded language for reading practice that have translations of words nearby on the same page. Sticking to less challenging texts may be perfectly fine, depending on the student's goals. Later as a student moves up the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) levels [3], perhaps they want to use English for work. In that case it will help to improve reading. Learning to handle these more complex works may also help them succeed on exams like the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL®) [4].

Authentic English texts students may want to read could include poems by Eve Ewing, novels by David Foster Wallace, plays by Lorraine Hansberry, or sportswriting by Mina Kimes. Viewing only text on a page may be intimidating for them, despite their interest in the material. One hack to encourage students to read more is to make it more fun by giving them comic books, specifically a "bound collection of comic strips, usually in chronological sequence, typically telling a single story or a series of different stories" [5]. This is a clever tactic because the students might enjoy reading the story so much that they may not even notice they are improving their English literacy. There is certainly no shortage of material available, including new works like "Big Jim and the White Boy" [6] by David F. Walker and Marcus Kwame Anderson that is modern retelling of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn tale.

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Teachers can give students short comic strips or longer stories. The art on the page will give context clues for students to learn the meaning behind the words they see. As they realize they can understand more of the words, we expect the students' confidence to grow. Over time with repeated practice, they may be able to read other works written for native English audiences.

Using comic books to teach ELLs is a new pattern. Patterns are often expressed as a solution to a problem in context, although they are not always that simple, as Gabriel [7] points out. This paper introduces a pattern working towards this goal he described:

"The goal of the pattern community is to build a body of literature to support design and development in general. There is less focus on technology than on a culture to document and support sound design and principles. Patterns have been used for domains as diverse as development organization and process, exposition and teaching, and software architecture."

2. DESCRIBING THE PATTERN

We will draw on the Context, Problem, Forces, Solution format [8] to describe our new Pedagogical Pattern [9] which is a type that tries: "to capture expert knowledge of the practice of teaching and learning. The intent is to capture the essence of the practice in a compact form that can be easily communicated to those who need the knowledge." In addition, we will share the pattern's name and add details about its intent and consequences to give a holistic representation of the new pattern.

2.1 Name of the Pattern

This pattern's name is "Teach English with Comics".

2.2 Intent

The intent of this pattern is to help ELLs acquire reading skills faster by adding comic books as part of curriculum to complement existing literature and textbooks. Getting this experience with graphic literature written for native speakers may help them later read and comprehend more complex works.

2.3 Context

Reading authentic texts such as novels, journalism, plays, and rap lyrics can be hard for ELLs because there may be unfamiliar vocabulary terms. To be precise, this pattern is focused on teaching ELLs who want to read at a high level of comprehension.

2.4 Problem

These complex, unfamiliar words may discourage students, especially stories that use slang, because they normally use accessible texts for reading homework. This contrast can make them feel overwhelmed, as they are used to simpler, more straightforward material that does not challenge them as much.

2.5 Forces

- ELLs are intimidated by challenges of comprehending texts written for native speakers.
- Faculty have limited options for challenging reading materials beyond textbooks.

2.6 Solution

Introduce comic books into your classrooms and curriculum. They embed authentic language, facilitating understanding alongside visual information and context. Students can infer visual cues from drawings to better understand the narrative on the page.

2.7 Consequences

2.7.1 Drawbacks

- Comic books have less history of classroom usage than do textbooks which may lead to hesitancy from some administrators approving them for inclusion in a curriculum.
- Not every adult enjoys reading comics. This may not be of interest to some students. In that case it will not help them improve their reading skills.
- Some comic books make jokes that are too high level for the English students to understand. Some students may find this lack of understanding discouraging. Instead of comic books being helpful for students, this may actually make them dislike learning even more.

2.7.2 Costs

- Some comic books are too expensive, and the teacher may not have funds from their school to cover the costs.
- Depending on budget and level, this can range from 1 to 3 pane comic strips (e.g. boondocks, peanuts) up to graphic novels.
- If the school does not provide a printer and paper, the teachers will be unable to provide physical copies of the comics.

2.7.3 Student Feedback

When considering how to teach, it is important to also ask students how they feel about an approach. One adult learner named Kaito Shiota, a member of Iba Lab at Keio University in Japan used a manga, an iconic Japanese artistic style of comic book [10]:

"I would like to share with you my approach to reading English versions of manga. Initially, I start by reading the Japanese version of the manga to get an overall understanding of the content. Then, I proceed to read the English version to grasp the phrases and other language nuances. ... As I encountered expressions unfamiliar to me, I would research them and gradually progress through the manga. Specifically, when reading content in English manga that I haven't encountered in the Japanese version, I make it a point to read through the English sentences and use tools like Google Translate to understand parts that are unclear to me."

Here Kaito has taken it upon himself to use manga for English reading practice. When considering a course with comics incorporated into the curriculum he thought that "was a modern and casual approach that was very good."

Teachers can gauge if their students would prefer manga rather than Western comic books. For the purposes of this pattern, we will use comics when referring to narrative art (narrative art featuring words and pictures) in general from the entire world, including graphic novels. We will use manga to refer to narrative art from Japan and Korea specifically that has been translated into English, including Tankōbon [11].

3. IMPLEMENTING THE PATTERN

Teachers should procure comic books to share with their class. At first, we recommend going for those that have simple jokes or morals. You can go to the school or local library to see what they have available. There are also places online that have free comic books. If you have funds available for class literature, you can check out a local book or comic book store. You can also find lists online [12].

Review the copyright laws in your own country if you are making copies of a comic you find, and respect the rights of the copyright holders. Also review the rules at your own school about leveraging outside resources. If you are able to find a copyright licensed resource, that will likely make it easier for other teachers to follow your example and use that comic in their own class.

Once you have the materials prepared for your lesson plan we recommend reading through the first few comics together as a class. Either give each student their own paper copy or a way for them to read via school computing devices (tablets/laptops) or project the comic onto the big screen. If they have their own mobile

phones, those can also be used. This scaffolding of group reading first will build confidence for the students to read on their own later.

Ask the students to read the next comic in pairs with a partner. Request that they also discuss the comic with their partner in English. This provides another benefit of getting them to practice producing spoken English.

Give the students a comic to read for homework. Prepare some questions for them to answer to check their comprehension. Make at least one of the questions require them to write multiple sentences to answer. This provides another benefit of getting them to practice producing written English. Choose three to five challenging words from the story and ask students to make new sentences with them.

Talking about words from the stories allows teachers the chance to also give instruction in producing spoken English. Perhaps one word bubble has the word “comb” during a scene at a barber shop. The instructor may explain how to pronounce it compared to “tomb” and “bomb”, which all end with the same three letters. During this teaching moment, the instructor can clarify how the sound of the o is different for each word, which is not intuitive.

As we mentioned, teachers should take care not to confuse students with material for which they are not yet ready. After some easier texts have been completed; however, one could also turn this around to make teachable moments. For example, pick a joke which would go over the students' heads and base a lesson on it. If the teacher explains the linguistic principle behind a joke, the student might feel a sense of accomplishment at figuring it out and laughing at the punch line. Subsequently, this humor could serve as a memory aid for learning and remembering that principle.

If teachers do not have a budget, the next question is if their school has an internet connection? If not, they can see if comic strips are available free at an accessible library. They can check if local free newspapers have comics or try to make their own manga. Another option is to write to the publisher of a given comic and ask for donated copies to use in class.

If internet is available, comics may be found for free online at places like the Internet Archive. If their students have internet at-home or via computers in class, they could send them links to the comics. If the classroom has internet and a projector, teachers could share the comics to the whole class together. Another approach is teachers could do a fundraiser to cover the costs (e.g., bake sale, DonorsChoose [13]).

However they secure their comics, teachers should be careful to pick stories that are appropriate for the level of the students in their classes. One example that worked for intermediate level adult students was the “Fantom of the Fair” [14]. Asking simple comprehension questions such as “Do you trust the Fantom?” and “Why?” can help gauge if students are understanding the content [15].



Fig. 1. Page from The Phantom of the Fair comic book issue used to teach adult ELLs. Image via Digital Comics Museum [16]. Public Domain.

4. EXAMPLES

4.1 In-Person Classroom

In a class for adult ELLs at a vocational English school, students were given comic books from the Digital Comics Museum [16]. One of the authors printed out copies that were read and discussed them during class [17]. At times this led to laughter and a pleasant break from the part of class devoted to textbook learning. An adult student from that school shared a memory:

"I do remember that you used comic books to teach us and it was helpful teaching materials! I think it was good way to learn vocabulary in the context. When we learn vocabulary at first, we just memorize the meaning so it is difficult to use in real context. So I think it was good to learn how can we use vocabulary while reading comic stories." - Miso Kim, English as a Foreign Language Student from Korea

4.2 Tutoring Online

While tutoring an adult EFL student online, an author found comics from free newspapers and magazines such as "Linework" [18] from NewCity [19], a free artistic publication in Chicago. These were chosen because they were free and the student lived in Chicago so it gave a sense of local art. Also the instructor hoped it would encourage the student to explore more of the publication. After reading that specific comic, this was the homework prompt:

Write 5 sentences with words from the October 30th, 2014 Newcity "Linework" comic:
 ** bleak, adj. or n.
 ** journal, n. or v.
 ** handbook, n.
 ** baby face, compound n.
 ** amid, preposition

Adding parts of speech following the words is done to aid the student's understanding. The student frequently used words learned from reading like these in subsequent writing assignments.

4.3 Narrative Art for Learning Other Subjects

As a general example of the idea of using manga to aid learning, there are now books, such as: "To Teach: The Journey, in Comics" [20]. Another example is the organization Reading With Pictures [21] that "empowers teachers, librarians, parents, creators, retailers, and publishers to engage all learners through the sequential arts. We foster the joy of reading and lifelong multi-literacy through the comic arts at all levels of education." They share research including where a teacher used comic books to meet Common Core standards [22].

4.4 A Pattern Manga

Using manga to illustrate a pattern was inspired by "Pattern Manga: Attractively Expressing Patterns of a Pattern Language in Manga Style" [23]. The manga is set at the Language School. The first two scenes are from Monday and the second two are from Tuesday.

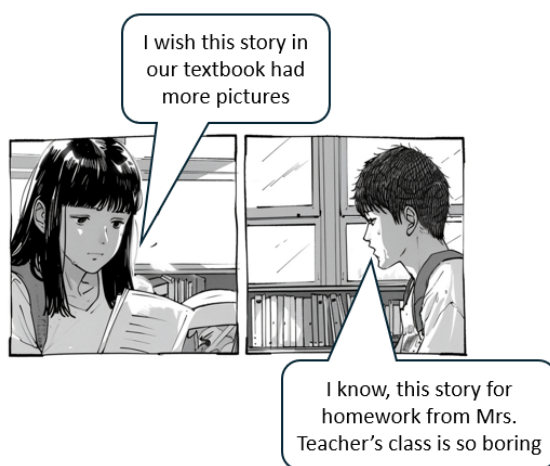


Fig. 2. On Monday evening, two students from Mrs. Teacher's class are talking about their English reading homework. Image generated using Midjourney.

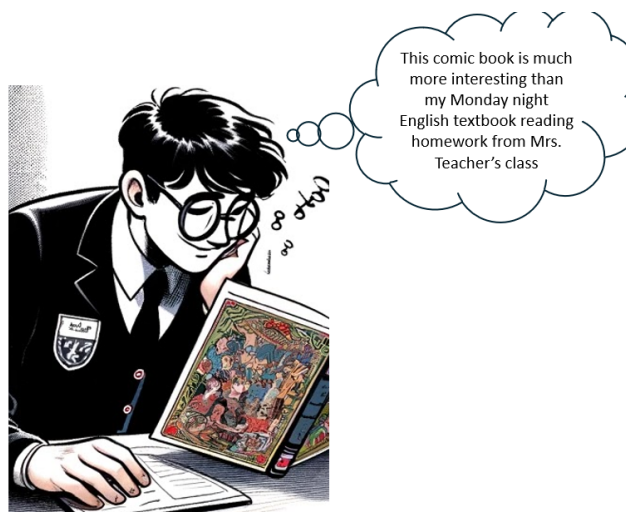


Fig. 3. On Monday evening another student from Mrs. Teacher's class is thinking talking about how comic books are more interesting than their English reading homework. Image generated using OpenAI's DALL·E.



Fig. 4. The next morning on Tuesday, students are excited to hear Mrs. Teacher's announce they will reading English comic books. Image generated using OpenAI's DALL·E.



Fig. 5. That night, one of the students from Mrs. Teacher's class is having fun reading English in her comic book for homework. Image generated using Midjourney.

5. CONCLUSION

Utilizing comics is an option for English teachers to make reading practice more fun and accessible for ELLs. It is critical to note this pattern does not work in every context and teachers need to be careful to align the level to their students. With the right choice of narrative art at a level suitable for students it can bring fun into the classroom and give students images on the page they can use to decipher unknown vocabulary.

This approach is one of many creative ways to teach English (or indeed, any language), for example with songs, nursery rhymes, skits, playing games, making movies, going on field trips, etc. The common theme linking these could be using embodiment when learning languages (e.g., sight, hearing, movement, etc.) thereby giving students the opportunity to be active learners. Future explorations of these additional ways could become its own pattern language! We are hoping to embrace this daunting task and live up to its high expectations by implementing the strategic "Build the Path from Now On" pattern [24] to continue mining patterns for this language.

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