Using comic books with pre-intermediate language students for reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition

El uso de historietas con estudiantes de idioma de nivel pre-intermedio para la comprensión de lectura y reconocimiento de vocabulario

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of using comic books with a group of pre-intermediate language students for reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition. For this research, 12 volunteer students from a public university participated in a six-session itinerary. A pre-test and post-test applied to the 12 participants where they solved reading comprehension and vocabulary exercises using a comic book. In four more sessions, a group of 6 participants worked on the exercises using a comic while the other 6 volunteers did the same using only the transcription of the comic's text. When the pilot study finished, those students were interviewed about their experience during the project and the effects on their performance. The results of the quantitative and qualitative data analysis showed that all the participants that used comics, regardless of proficiency and text level, performed better on reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition than the ones using the transcripts. The findings of the study confirm that comics can be a motivation for reluctant readers and an effective tool for literacy and language learning. The results of the study are discussed along with the existing literature on the use of visuals for developing reading skills. Implications for language teachers and some suggestions for further research are also provided.

Keywords: using comic books, reading comprehension, vocabulary recognition, language learning

Resumen

El propósito de este estudio es explorar los efectos de usar historietas con un grupo de estudiantes de idiomas de nivel pre-intermedio para la comprensión de lectura y reconocimiento de vocabulario. Para esta investigación, 12 estudiantes voluntarios de una universidad pública participaron en un itinerario de seis sesiones. Una prueba previa y una prueba posterior fueron aplicadas a los 12 participantes donde resolvieron ejercicios de comprensión de lectura y vocabulario usando historietas. En cuatro de las seis sesiones, un grupo de 6 participantes trabajó en dichos ejercicios usando historietas mientras que los otros 6 voluntarios usaron solamente la transcripción del texto de la historieta. Cuando el estudio piloto concluyó, los estudiantes fueron entrevistados acerca de su experiencia durante el proyecto y sobre los efectos en su desempeño. Los resultados del análisis de la información cuantitativa y cualitativa mostraron que todos los participantes que usaron historietas, independientemente de su capacidad en el idioma y de la dificultad del texto, se desempeñaron mejor en comprensión de lectura y reconocimiento de vocabulario que aquellos que usaron las transcripciones. Los hallazgos del estudio confirman que las historietas pueden motivar lectores reacios y que son una herramienta efectiva para la instrucción y el aprendizaje del idioma. Los resultados del estudio son discutidos junto con la literatura existente acerca del uso de elementos visuales para las destrezas de lectura. Se proveen, además, algunas implicaciones para profesores de idiomas y algunas sugerencias para futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave: uso de historietas, comprensión de lectura, reconocimiento de vocabulario, aprendizaje del idioma

Introduction

The last hundred years were characterized by their technological advances and the human production regarding art and literature. About this last aspect, one captivating and innovative literary form appeared in the first half of the 20th century. According to Gabilliet and Nguyen (2013), at the end of the 1930s nothing seemed to foreshadow the coming of comic book magazines; however, between 1936 and 1939, the comic magazine became an established product of American popular publishing. These authors account three factors as responsible for this transformation: an increase in the number of themed magazines, a simultaneous increase in the number of publishers, and, crucially, the appearance of Superman, the first superhero. Since that day, comic books dealing with the adventures of superpower beings and masked vigilantes have been attracting young readers. It is a multi-millionaire industry that has expanded to graphic novels, video games, movie franchises, and merchandise products. Comic books' stories have become a great way of entertainment for children, adolescents, and young people, as well as a source to learn about history, literature, and language.

Despite all the benefits reading brings, as an educator, I still find it difficult to grab a book, sit down, and read. Nevertheless, going through the pages of a comic book has always been a delightful experience for me. Then, I wonder if I could help my students to enrich their L2 performance by putting them to read comic books as well. The answer came a few days ago when I started a new English group at my job. The nature of the course is integrated, which means the four skills, namely speaking, writing, listening, and reading, have to be taught. However, after a short survey about their reading habits, I found out most of them would also have problems when facing a book. Nonetheless, one of the questions from that survey revealed an unexpected outcome. When I asked those who read less than an hour a week or that never read if they would embark on reading a comic book, all of them agreed. Even the assiduous readers became thrilled with the idea.

In the field of teaching, the implementation of innovative materials has always been a great help. I decided to develop this research to explore the relationship between comic books and L2 proficiency level to find techniques to help students improve their performance.

The idea of using comic books as an educational tool is not new. There has been a huge argument between those who dislike them and those who believe they are useful for the students' learning process. The latter assures that there are many obstacles when trying to implement them in class. It requires a deep analysis and creativity for doing it. There are many cases in which this objective has been successfully accomplished. In this regard, Tatalovic (2009) claims that "Super-hero comics have also inspired teachers to use examples from the comics to teach science, The Science of Superheroes and The Physics of Superheroes being two excellent books about the science behind the superpowers and how to use those in teaching students about science."

Another defender of the use of comic books in the teaching process is Patrick McCoy. In his paper "Using Comics in the Classroom," he states that "comics can be used in a variety of ways as motivating input to capture student interest" (McCoy, 2010). Even though many remain reluctant to or skeptical about the implementation of this type of material in the classroom, the truth is that this might be the only way to capture the student interest and creating motivation for better and meaningful L2 performance. We have to consider making use of them because they can fulfill the students' needs. In general, the love of comic books can be an inflection point to engage them into reading, and, at the same time, try something new in the language classroom.

As a professor researcher, I am a first-hand witness of the teachers' struggle with the task of engaging students with the habit of reading books due to children and young people's access to technological gadgets such as tablets and smartphones. In this process, many different types of texts have been used in the classroom with the purpose of teaching reading comprehension skills and wide the vocabulary range of the pupils.

Nevertheless, times have changed a lot and stick to regular books to teach English is not enough. Like it or not, comic books came to stay. Not only that, we are in a juncture in which comics have gained popularity because of all the blockbusters about superheroes that companies such DC Comics and Marvel Studios and have been releasing during the last seventeen years. Therefore, I consider that using this tool in class will be useful to motivate and help them in their English learning process with an innovative and enjoyable method.

My purpose with this study is to explore the effects of using comic books with a group of pre-intermediate language students regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition. The study looks for a reasonable explanation on how these skills may be enhanced by the contents of the comic books and the motivation hidden in the process of being part of a ludic activity that requires basic reading, vocabulary, and analytical skills.

As a result, the question that this study tries to answer is which are the effects of using comic books with a group of pre-intermediate language students regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition?

Other questions to be answered with this research are what is the importance that college students give to reading as a technique to learn English and what are the students' initial reactions towards the idea of using comics in the language classroom instead of regular textbooks? Which is the measurable outcome of a group of students regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition when they are engaged in reading comics in comparison with using only the transcription of the text from the comics? And what is the perception of the students regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition after they were engaged in reading comics in comparison with using only the transcription of the text from the comics?

Literature Review

With the topic of this research being the effects of comic books on public university students' reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition, exhaustive literature review has been made in order to provide context for the present study, overview works related to the investigated problem and identify gaps in how this subject has been researched to date. The following conceptual categories, along with their authors, stand for the most pertinent existing literature review.

The affective filter

Krashen's (2003) theories regarding dynamics and optimal conditions for second language development are deep-rooted in modern approaches to ESL teaching. The most important ideas are those of input hypothesis and affective filter hypothesis. The input hypothesis suggests that second language is acquired through comprehensible input or messages when involved in activities using language for communication. This theory suggests that it is not the form of the message from which learners learn, but rather the message itself. The affective filter hypothesis suggests that emotions can have an impact on second language learning. That is students who are self-confident and highly motivated tend to make more progress in second language learning than those who are not. In addition, a student's level of anxiety (affective filter) is crucial in the amount and speed of second language development. Comics can provide input and positive affect. There are many visual clues which help increase the amount of comprehensible input and can boost comprehension. This increased comprehension keeps the affective filter low. The affective filter might also be low due to the enjoyment of comics by students.

Several authors (Hatch, 1992; McGroarty, 1993; Johnson, 1995; Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000) emphasize the importance of interaction in language. There are many ways students can collaborate using comics as materials for interaction in pairs or small groups. Many such activities will require students to exchange ideas and opinions, edit each other's work or collaborate in teams for original comics' production. When students interact with each other or the teacher they are using language for real communication.

Brain-based teaching is concerned with using practices that can increase student learning. These activities include hands-on, manipulative-based activities, simulations, role-plays, projects, and small group work. The emphasis is on more student-to-student interaction, which creates greater opportunities to use and develop language. Comics use an emphasis on engaging content and greater use of visual materials. Relevant and engaging materials, like comics, create a strong emotional buy-in and students become more engaged and learning accelerates. Added visuals are extremely useful with beginning to early intermediate second language learners who are largely visual learners at these stages. Pictures can make oral and written text more concrete and understandable. Visuals can also increase the number of concepts learned and the length of time those concepts are remembered.

Another theoretical framework for using comics in the classroom borrows from progressive literacy: engagement through authentic literature, using language for real communication, and a focus on content over form. This theory suggests that authentic materials, books and stories that are whole rather than excerpted use natural language and are meaningful, are much more likely to engage students (Smith, 1997, 2003).

Visual and multimodal literacy

Comics can also help students develop visual and multimodal literacy. Visual literacy is defined as the "ability to decode, use, and create visual forms of expression" (Elsner and Viebrock, 2013), while multimodal literacy "denotes the ability to obtain, systematize, expand and link information from different symbolic systems" (Elsner and Viebrock, 2013). Elsner (2013) mentions that, "in graphic novels, each panel has its own story to tell. The complete and comprehensive meaning, however, is only revealed in the overall interplay of all panels." Readers need to learn how to decode and interpret the individual panels, the words and images that they contain, and how to relate the panels to each other.

According to Elsner (2013) graphic novels can develop functional literacy, "the ability to learn languages and use

them adequately in different contexts" (Elsner and Viebrock) just as well, if not better, than traditional books. Elsner argues that the quality and lexical density of the vocabulary in comics are higher than in other books at the same level. She also argues that the combination of images and text is especially helpful for weak readers, and that young readers might be more motivated to read multimodal texts.

Many people do not want to use comics in their literacy teaching because they believe that the images limit the students' own ability to visualize the story. Elsner (2013) and others (e.g. Cary, 2004) disagree. Researchers seem to agree that comics do not interfere with visualization or creativity (Elsner, 2013; Wolk, 2007). Most writers and illustrators do not create overly detailed panels. Instead, they work with visual and/or textual clues and symbols to indicate setting, mood, motion, time, and so on. From these clues' readers must actively participate in making meaning out of these clues. McCloud (1993) calls this "closure": "the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole." The readers' understanding of the medium, their background knowledge and their imagination will help them determine what happens in the story based upon the clues given.

Thus, it seems as if the key to understanding what comics can do lies in understanding the medium itself. Elsner (2013) concludes her chapter by advising educators to "start with reading and analyzing graphic novels themselves, they will soon recognize the very potential of this fascinating piece of literature, not only but especially in terms of their benefits for literacies development in the EFL classroom."

The importance of understanding the comics' medium has been studied by Heidi Hammond. Hammond (2012) observed that the circulation of superhero comics and manga, at the library where she worked, was increasing as they brought in more comics to their collection. This made her wonder how students would respond to more serious art graphic novels. Therefore, she set out to determine "whether students' knowledge of comic conventions involving multimodal literacy skills would affect their responses to a graphic novel" (Hammond, 2012). The participants in her study consisted of "23 senior Political Science students" (Hammond, 2012). First, they had to read the chosen graphic novel, American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang, and after that write down responses on three different occasions. Thereafter, they had recorded book discussions, which were followed by classroom lessons about the history of comics and comic conventions. After that they had to read the graphic novel once again and write down new

responses. Finally, some students participated in a group interview, while other created their own comics.

Motivation to read

Many researchers agree that comics have the ability to help struggling or reluctant readers, as well as engage advanced and assiduous learners.

One idea as to why comics are motivating to read is that they are first and foremost an entertainment medium – they are supposed to be engaging to read – otherwise people would probably not buy them. Cary (2004) calls this the "fun factor" and he argues with a starting point in Krashen's input hypothesis that if students are engaged in their reading, they are more likely to learn from it as well.

Norton (2003) came to a similar conclusion in her research, namely, that one of the driving forces behind children's motivation to read Archie comics is that they are fun to read. In her study, Norton wanted to find out why students read Archie comics, and to see if these findings could possibly assist literacy teaching in schools. She interviewed 34 students between the ages of nine and twelve in an elementary school in Canada. All of the interviewed students were readers of Archie comics. She had also conducted interviews with teacher students, which she used to contrast the views of teachers and students regarding Archie comics.

The majority of students in Norton study answered that humor was a part of why they were reading Archie. Norton discusses several aspects as to why the students found Archie comics fun. One aspect was that they "found the characters interesting, engaging, and humorous." Another aspect was the fact that they felt a sense of ownership over the reading - they felt that they were in control of the reading. A third aspect was the visual appeal of comics. Some students commented that they liked to look at the pictures while others, mostly those with other L1s than English, also argued that the pictures helped them understand the text.

Unsurprisingly, the teacher students did not share the student's positive view of Archie comics. Instead they considered the characters to be "superficial and shallow" and most of them would not include Archie comics in their classroom (Norton, 2003). A couple of the teacher students who were slightly more positive towards using comics in their classroom, simply argued that reading comics was better than reading nothing at all. Norton (2003) concludes her text by arguing that in order for students to make meaning out of reading they need to feel like they are in control of that reading which, unfortunately, is not always achievable in schools.

A common opinion amongst those who negatively criticize comics is that people consider comics to be childish diversions. From this background Botzakis (2009) set out to explore what adult fans of comics get out of reading comic books and with the aim of understanding if this could possibly have any implications for educators.

Botzakis (2009) observed and interviewed twelve individuals of different ages and origins that had been reading comic books for quite some time throughout their lives. Four out of these twelve were used as examples to demonstrate Botzakis observations. The four areas that he could identify were: reading as study, reading as appreciation and ownership, reading as friendship, and reading as search for meaning. The first individual was going to use comics and other sources of pop culture to investigate people's view and knowledge of specific cultures, in this case Japanese and Chinese cultures. Comics, in this case, were used as a source in higher education and studying. The second individual enjoyed reading the stories that comics tell. He answered the question of what he got out of reading comics with the following: "Just happiness. Just joy. There is a collectible aspect to it that I like. I like picking up a book, reading it, enjoying the story, enjoying the artwork, and then having it, kind of like forever. Maybe" (Botzakis, 2009). For the third individual reading comics became an escape, and a way for him to tackle problems in his own life situation. He had read the same comics for a long time and the same characters still remained in those, which gave him something constant in his life. The fourth and final individual read comics in search for existential answers – to find meaning.

Another aspect that might motivate students to read comics is the range of topics available. Rapp (2012) states that "the sheer variety of topics and stories to be found in comic books suggests that readers, regardless of their demographic characteristics and personal interests, should find titles that interest them." These topics can not only be a source for interest and motivation but also learning.

Language Learning

With a starting-point in Stephen Krashen's input hypothesis and affective filter hypothesis, Stephen Cary promotes comics as a source for foreign language learning. The author claims that "comics provide both the needed input and positive affect. Abundant visual clues increase the amount of comprehensible input and consequently boost reading comprehension and L2 acquisition. Increased comprehension, in turn, keeps the affective filter low by eliminating or considerably reducing the anxiety and frustration many students feel…" (Cary, 2004)

Comics can function as a source for language learning as they provide readers with authentic language that native speakers would use in different contexts, and with the help of visual clues to understand. According to Cary (2004), "comics provide authentic language-learning opportunities for all students, regardless of a learner's second language proficiency level. The dramatically reduced text […] of many comics […], make them manageable and language-profitable for even beginning level readers". This might be true; however, according to James Milton (2008), comics usually have a lexically dense language, which might require more from the reader in terms of language proficiency. The language level and the amount of written language in comics will vary from comic to comic.

Milton (2008) has conducted studies regarding whether foreign language students can learn vocabulary from informal tasks such as reading a comic book, watching a movie, or listening to a song outside of school. His study regarding comic book reading consisted of one native English speaker learning Dutch. The learner read a Lucky Luke comic book for one hour, once a week, for eight weeks. A pre-test was administered to determine how many words of the text the student knew from the beginning.

During the eight weeks, the learner did weekly vocabulary tests. The tests, both the pre-test and the rest of them, consisted of 300 words from the text, which the student had to grade on a scale of 0-3 (0 meaning that the learner definitely did not know the meaning of the word and 3 meaning that the learner was definitely sure about the meaning). During the pre-test the learner gave 3's to 82 out of 300 words. At the last test, after eight weeks, the learner gave 3's to 223 words. According to Milton (2008), this means that on average the learner learned 30-36 words per every hour spent reading the comic book. He contrasts this with previous studies on incidental learning, which indicated that only a small limited number of items could be learned this way. He also mentions that comic books are more lexically dense than, for example, song lyric or movies: "it is clear that reading the comic book text, in particular, is a very lexically dense activity; an able learner might be expected to take rather more vocabulary from this compared with the DVD…" Milton also makes some concluding remarks regarding whether it is possible to learn vocabulary from informal out of school activities and point out that "learners were apparently very willing to spend time, and considerable amount of it, in foreign-language activities provided they enjoyed the activity." He also mentions the role and importance of repetition in language learning.

Milton (2008) acknowledges the fact that he only had one participating student in his study. The reliability and generalizability of the results could therefore be questioned since one student is most likely not representative of all students. However, it does give an indication of the fact that students might actually learn from informal learning activities such as reading a comic book outside of the classroom.

Comic book reading outside of the classroom has also been investigated by Kay Hammond and Katherine Danaher. Since "reading outside the classroom offers students greater exposure to language than is possible in class time alone…" (Hammond and Danaher, 2012), it is an important aspect of language learning. However, Hammond and Danaher reference a study which stated that adult refugees and migrants do not always have the time to engage with the types of texts that are commonly used in education even though they might want to. Thus, there was a need to find or create material that provided these learners with more efficient texts and readings.

As a result of this, Hammond and Danaher (2012) created their own comic books. These were used with elementary and upper-intermediate level adult refugee and migrant ESL learners. The focus with the comic books was for the students to learn vocabulary; therefore, the grammatical structures of the comic books were at a level that the students could understand. The researchers also made recordings of the stories so that the students could listen to them while reading.

The aim of the study was to investigate the perceived value of targeted comic book readers with ESL learners. The participants were adults from all over the world: Asia, Africa, The Middle-East, South America, and Eastern Europe. At first, they were given a questionnaire to respond to; however, these did not provide useful information for the researchers. Therefore, interviews were conducted instead. These interviews allowed the researchers to identify five areas of relevance as to the value of targeted comic book readers. According to Hammond and Danaher (2012) the students found the comic books valuable and enjoyable. The illustrations played a major part in making them enjoyable and understandable. They also mentioned that "the main aspects that appeared to be useful were the level of difficulty and the repeated target vocabulary that matched the vocabulary taught in the courses and which was relevant to their needs" (Hammond and Danaher, 2012).

From the interviews with the learners several aspects could be identified that the targeted comic books helped with. Except the already mentioned language aspects, the students also mentioned that reading these comic books improved their confidence, motivation, and they felt more relaxed toward learning English. They were also able to practice using different learning strategies such as re-listening and re-reading parts in order to understand it and also using dictionaries.

These students valued targeted comic book readers as educational material. However, it is also possible that they could have learned vocabulary just as well in other situations. Since this is a qualitative study about comic book readers' perceived value it is possible to question whether it really is the most effective method to learn vocabulary outside of classrooms. Still, the study indicates that targeted comic book readers can be used as learning material that students might enjoy working with.

Another difficulty with targeted comic book readers is that the researchers had to make their own comic books. Most educators are probably unable to create their own comics with specific and repeated vocabulary. However, Milton (2008) also pointed towards the importance of repetition, his student achieved this by reading the same comic book several times.

Methodology

There are currently three major research approaches in education (and in the social and behavioral sciences). They are quantitative research, qualitative research, and mixed research. Due to the complex nature of this research which requires inquiring students to reach a feasible explanation on how comic books are helpful for teaching, a combination of these two approaches is required.

Developing a mixed methods research design can be challenging. Researchers must choose the appropriate quantitative and qualitative approaches necessary to answer the research question and design their mixed methods project using those approaches. There are many ways to combine these approaches and there are no rigid formulas for designing a mixed methods project.

Once the researcher has considered the factors of the investigation project, he or she can use that information to choose an overall mixed methods design. Because of the nature of this investigation, the research design chosen was exploratory research.

Exploratory research, as the name implies, intends merely to explore the research questions and does not intend to offer final and conclusive solutions to existing problems. This type of research is usually conducted to study a problem that has not been clearly defined yet.

Exploratory studies are also referred to as formulative research studies. The primary objective or purpose of exploratory research design is that of formulating a problem for more precise investigation or of developing the working hypothesis from an operational perspective. The focus in these research projects is on the discovery of ideas and insights. Conducted in order to determine the nature of the problem, exploratory research is not intended to provide conclusive evidence, but helps us to have a better understanding of the problem. When conducting exploratory research, the researcher ought to be willing to change his/her direction as a result of revelation of new data and new insights (Saunders, 2012).

Exploratory research design does not aim to provide the final and conclusive answers to the research questions, but merely explores the research topic with varying levels of depth. It has been noted that "exploratory research is the initial research, which forms the basis of more conclusive research. It can even help in determining the research design, sampling methodology and data collection method" (Singh, 2007). Exploratory research "tends to tackle new problems on which little or no previous research has been done" (Brown, 2006). Unstructured interviews are the most popular primary data collection method with exploratory studies.

Exploratory research presents four different categories: experience surveys, secondary data analysis, case studies, and pilot studies. The latter is the one to be used in this research.

A pilot study is a "pre-study" of a fuller study. It can be thought as a miniature version of the research project and be limited by using fewer subjects than the ones planned to include in the full study. The pilot study can also be limited because the research scope is smaller in some other way. For example, the range of types of subject may be more limited or the procedures may be more limited. A pilot study can help the researcher work out some of the procedural bugs even though it is not likely to add anything new or important to the main study.

Context of the Study

The venue where this study took place is in Alajuela downtown and it was a community college for 14 years. It has gone through a transition process since it was declared public university in 2010. Some of the career programs were changed along with its pedagogical framework.

However, there are some characteristics from the community college that remain. First, the nature of its popu-

lation has not changed. More than 60% of the students come from rural areas of Alajuela. The most common places of origin are Atenas, Grecia, Sabanilla, Poás, Naranjo, and Turrúcares.

Second, the most important motivation for most learners the career of English as a Foreign Language is that they want to improve their proficiency level in order to apply for a promotion in their jobs. This means that most of the students from this university work on a daily basis. The majority of this population has a day-shift schedule. Therefore, they take the night-shift classes.

This lack of time results, according to what they express in class, in reading reluctance. The main reason for not having developed reading habits is their reduced spare time because of time constraints.

Participants

Regarding this study, the survey to collect preliminary data for was carried out on a group of 24 students that were part of the course Integrated English II.

Two months later, a sample group of 12 students in a range of 19 to 43 years old from the same university participated in the development of this project.

Initially, the idea was to apply the pilot study in the form of a six-session itinerary with the whole group of students from the course Integrated English III. Nevertheless, due to ethical and logistic reasons, the pilot study was conducted out of class schedule and with volunteers only.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected by means of the administration of a survey, an itinerary of activities, and an interview.

Firstly, to justify this study, a survey was conducted among the students of a course called Integrated English II in a public university in Alajuela. Such survey, consisting of 10 close-ended questions, was applied to 18 students from the course with the aim of exploring their reading habits and attitude towards the use of comics as tools to learn English.

Secondly, an itinerary, defined by the Oxford dictionary, as "a planned route or journey; a travel document recording a route or journey" was applied to the participants. The six-session itinerary was built and carried out with the sample population mentioned in the previous section. The initial survey traced the route to be undertaken during the journey of six weeks into the use of comic books as a reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition

tool. A group of 12 volunteers participating in the itinerary worked on a series of exercises after reading a comic book or the transcript with its content (See illustrations 1, 2 and 3).

Illustration 1. Arrangement of the classroom for the six sessions of the itinerary. Twelve laptops were distributed into groups of three and the software to read the comics was installed and ready to be used. **Source:** Alonso Salazar, Costa Rica, 2017 (Personal collection).
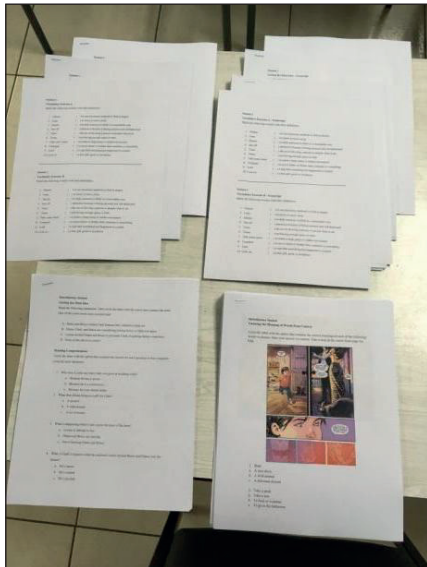

Illustration 2. Sets of copies with the reading comprehension and vocabulary exercises to be solved by the participants after they read either the comics or the transcripts of the comics. **Source:** Alonso Salazar, Costa Rica, 2017 (Personal collection)

The first exercise of the itinerary consisted of 10 words and their corresponding 10 definitions, both arranged in two columns to be matched. The participants were given a worksheet with two identical matching exercises labelled A and B. They had to work on Matching A before

Illustration 3. Participants using the laptops and the software to read comic books during the introductory session or pre-test of the itinerary. **Source:** Alonso Salazar, Costa Rica, 2017 (Personal collection)

they read either the comic or the transcript. After reading the text and working on the other exercises of the session, they had to do Matching B. This time, they had the chance to take a look at the answers they gave on Matching A and make all the necessary corrections.

The second exercise of the itinerary consisted of one close-ended question about the main idea of the comic issue and 4 options to choose from. The participants were given 5 minutes to skim either the comic or the text with the transcription of the comic with the aim of getting the main idea.

The third exercise of the itinerary consisted of 10 close-ended questions about details of the comic issue and 3 options to choose from. The participants were given 10 minutes to scan either the comic or the text with the transcription of the comic with the aim of finding the answers to those questions.

The fourth and last exercise of the itinerary consisted of 8 words taken from the comic issue and 3 options with synonyms or definitions to choose from. The participants were given 5 minutes to scan either the comic or the text with the transcription of the comic with the aim of guessing the meaning of words from context.

For the purpose of this study, the participants answered the questions of an interview through the online tool Google Forms. An online interview consisting of 11 close and open-ended questions was applied to the 12 volunteers who participated in the itinerary with the aim of collecting their perceptions in regards to reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition after they were enga-

ged in reading comics in comparison with using only the transcription of the text from the comics.

Findings

Analysis of quantitative results

This section is devoted to the analysis of the results derived from the two quantitative instruments applied to the participants: the survey and the itinerary.

The survey aimed to determine what the importance that college students gave to reading as a technique for learning English was and what their initial reactions towards the idea of using comics in the language classroom instead of regular textbooks were. The results from such instrument revealed that reading is not even considered by the participants as a technique to learn English. The techniques that they mostly use are watching movies and series, watching videos and talking with native speakers. Contradictorily, almost all of them consider reading a very important tool in order to learn that foreign language. At the same time, the majority admitted that their frequency of reading in English is null (See figure 1).
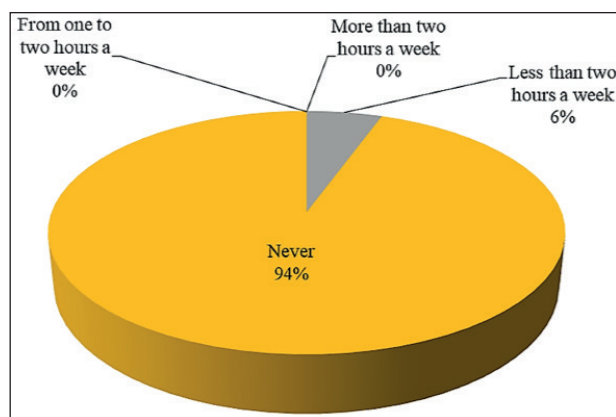

Figure 1. Data about the of weekly hours spent reading in English by the surveyed students. **Source:** Own construction.

The only participant that assured to read materials in English claimed to read magazines or other types of written texts. Among the reasons given by the participants for not reading in English, the most significant were lack of time followed by lack of interest and finally lack to attractive topics. For the purpose of this research, the fact that most of them were willing to read comics in an English course was crucial. Moreover, the majority claimed to consider comics very useful to learn that foreign language. Finally, the survey revealed that the types of comics they were the most interested in were the ones about superheroes, mystery and comedy.

The information collected from the survey was crucial for the design and application of the itinerary. This instrument aimed to demonstrate the measurable outcome of a group of students regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary learning while they were engaged in reading comics in comparison with using only the transcription of the text from the comics. Regarding this six-session instrument, the findings show that the results of the pre-test matching exercises of both groups (control and experimental) were always very close to each other, which might mean that both groups had similar knowledge about the target words before they were exposed to the treatment. However, the results in scores in both groups after passing the treatment were significant. Evidently, what facilitated the improvement in vocabulary knowledge in the post-test matching exercises was related to using the comic and associating words with images in context, which can have more impact on acquiring incidental vocabulary in relation to only reading the transcript of the comic. The differences in the resulting scores in both groups from the getting the main idea exercise, the reading comprehension questions exercise, and the guessing the meaning of words from context exercise were equally compelling. The participants from the experimental group always obtained the highest amount of correct answers and finished solving the exercises before the participants from the control group (See tables 1, 2 and 3).

Table 1. Results obtained in Session 3. During this session, half of the participants (Group 1) worked with comics and the other half (Group 2) with the transcription of the text from the comics. The average of correct answers for Group 1 was 9.3 on a scale of 10. On the other hand, the average of correct answers for Group 2 was 3.1 on a scale of 10.

Type of Participant	Average of correct answers	Average of incorrect answers
Participants using comics	9.3	0.6
Participants using transcripts	3.1	6.8

Table 2. Results obtained in Session 3. During this session, half of the participants (Group 1) worked with comics and the other half (Group 2) with the transcription of the text from the comics. The number of participants from Group 1who answered this question correctly was 6 out of 6. On the other hand, the number of participants from Group 2 who answered this question correctly was 1 out of 6.

Type of Participant	Number of participants who answered correctly	Number of participants who answered correctly	Total of participants
Participants using comics	6	0	6
Participants using transcripts	1	5	6

Table 3. Results obtained in Session 3. During this session, half of the participants (Group 1) worked with comics and the other half (Group 2) with the transcription of the text from the comics. The average of correct answers for Group 1 was 7.5 on a scale of 8. On the other hand, the average of correct answers for Group 2 was 2.8 on a scale of 8.

Type of Participant	Average of correct answers	Average of incorrect answers
Participants using comics	7.5	0.5
Participants using transcripts	2.8	5.1

These results confirm Cary's (2004) statement that comics provide both the needed input and positive affect. The author's thesis that the abundant visual clues increase the amount of comprehensible input and consequently boost reading comprehension and L2 acquisition is demonstrated in the scores of the experimental group. In their case, comics functioned as a source for language learning as they provided participants with authentic language that they would use in different contexts, and with the help of visual clues to understand. According to Cary (2004), "comics provide authentic language-learning opportunities for all students, regardless of a learner's second language proficiency level. The dramatically reduced text […] of many comics […], make them manageable and language-profitable for even beginning level readers".

Moreover, these scores from the experimental group confirm the findings of Lang's (2009) study, who claims that comics have a very consequential role in the English classroom. Lang (2009) describes the problem of language teachers as constantly searching for new innovative and motivating authentic material to enhance learning in the formal classroom. A textbook is made of material that has been altered and simplified for the learner. He argues that by using comic books the learners can learn different kinds of topics in the classroom. Like this current study, Liu (2004), in his article, talked about the role of comics on ESL learners' reading comprehension. He has two different students' levels of proficiency (low & high) with and without a comic, like in the itinerary.

The outcome of the present study is compatible with what Bowkett (2011) explained in his book about learners' interest in pictures, comics and graphic novels as a way of developing their creative writing abilities and reading skills. The book's strategy is the use of comic art images as a visual aid to help learners generate, organize and refine their ideas when talking about text. He agrees in reading comic books learners are engaging with highly complex and structured narrative forms.

The high scores of the participants using comics in the vocabulary exercises of the itinerary meet with Khoiri-yah's (2011) study where he uses comic stories to improve the students' level of vocabulary. He suggests the students identify and study words from the context on the comic reading just like the participants did in the exercises about getting the meaning of words from context. With the course of the sessions, the participants using the comics finished their vocabulary matching and getting the meaning exercises faster than the ones using only the transcript, also obtaining the best scores. This means that comics do have an impact on incidental vocabulary learning. Moreover, the fact that the target words were contextualized made it easier for participants to elicit the meanings of the words.

Finally, the scores of the participants using comics in the getting the main idea and reading comprehension exercises matched Merc's (2013) outcome in his study about the effects of comic strips on reading comprehension of Turkish EFL learners. The results of the itinerary as well as Merc's research show that all students with a comic book effect, regardless of proficiency and text level, performed better than the ones without the comics.

Analysis of qualitative results

This section is devoted to the analysis of the results derived from the qualitative instrument applied to the participants: the interview.

This instrument aimed to answer what was the perception of the students regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition after they were engaged in reading comics in comparison with using only the transcription of the text from the comics.

Out of the fifteen questions made, there were three that displayed the most significant results. The first one dealt with the main difference found between using comics and regular texts. Most of the interviewees answered that comic books were visually helpful, easy to follow and more attractive than a book. These responses support Elsner and Viebrock's (2013) claim that comics can help students develop visual and multimodal literacy. The authors' thesis that graphic novels, and in this case comic books, can develop the ability to learn languages and use them adequately in different contexts turned out to be true. It was demonstrated by means of the results from the itinerary and the answers from this interview that the combination of images and text was especially helpful for weak readers and that young readers can be more motivated to read this kinds of texts.

The second question that provided important information was related to this last topic: motivation. The interviewees were asked if their desire for reading had

changed as a result of their participation in the project. Surprisingly, a hundred percent of them responded affirmatively to such question (See table 4). This outcome contrasts with what they said in the survey their experience with comics. Before the experiment, the participants were reluctant readers and none of them considered reading as an effective way to learn English. Nevertheless, their contact with this innovative learning resource changed their minds. These results support Cary's (2004) idea of the fun factor contained in comics. This author argues that if students are engaged in their reading, they are more likely to learn from it as well. The participants felt that they had a sense of ownership over the reading; in other words, they felt that they were in control of the reading.

Table 4. Answers of the participants to the question: Has your reading desire improved after your experience in the project?

"Now I want to read. In the past I didn't like it. Reading is a hard skill, but now I have the desire of doing it." *Participant 2*
"I understood that reading helps you learn English and vocabulary." *Participant 5*
"I didn't like reading because I thought it was boring and difficult. But now I enjoy it a lot." *Participant 7*
"I thought reading wasn't important. But now I know it is. So I read more now." *Participant 10*
"Reading comics was very interesting. Now I want to try other kinds of books." *Participant 11*
"I have been reading more since the project." *Participant 12*

The last two questions from the interview that displayed substantial outcomes are strongly related. One asked the participants if they overcame any former reading limitation during this project. The other one inquired them about characteristic that made comics a good resource to learn English.

In the first one, the answers of the participants were that abilities like reading speed, understanding a text and getting the main idea had improved (See table 5).

Table 5. Answers of the participants to the question: Did you overcome any former reading limitation during this project? Which one?

"I improved my reading speed." *Participant 1*
"I'm better at concentrating when I read now." *Participant 3*
"I understand more of what I read now." *Participant 4*
"I pay more attention to what I read now. I don't get distracted so easily." *Participant 6*
"Getting the main idea and concentrating on the text is easier for me now." *Participant 8*

In the second one, most of their responses were related to improvement of vocabulary and grammatical structures. In this sense, comic books proved themselves to be suitable tools for learning a language. These results support Cary's (2004) claim that comics are a source for foreign language learning. According to this author, comics provide both the needed input and positive affect. Abundant visual clues increase the amount of comprehensible input and consequently boost reading comprehension and L2 acquisition. Increased comprehension, in turn, keeps the affective filter low by eliminating or considerably reducing anxiety and frustration many students feel (Cary, 2004). The outcomes from these two questions also corroborate Milton's (2008) idea that comics usually have a lexically dense language which benefits directly the reader in terms of language acquisition. He sustains that reading a comic book is a very dense activity and that a learner might take more vocabulary from this compared to other materials such as song lyrics or movies.

Overall, the perception of the participants regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition with comic books was very positive. In the interview they claimed that they absolutely recommended using comic books for those who desire to improve their English proficiency. The participants pointed out that reading comics was an effective way of learning English, easy to use, attractive, and useful for improving reading and oral skills and to learn vocabulary.

Conclusions

Comic books can be certainly used to motivate learners and capture their interest. In this study, there is significant theoretical support for using this kind of tool with language learners. The use of comics can significantly decrease the affective filter and motivate students to learn and read. Furthermore, comic books stand for a great opportunity to interact with the English language. They can be used in different moments during the language class. For instance, they can work as warm-up or follow-up activities, or they can even be the main focus of a course or unit.

Some reading skills limitations can be overcome by regular and gradual reading of comic books and graphic novels. Nevertheless, there must be a careful selection of the chose text to make sure it is still understandable and not demotivating to learners. In other words, the chosen comics must be suitable to the students' proficiency level.

It is undeniable that using comics and graphic novels can lead to the development of visual literacy. This means

that learners can be trained to exploit images, visuals and fonts to be more sensitive to reading the textual context. As a result, their reading skills and techniques can improve, and this might lead them to learning autonomy. Also, the mastering of these reading strategies leads to more effective learning and supports positive motivation.

Several authors in the field of language learning have accredited comics and graphic novels to have important benefits. Comics not only attract reluctant readers' attention but also are used to teach advanced vocabulary and themes. This study demonstrated that the bright colors and popular characters that comics contain are positively more engaging than traditional texts. Besides that, the topics displayed by comics and their vocabulary level are not sacrificed for the sake of entertainment. These texts can be challenging for language learners and a great tool for language acquisition.

Although comics have been around for years, it is now that facilitators are taking them seriously in educational settings. Research has proven comics to be an option for struggling and reluctant readers. Comics and graphic novels can lead students into exploring others texts such as magazines and books. This study found that many language learners begin with comics and move on to harder reading. Also, incorporating text and visuals causes readers to examine the relationship between the two and encourages deep and critical thinking.

Implications for Teaching

The effectiveness of visual aids in education has been well established through extensively published research. Evidence supports the argument that student learning is affected positively when text and illustrations are presented together. A form of visual communication that combines both, visuals and text, is comics. Comic books combine content through the written word and artwork to create a narrative that appeals to readers not only artistically, but also informatively.

As reviewed in the earlier sections of this research, comic books have been considered as a contemporary and engaging form of literature that deals with topics ranging from business ethics, social issues, environmental issues, to human healthcare experiences, beliefs, and concerns. Although this is true, there is still resistance to the use of this genre as a pedagogical tool in some circles at the university level. Educators are on both sides of the debate. Most of the resistance is because the combination of text and images is considered fine for children's books, but not for college education where students are expected to read "real books."

Regarding this issue, the mature subjects that some comic books cover show their use as complementary readings in academic settings. The potential of this unexploited resource can definitely turn into an effective method in language courses. The use of colors and the interaction of text and visuals in comics and graphic novels make students not only find a personal connection with the characters, but also identify with the characters in their own unique ways.

Comic books stand for a fresh way of presenting information which encourages students to read, understand, and reflect upon them. Students recognize the basic form or comics, but including them in a course can catch students unexpectedly in a positive way, and this can lead students to become more energized and engaged in the given work.

Many of today's students were raised in an environment filled with interactive visual media. Creative advertising campaigns, smartphones, and video games are filled with images. Due to this abundant visual media, language students display less interest with unillustrated, text-heavy books, and expect to find similar interactive visual characteristics in their educational materials. The strong point of comic books is the visual representation of the story and the information. The format of comic books, with abundant visuals and limited text, creates a harmony between the students experience in their everyday lives and their learning experiences, thus motivating them to learn more about the information presented.

This study found that comics use noticeably facilitated the reading comprehension of the experimental group participants. Once again, it was proven that students should be provided texts with a visual material (comics in particular) in their reading comprehension classrooms. Teachers might even create their own comics together with their students, and present them in the classroom for developing high-level thinking.

Furthermore, the effect of comics on reading comprehension largely depends on the quality of the repetition effect. When readers are able to integrate the information from the text and from the illustration, these two work, as if the information was presented twice, thus enhancing performance.

Another implication based on the findings of this study is for the material developers. The material developers for reading comprehension must be very careful at selecting their reading comprehension texts and the illustrations they provide with those texts. In the same manner, classroom teachers should use comics or other visual aids

very carefully considering the proficiency level of their students.

This study should be replicated in different contexts with different proficiency levels, and age groups. Moreover, future research can deal with different text types and different visual materials than the comics such as pictures, maps or photographs. Therefore, the effect of visuals in reading comprehension can be rather clear for language teachers and materials developers.

Finally, the research method used in this study is recognition tasks such as matching and multiple-choice items. Future studies could also include other research tools such a recall protocol which requires language production for comprehending a text.

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Using comic books with pre-intermediate language students for reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition

El uso de historietas con estudiantes de idioma de nivel pre-intermedio para la comprensión de lectura y reconocimiento de vocabulario

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of using comic books with a group of pre-intermediate language students for reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition. For this research, 12 volunteer students from a public university participated in a six-session itinerary. A pre-test and post-test applied to the 12 participants where they solved reading comprehension and vocabulary exercises using a comic book. In four more sessions, a group of 6 participants worked on the exercises using a comic while the other 6 volunteers did the same using only the transcription of the comic's text. When the pilot study finished, those students were interviewed about their experience during the project and the effects on their performance. The results of the quantitative and qualitative data analysis showed that all the participants that used comics, regardless of proficiency and text level, performed better on reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition than the ones using the transcripts. The findings of the study confirm that comics can be a motivation for reluctant readers and an effective tool for literacy and language learning. The results of the study are discussed along with the existing literature on the use of visuals for developing reading skills. Implications for language teachers and some suggestions for further research are also provided.

Keywords: using comic books, reading comprehension, vocabulary recognition, language learning

Resumen

El propósito de este estudio es explorar los efectos de usar historietas con un grupo de estudiantes de idiomas de nivel pre-intermedio para la comprensión de lectura y reconocimiento de vocabulario. Para esta investigación, 12 estudiantes voluntarios de una universidad pública participaron en un itinerario de seis sesiones. Una prueba previa y una prueba posterior fueron aplicadas a los 12 participantes donde resolvieron ejercicios de comprensión de lectura y vocabulario usando historietas. En cuatro de las seis sesiones, un grupo de 6 participantes trabajó en dichos ejercicios usando historietas mientras que los otros 6 voluntarios usaron solamente la transcripción del texto de la historieta. Cuando el estudio piloto concluyó, los estudiantes fueron entrevistados acerca de su experiencia durante el proyecto y sobre los efectos en su desempeño. Los resultados del análisis de la información cuantitativa y cualitativa mostraron que todos los participantes que usaron historietas, independientemente de su capacidad en el idioma y de la dificultad del texto, se desempeñaron mejor en comprensión de lectura y reconocimiento de vocabulario que aquellos que usaron las transcripciones. Los hallazgos del estudio confirman que las historietas pueden motivar lectores reacios y que son una herramienta efectiva para la instrucción y el aprendizaje del idioma. Los resultados del estudio son discutidos junto con la literatura existente acerca del uso de elementos visuales para las destrezas de lectura. Se proveen, además, algunas implicaciones para profesores de idiomas y algunas sugerencias para futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave: uso de historietas, comprensión de lectura, reconocimiento de vocabulario, aprendizaje del idioma

Introduction

The last hundred years were characterized by their technological advances and the human production regarding art and literature. About this last aspect, one captivating and innovative literary form appeared in the first half of the 20th century. According to Gabilliet and Nguyen (2013), at the end of the 1930s nothing seemed to foreshadow the coming of comic book magazines; however, between 1936 and 1939, the comic magazine became an established product of American popular publishing. These authors account three factors as responsible for this transformation: an increase in the number of themed magazines, a simultaneous increase in the number of publishers, and, crucially, the appearance of Superman, the first superhero. Since that day, comic books dealing with the adventures of superpower beings and masked vigilantes have been attracting young readers. It is a multi-millionaire industry that has expanded to graphic novels, video games, movie franchises, and merchandise products. Comic books' stories have become a great way of entertainment for children, adolescents, and young people, as well as a source to learn about history, literature, and language.

Despite all the benefits reading brings, as an educator, I still find it difficult to grab a book, sit down, and read. Nevertheless, going through the pages of a comic book has always been a delightful experience for me. Then, I wonder if I could help my students to enrich their L2 performance by putting them to read comic books as well. The answer came a few days ago when I started a new English group at my job. The nature of the course is integrated, which means the four skills, namely speaking, writing, listening, and reading, have to be taught. However, after a short survey about their reading habits, I found out most of them would also have problems when facing a book. Nonetheless, one of the questions from that survey revealed an unexpected outcome. When I asked those who read less than an hour a week or that never read if they would embark on reading a comic book, all of them agreed. Even the assiduous readers became thrilled with the idea.

In the field of teaching, the implementation of innovative materials has always been a great help. I decided to develop this research to explore the relationship between comic books and L2 proficiency level to find techniques to help students improve their performance.

The idea of using comic books as an educational tool is not new. There has been a huge argument between those who dislike them and those who believe they are useful for the students' learning process. The latter assures that there are many obstacles when trying to implement them in class. It requires a deep analysis and creativity for doing it. There are many cases in which this objective has been successfully accomplished. In this regard, Tatalovic (2009) claims that "Super-hero comics have also inspired teachers to use examples from the comics to teach science, The Science of Superheroes and The Physics of Superheroes being two excellent books about the science behind the superpowers and how to use those in teaching students about science."

Another defender of the use of comic books in the teaching process is Patrick McCoy. In his paper "Using Comics in the Classroom," he states that "comics can be used in a variety of ways as motivating input to capture student interest" (McCoy, 2010). Even though many remain reluctant to or skeptical about the implementation of this type of material in the classroom, the truth is that this might be the only way to capture the student interest and creating motivation for better and meaningful L2 performance. We have to consider making use of them because they can fulfill the students' needs. In general, the love of comic books can be an inflection point to engage them into reading, and, at the same time, try something new in the language classroom.

As a professor researcher, I am a first-hand witness of the teachers' struggle with the task of engaging students with the habit of reading books due to children and young people's access to technological gadgets such as tablets and smartphones. In this process, many different types of texts have been used in the classroom with the purpose of teaching reading comprehension skills and wide the vocabulary range of the pupils.

Nevertheless, times have changed a lot and stick to regular books to teach English is not enough. Like it or not, comic books came to stay. Not only that, we are in a juncture in which comics have gained popularity because of all the blockbusters about superheroes that companies such DC Comics and Marvel Studios and have been releasing during the last seventeen years. Therefore, I consider that using this tool in class will be useful to motivate and help them in their English learning process with an innovative and enjoyable method.

My purpose with this study is to explore the effects of using comic books with a group of pre-intermediate language students regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition. The study looks for a reasonable explanation on how these skills may be enhanced by the contents of the comic books and the motivation hidden in the process of being part of a ludic activity that requires basic reading, vocabulary, and analytical skills.

As a result, the question that this study tries to answer is which are the effects of using comic books with a group of pre-intermediate language students regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition?

Other questions to be answered with this research are what is the importance that college students give to reading as a technique to learn English and what are the students' initial reactions towards the idea of using comics in the language classroom instead of regular textbooks? Which is the measurable outcome of a group of students regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition when they are engaged in reading comics in comparison with using only the transcription of the text from the comics? And what is the perception of the students regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition after they were engaged in reading comics in comparison with using only the transcription of the text from the comics?

Literature Review

With the topic of this research being the effects of comic books on public university students' reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition, exhaustive literature review has been made in order to provide context for the present study, overview works related to the investigated problem and identify gaps in how this subject has been researched to date. The following conceptual categories, along with their authors, stand for the most pertinent existing literature review.

The affective filter

Krashen's (2003) theories regarding dynamics and optimal conditions for second language development are deep-rooted in modern approaches to ESL teaching. The most important ideas are those of input hypothesis and affective filter hypothesis. The input hypothesis suggests that second language is acquired through comprehensible input or messages when involved in activities using language for communication. This theory suggests that it is not the form of the message from which learners learn, but rather the message itself. The affective filter hypothesis suggests that emotions can have an impact on second language learning. That is students who are self-confident and highly motivated tend to make more progress in second language learning than those who are not. In addition, a student's level of anxiety (affective filter) is crucial in the amount and speed of second language development. Comics can provide input and positive affect. There are many visual clues which help increase the amount of comprehensible input and can boost comprehension. This increased comprehension keeps the affective filter low. The affective filter might also be low due to the enjoyment of comics by students.

Several authors (Hatch, 1992; McGroarty, 1993; Johnson, 1995; Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000) emphasize the importance of interaction in language. There are many ways students can collaborate using comics as materials for interaction in pairs or small groups. Many such activities will require students to exchange ideas and opinions, edit each other's work or collaborate in teams for original comics' production. When students interact with each other or the teacher they are using language for real communication.

Brain-based teaching is concerned with using practices that can increase student learning. These activities include hands-on, manipulative-based activities, simulations, role-plays, projects, and small group work. The emphasis is on more student-to-student interaction, which creates greater opportunities to use and develop language. Comics use an emphasis on engaging content and greater use of visual materials. Relevant and engaging materials, like comics, create a strong emotional buy-in and students become more engaged and learning accelerates. Added visuals are extremely useful with beginning to early intermediate second language learners who are largely visual learners at these stages. Pictures can make oral and written text more concrete and understandable. Visuals can also increase the number of concepts learned and the length of time those concepts are remembered.

Another theoretical framework for using comics in the classroom borrows from progressive literacy: engagement through authentic literature, using language for real communication, and a focus on content over form. This theory suggests that authentic materials, books and stories that are whole rather than excerpted use natural language and are meaningful, are much more likely to engage students (Smith, 1997, 2003).

Visual and multimodal literacy

Comics can also help students develop visual and multimodal literacy. Visual literacy is defined as the "ability to decode, use, and create visual forms of expression" (Elsner and Viebrock, 2013), while multimodal literacy "denotes the ability to obtain, systematize, expand and link information from different symbolic systems" (Elsner and Viebrock, 2013). Elsner (2013) mentions that, "in graphic novels, each panel has its own story to tell. The complete and comprehensive meaning, however, is only revealed in the overall interplay of all panels." Readers need to learn how to decode and interpret the individual panels, the words and images that they contain, and how to relate the panels to each other.

According to Elsner (2013) graphic novels can develop functional literacy, "the ability to learn languages and use

them adequately in different contexts" (Elsner and Viebrock) just as well, if not better, than traditional books. Elsner argues that the quality and lexical density of the vocabulary in comics are higher than in other books at the same level. She also argues that the combination of images and text is especially helpful for weak readers, and that young readers might be more motivated to read multimodal texts.

Many people do not want to use comics in their literacy teaching because they believe that the images limit the students' own ability to visualize the story. Elsner (2013) and others (e.g. Cary, 2004) disagree. Researchers seem to agree that comics do not interfere with visualization or creativity (Elsner, 2013; Wolk, 2007). Most writers and illustrators do not create overly detailed panels. Instead, they work with visual and/or textual clues and symbols to indicate setting, mood, motion, time, and so on. From these clues' readers must actively participate in making meaning out of these clues. McCloud (1993) calls this "closure": "the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole." The readers' understanding of the medium, their background knowledge and their imagination will help them determine what happens in the story based upon the clues given.

Thus, it seems as if the key to understanding what comics can do lies in understanding the medium itself. Elsner (2013) concludes her chapter by advising educators to "start with reading and analyzing graphic novels themselves, they will soon recognize the very potential of this fascinating piece of literature, not only but especially in terms of their benefits for literacies development in the EFL classroom."

The importance of understanding the comics' medium has been studied by Heidi Hammond. Hammond (2012) observed that the circulation of superhero comics and manga, at the library where she worked, was increasing as they brought in more comics to their collection. This made her wonder how students would respond to more serious art graphic novels. Therefore, she set out to determine "whether students' knowledge of comic conventions involving multimodal literacy skills would affect their responses to a graphic novel" (Hammond, 2012). The participants in her study consisted of "23 senior Political Science students" (Hammond, 2012). First, they had to read the chosen graphic novel, American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang, and after that write down responses on three different occasions. Thereafter, they had recorded book discussions, which were followed by classroom lessons about the history of comics and comic conventions. After that they had to read the graphic novel once again and write down new responses. Finally, some students participated in a group interview, while other created their own comics.

Motivation to read

Many researchers agree that comics have the ability to help struggling or reluctant readers, as well as engage advanced and assiduous learners.

One idea as to why comics are motivating to read is that they are first and foremost an entertainment medium – they are supposed to be engaging to read – otherwise people would probably not buy them. Cary (2004) calls this the "fun factor" and he argues with a starting point in Krashen's input hypothesis that if students are engaged in their reading, they are more likely to learn from it as well.

Norton (2003) came to a similar conclusion in her research, namely, that one of the driving forces behind children's motivation to read Archie comics is that they are fun to read. In her study, Norton wanted to find out why students read Archie comics, and to see if these findings could possibly assist literacy teaching in schools. She interviewed 34 students between the ages of nine and twelve in an elementary school in Canada. All of the interviewed students were readers of Archie comics. She had also conducted interviews with teacher students, which she used to contrast the views of teachers and students regarding Archie comics.

The majority of students in Norton study answered that humor was a part of why they were reading Archie. Norton discusses several aspects as to why the students found Archie comics fun. One aspect was that they "found the characters interesting, engaging, and humorous." Another aspect was the fact that they felt a sense of ownership over the reading - they felt that they were in control of the reading. A third aspect was the visual appeal of comics. Some students commented that they liked to look at the pictures while others, mostly those with other L1s than English, also argued that the pictures helped them understand the text.

Unsurprisingly, the teacher students did not share the student's positive view of Archie comics. Instead they considered the characters to be "superficial and shallow" and most of them would not include Archie comics in their classroom (Norton, 2003). A couple of the teacher students who were slightly more positive towards using comics in their classroom, simply argued that reading comics was better than reading nothing at all. Norton (2003) concludes her text by arguing that in order for students to make meaning out of reading they need to feel like they are in control of that reading which, unfortunately, is not always achievable in schools.

A common opinion amongst those who negatively criticize comics is that people consider comics to be childish diversions. From this background Botzakis (2009) set out to explore what adult fans of comics get out of reading comic books and with the aim of understanding if this could possibly have any implications for educators.

Botzakis (2009) observed and interviewed twelve individuals of different ages and origins that had been reading comic books for quite some time throughout their lives. Four out of these twelve were used as examples to demonstrate Botzakis observations. The four areas that he could identify were: reading as study, reading as appreciation and ownership, reading as friendship, and reading as search for meaning. The first individual was going to use comics and other sources of pop culture to investigate people's view and knowledge of specific cultures, in this case Japanese and Chinese cultures. Comics, in this case, were used as a source in higher education and studying. The second individual enjoyed reading the stories that comics tell. He answered the question of what he got out of reading comics with the following: "Just happiness. Just joy. There is a collectible aspect to it that I like. I like picking up a book, reading it, enjoying the story, enjoying the artwork, and then having it, kind of like forever. Maybe" (Botzakis, 2009). For the third individual reading comics became an escape, and a way for him to tackle problems in his own life situation. He had read the same comics for a long time and the same characters still remained in those, which gave him something constant in his life. The fourth and final individual read comics in search for existential answers – to find meaning.

Another aspect that might motivate students to read comics is the range of topics available. Rapp (2012) states that "the sheer variety of topics and stories to be found in comic books suggests that readers, regardless of their demographic characteristics and personal interests, should find titles that interest them." These topics can not only be a source for interest and motivation but also learning.

Language Learning

With a starting-point in Stephen Krashen's input hypothesis and affective filter hypothesis, Stephen Cary promotes comics as a source for foreign language learning. The author claims that "comics provide both the needed input and positive affect. Abundant visual clues increase the amount of comprehensible input and consequently boost reading comprehension and L2 acquisition. Increased comprehension, in turn, keeps the affective filter low by eliminating or considerably reducing the anxiety and frustration many students feel…" (Cary, 2004)

Comics can function as a source for language learning as they provide readers with authentic language that native speakers would use in different contexts, and with the help of visual clues to understand. According to Cary (2004), "comics provide authentic language-learning opportunities for all students, regardless of a learner's second language proficiency level. The dramatically reduced text […] of many comics […], make them manageable and language-profitable for even beginning level readers". This might be true; however, according to James Milton (2008), comics usually have a lexically dense language, which might require more from the reader in terms of language proficiency. The language level and the amount of written language in comics will vary from comic to comic.

Milton (2008) has conducted studies regarding whether foreign language students can learn vocabulary from informal tasks such as reading a comic book, watching a movie, or listening to a song outside of school. His study regarding comic book reading consisted of one native English speaker learning Dutch. The learner read a Lucky Luke comic book for one hour, once a week, for eight weeks. A pre-test was administered to determine how many words of the text the student knew from the beginning.

During the eight weeks, the learner did weekly vocabulary tests. The tests, both the pre-test and the rest of them, consisted of 300 words from the text, which the student had to grade on a scale of 0-3 (0 meaning that the learner definitely did not know the meaning of the word and 3 meaning that the learner was definitely sure about the meaning). During the pre-test the learner gave 3's to 82 out of 300 words. At the last test, after eight weeks, the learner gave 3's to 223 words. According to Milton (2008), this means that on average the learner learned 30-36 words per every hour spent reading the comic book. He contrasts this with previous studies on incidental learning, which indicated that only a small limited number of items could be learned this way. He also mentions that comic books are more lexically dense than, for example, song lyric or movies: "it is clear that reading the comic book text, in particular, is a very lexically dense activity; an able learner might be expected to take rather more vocabulary from this compared with the DVD…" Milton also makes some concluding remarks regarding whether it is possible to learn vocabulary from informal out of school activities and point out that "learners were apparently very willing to spend time, and considerable amount of it, in foreign-language activities provided they enjoyed the activity." He also mentions the role and importance of repetition in language learning.

Milton (2008) acknowledges the fact that he only had one participating student in his study. The reliability and generalizability of the results could therefore be questioned since one student is most likely not representative of all students. However, it does give an indication of the fact that students might actually learn from informal learning activities such as reading a comic book outside of the classroom.

Comic book reading outside of the classroom has also been investigated by Kay Hammond and Katherine Danaher. Since "reading outside the classroom offers students greater exposure to language than is possible in class time alone…" (Hammond and Danaher, 2012), it is an important aspect of language learning. However, Hammond and Danaher reference a study which stated that adult refugees and migrants do not always have the time to engage with the types of texts that are commonly used in education even though they might want to. Thus, there was a need to find or create material that provided these learners with more efficient texts and readings.

As a result of this, Hammond and Danaher (2012) created their own comic books. These were used with elementary and upper-intermediate level adult refugee and migrant ESL learners. The focus with the comic books was for the students to learn vocabulary; therefore, the grammatical structures of the comic books were at a level that the students could understand. The researchers also made recordings of the stories so that the students could listen to them while reading.

The aim of the study was to investigate the perceived value of targeted comic book readers with ESL learners. The participants were adults from all over the world: Asia, Africa, The Middle-East, South America, and Eastern Europe. At first, they were given a questionnaire to respond to; however, these did not provide useful information for the researchers. Therefore, interviews were conducted instead. These interviews allowed the researchers to identify five areas of relevance as to the value of targeted comic book readers. According to Hammond and Danaher (2012) the students found the comic books valuable and enjoyable. The illustrations played a major part in making them enjoyable and understandable. They also mentioned that "the main aspects that appeared to be useful were the level of difficulty and the repeated target vocabulary that matched the vocabulary taught in the courses and which was relevant to their needs" (Hammond and Danaher, 2012).

From the interviews with the learners several aspects could be identified that the targeted comic books helped with. Except the already mentioned language aspects, the students also mentioned that reading these comic books improved their confidence, motivation, and they felt more relaxed toward learning English. They were also able to practice using different learning strategies such as re-listening and re-reading parts in order to understand it and also using dictionaries.

These students valued targeted comic book readers as educational material. However, it is also possible that they could have learned vocabulary just as well in other situations. Since this is a qualitative study about comic book readers' perceived value it is possible to question whether it really is the most effective method to learn vocabulary outside of classrooms. Still, the study indicates that targeted comic book readers can be used as learning material that students might enjoy working with.

Another difficulty with targeted comic book readers is that the researchers had to make their own comic books. Most educators are probably unable to create their own comics with specific and repeated vocabulary. However, Milton (2008) also pointed towards the importance of repetition, his student achieved this by reading the same comic book several times.

Methodology

There are currently three major research approaches in education (and in the social and behavioral sciences). They are quantitative research, qualitative research, and mixed research. Due to the complex nature of this research which requires inquiring students to reach a feasible explanation on how comic books are helpful for teaching, a combination of these two approaches is required.

Developing a mixed methods research design can be challenging. Researchers must choose the appropriate quantitative and qualitative approaches necessary to answer the research question and design their mixed methods project using those approaches. There are many ways to combine these approaches and there are no rigid formulas for designing a mixed methods project.

Once the researcher has considered the factors of the investigation project, he or she can use that information to choose an overall mixed methods design. Because of the nature of this investigation, the research design chosen was exploratory research.

Exploratory research, as the name implies, intends merely to explore the research questions and does not intend to offer final and conclusive solutions to existing problems. This type of research is usually conducted to study a problem that has not been clearly defined yet.

Exploratory studies are also referred to as formulative research studies. The primary objective or purpose of exploratory research design is that of formulating a problem for more precise investigation or of developing the working hypothesis from an operational perspective. The focus in these research projects is on the discovery of ideas and insights. Conducted in order to determine the nature of the problem, exploratory research is not intended to provide conclusive evidence, but helps us to have a better understanding of the problem. When conducting exploratory research, the researcher ought to be willing to change his/her direction as a result of revelation of new data and new insights (Saunders, 2012).

Exploratory research design does not aim to provide the final and conclusive answers to the research questions, but merely explores the research topic with varying levels of depth. It has been noted that "exploratory research is the initial research, which forms the basis of more conclusive research. It can even help in determining the research design, sampling methodology and data collection method" (Singh, 2007). Exploratory research "tends to tackle new problems on which little or no previous research has been done" (Brown, 2006). Unstructured interviews are the most popular primary data collection method with exploratory studies.

Exploratory research presents four different categories: experience surveys, secondary data analysis, case studies, and pilot studies. The latter is the one to be used in this research.

A pilot study is a "pre-study" of a fuller study. It can be thought as a miniature version of the research project and be limited by using fewer subjects than the ones planned to include in the full study. The pilot study can also be limited because the research scope is smaller in some other way. For example, the range of types of subject may be more limited or the procedures may be more limited. A pilot study can help the researcher work out some of the procedural bugs even though it is not likely to add anything new or important to the main study.

Context of the Study

The venue where this study took place is in Alajuela downtown and it was a community college for 14 years. It has gone through a transition process since it was declared public university in 2010. Some of the career programs were changed along with its pedagogical framework.

However, there are some characteristics from the community college that remain. First, the nature of its popu-lation has not changed. More than 60% of the students come from rural areas of Alajuela. The most common places of origin are Atenas, Grecia, Sabanilla, Poás, Naranjo, and Turrúcares.

Second, the most important motivation for most learners the career of English as a Foreign Language is that they want to improve their proficiency level in order to apply for a promotion in their jobs. This means that most of the students from this university work on a daily basis. The majority of this population has a day-shift schedule. Therefore, they take the night-shift classes.

This lack of time results, according to what they express in class, in reading reluctance. The main reason for not having developed reading habits is their reduced spare time because of time constraints.

Participants

Regarding this study, the survey to collect preliminary data for was carried out on a group of 24 students that were part of the course Integrated English II.

Two months later, a sample group of 12 students in a range of 19 to 43 years old from the same university participated in the development of this project.

Initially, the idea was to apply the pilot study in the form of a six-session itinerary with the whole group of students from the course Integrated English III. Nevertheless, due to ethical and logistic reasons, the pilot study was conducted out of class schedule and with volunteers only.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected by means of the administration of a survey, an itinerary of activities, and an interview.

Firstly, to justify this study, a survey was conducted among the students of a course called Integrated English II in a public university in Alajuela. Such survey, consisting of 10 close-ended questions, was applied to 18 students from the course with the aim of exploring their reading habits and attitude towards the use of comics as tools to learn English.

Secondly, an itinerary, defined by the Oxford dictionary, as "a planned route or journey; a travel document recording a route or journey" was applied to the participants. The six-session itinerary was built and carried out with the sample population mentioned in the previous section. The initial survey traced the route to be undertaken during the journey of six weeks into the use of comic books as a reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition

tool. A group of 12 volunteers participating in the itinerary worked on a series of exercises after reading a comic book or the transcript with its content (See illustrations 1, 2 and 3).

Illustration 1. Arrangement of the classroom for the six sessions of the itinerary. Twelve laptops were distributed into groups of three and the software to read the comics was installed and ready to be used. **Source:** Alonso Salazar, Costa Rica, 2017 (Personal collection).
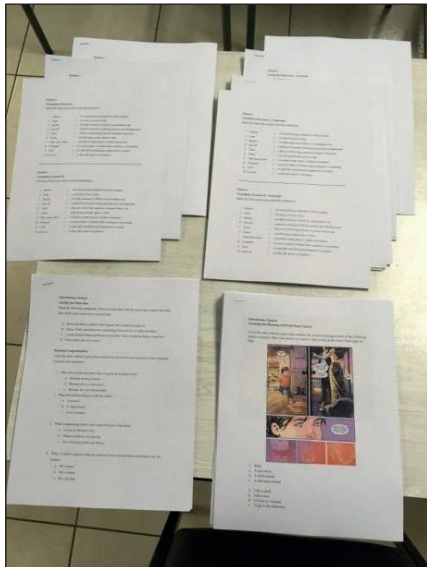

Illustration 2. Sets of copies with the reading comprehension and vocabulary exercises to be solved by the participants after they read either the comics or the transcripts of the comics. **Source:** Alonso Salazar, Costa Rica, 2017 (Personal collection)

The first exercise of the itinerary consisted of 10 words and their corresponding 10 definitions, both arranged in two columns to be matched. The participants were given a worksheet with two identical matching exercises labeled A and B. They had to work on Matching A before

Illustration 3. Participants using the laptops and the software to read comic books during the introductory session or pre-test of the itinerary. **Source:** Alonso Salazar, Costa Rica, 2017 (Personal collection)

they read either the comic or the transcript. After reading the text and working on the other exercises of the session, they had to do Matching B. This time, they had the chance to take a look at the answers they gave on Matching A and make all the necessary corrections.

The second exercise of the itinerary consisted of one close-ended question about the main idea of the comic issue and 4 options to choose from. The participants were given 5 minutes to skim either the comic or the text with the transcription of the comic with the aim of getting the main idea.

The third exercise of the itinerary consisted of 10 close-ended questions about details of the comic issue and 3 options to choose from. The participants were given 10 minutes to scan either the comic or the text with the transcription of the comic with the aim of finding the answers to those questions.

The fourth and last exercise of the itinerary consisted of 8 words taken from the comic issue and 3 options with synonyms or definitions to choose from. The participants were given 5 minutes to scan either the comic or the text with the transcription of the comic with the aim of guessing the meaning of words from context.

For the purpose of this study, the participants answered the questions of an interview through the online tool Google Forms. An online interview consisting of 11 close and open-ended questions was applied to the 12 volunteers who participated in the itinerary with the aim of collecting their perceptions in regards to reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition after they were enga-

ged in reading comics in comparison with using only the transcription of the text from the comics.

Findings

Analysis of quantitative results

This section is devoted to the analysis of the results derived from the two quantitative instruments applied to the participants: the survey and the itinerary.

The survey aimed to determine what the importance that college students gave to reading as a technique for learning English was and what their initial reactions towards the idea of using comics in the language classroom instead of regular textbooks were. The results from such instrument revealed that reading is not even considered by the participants as a technique to learn English. The techniques that they mostly use are watching movies and series, watching videos and talking with native speakers. Contradictorily, almost all of them consider reading a very important tool in order to learn that foreign language. At the same time, the majority admitted that their frequency of reading in English is null (See figure 1).
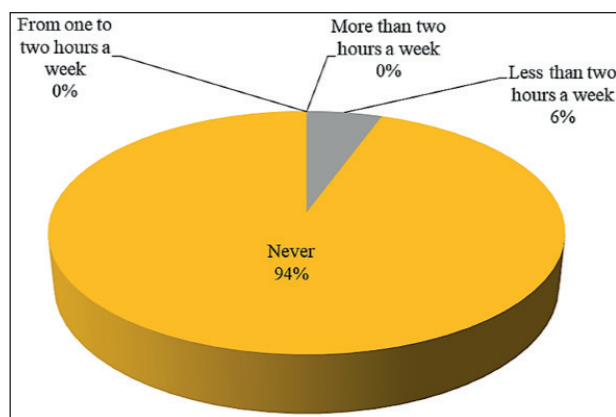

Figure 1. Data about the of weekly hours spent reading in English by the surveyed students. **Source:** Own construction.

The only participant that assured to read materials in English claimed to read magazines or other types of written texts. Among the reasons given by the participants for not reading in English, the most significant were lack of time followed by lack of interest and finally lack to attractive topics. For the purpose of this research, the fact that most of them were willing to read comics in an English course was crucial. Moreover, the majority claimed to consider comics very useful to learn that foreign language. Finally, the survey revealed that the types of comics they were the most interested in were the ones about superheroes, mystery and comedy.

The information collected from the survey was crucial for the design and application of the itinerary. This instrument aimed to demonstrate the measurable outcome of a group of students regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary learning while they were engaged in reading comics in comparison with using only the transcription of the text from the comics. Regarding this six-session instrument, the findings show that the results of the pretest matching exercises of both groups (control and experimental) were always very close to each other, which might mean that both groups had similar knowledge about the target words before they were exposed to the treatment. However, the results in scores in both groups after passing the treatment were significant. Evidently, what facilitated the improvement in vocabulary knowledge in the post-test matching exercises was related to using the comic and associating words with images in context, which can have more impact on acquiring incidental vocabulary in relation to only reading the transcript of the comic. The differences in the resulting scores in both groups from the getting the main idea exercise, the reading comprehension questions exercise, and the guessing the meaning of words from context exercise were equally compelling. The participants from the experimental group always obtained the highest amount of correct answers and finished solving the exercises before the participants from the control group (See tables 1, 2 and 3).

Table 1. Results obtained in Session 3. During this session, half of the participants (Group 1) worked with comics and the other half (Group 2) with the transcription of the text from the comics. The average of correct answers for Group 1 was 9.3 on a scale of 10. On the other hand, the average of correct answers for Group 2 was 3.1 on a scale of 10.

Type of Participant	Average of correct answers	Average of incorrect answers
Participants using comics	9.3	0.6
Participants using transcripts	3.1	6.8

Table 2. Results obtained in Session 3. During this session, half of the participants (Group 1) worked with comics and the other half (Group 2) with the transcription of the text from the comics. The number of participants from Group 1 who answered this question correctly was 6 out of 6. On the other hand, the number of participants from Group 2 who answered this question correctly was 1 out of 6.

Type of Participant	Number of participants who answered correctly	Number of participants who answered correctly	Total of participants
Participants using comics	6	0	6
Participants using transcripts	1	5	6

Table 3. Results obtained in Session 3. During this session, half of the participants (Group 1) worked with comics and the other half (Group 2) with the transcription of the text from the comics. The average of correct answers for Group 1 was 7.5 on a scale of 8. On the other hand, the average of correct answers for Group 2 was 2.8 on a scale of 8.

Type of Participant	Average of correct answers	Average of incorrect answers
Participants using comics	7.5	0.5
Participants using transcripts	2.8	5.1

These results confirm Cary's (2004) statement that comics provide both the needed input and positive affect. The author's thesis that the abundant visual clues increase the amount of comprehensible input and consequently boost reading comprehension and L2 acquisition is demonstrated in the scores of the experimental group. In their case, comics functioned as a source for language learning as they provided participants with authentic language that they would use in different contexts, and with the help of visual clues to understand. According to Cary (2004), "comics provide authentic language-learning opportunities for all students, regardless of a learner's second language proficiency level. The dramatically reduced text […] of many comics […], make them manageable and language-profitable for even beginning level readers".

Moreover, these scores from the experimental group confirm the findings of Lang's (2009) study, who claims that comics have a very consequential role in the English classroom. Lang (2009) describes the problem of language teachers as constantly searching for new innovative and motivating authentic material to enhance learning in the formal classroom. A textbook is made of material that has been altered and simplified for the learner. He argues that by using comic books the learners can learn different kinds of topics in the classroom. Like this current study, Liu (2004), in his article, talked about the role of comics on ESL learners' reading comprehension. He has two different students' levels of proficiency (low & high) with and without a comic, like in the itinerary.

The outcome of the present study is compatible with what Bowkett (2011) explained in his book about learners' interest in pictures, comics and graphic novels as a way of developing their creative writing abilities and reading skills. The book's strategy is the use of comic art images as a visual aid to help learners generate, organize and refine their ideas when talking about text. He agrees in reading comic books learners are engaging with highly complex and structured narrative forms.

The high scores of the participants using comics in the vocabulary exercises of the itinerary meet with Khoiri-

yah's (2011) study where he uses comic stories to improve the students' level of vocabulary. He suggests the students identify and study words from the context on the comic reading just like the participants did in the exercises about getting the meaning of words from context. With the course of the sessions, the participants using the comics finished their vocabulary matching and getting the meaning exercises faster than the ones using only the transcript, also obtaining the best scores. This means that comics do have an impact on incidental vocabulary learning. Moreover, the fact that the target words were contextualized made it easier for participants to elicit the meanings of the words.

Finally, the scores of the participants using comics in the getting the main idea and reading comprehension exercises matched Merc's (2013) outcome in his study about the effects of comic strips on reading comprehension of Turkish EFL learners. The results of the itinerary as well as Merc's research show that all students with a comic book effect, regardless of proficiency and text level, performed better than the ones without the comics.

Analysis of qualitative results

This section is devoted to the analysis of the results derived from the qualitative instrument applied to the participants: the interview.

This instrument aimed to answer what was the perception of the students regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition after they were engaged in reading comics in comparison with using only the transcription of the text from the comics.

Out of the fifteen questions made, there were three that displayed the most significant results. The first one dealt with the main difference found between using comics and regular texts. Most of the interviewees answered that comic books were visually helpful, easy to follow and more attractive than a book. These responses support Elsner and Viebrock's (2013) claim that comics can help students develop visual and multimodal literacy. The authors' thesis that graphic novels, and in this case comic books, can develop the ability to learn languages and use them adequately in different contexts turned out to be true. It was demonstrated by means of the results from the itinerary and the answers from this interview that the combination of images and text was especially helpful for weak readers and that young readers can be more motivated to read this kinds of texts.

The second question that provided important information was related to this last topic: motivation. The interviewees were asked if their desire for reading had

changed as a result of their participation in the project. Surprisingly, a hundred percent of them responded affirmatively to such question (See table 4). This outcome contrasts with what they said in the survey their experience with comics. Before the experiment, the participants were reluctant readers and none of them considered reading as an effective way to learn English. Nevertheless, their contact with this innovative learning resource changed their minds. These results support Cary's (2004) idea of the fun factor contained in comics. This author argues that if students are engaged in their reading, they are more likely to learn from it as well. The participants felt that they had a sense of ownership over the reading; in other words, they felt that they were in control of the reading.

Table 4. Answers of the participants to the question: Has your reading desire improved after your experience in the project?

"Now I want to read. In the past I didn't like it. Reading is a hard skill, but now I have the desire of doing it." *Participant 2* "I understood that reading helps you learn English and vocabulary." *Participant 5* "I didn't like reading because I thought it was boring and difficult. But now I enjoy it a lot." *Participant 7* "I thought reading wasn't important. But now I know it is. So I read more now." *Participant 10* "Reading comics was very interesting. Now I want to try other kinds of books." *Participant 11* "I have been reading more since the project." *Participant 12*

The last two questions from the interview that displayed substantial outcomes are strongly related. One asked the participants if they overcame any former reading limitation during this project. The other one inquired them about characteristic that made comics a good resource to learn English.

In the first one, the answers of the participants were that abilities like reading speed, understanding a text and getting the main idea had improved (See table 5).

Table 5. Answers of the participants to the question: Did you overcome any former reading limitation during this project? Which one?

"I improved my reading speed." *Participant 1* "I'm better at concentrating when I read now." *Participant 3* "I understand more of what I read now." *Participant 4* "I pay more attention to what I read now. I don't get distracted so easily." *Participant 6* "Getting the main idea and concentrating on the text is easier for me now." *Participant 8*

In the second one, most of their responses were related to improvement of vocabulary and grammatical structures. In this sense, comic books proved themselves to be suitable tools for learning a language. These results support Cary's (2004) claim that comics are a source for foreign language learning. According to this author, comics provide both the needed input and positive affect. Abundant visual clues increase the amount of comprehensible input and consequently boost reading comprehension and L2 acquisition. Increased comprehension, in turn, keeps the affective filter low by eliminating or considerably reducing anxiety and frustration many students feel (Cary, 2004). The outcomes from these two questions also corroborate Milton's (2008) idea that comics usually have a lexically dense language which benefits directly the reader in terms of language acquisition. He sustains that reading a comic book is a very dense activity and that a learner might take more vocabulary from this compared to other materials such as song lyrics or movies.

Overall, the perception of the participants regarding reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition with comic books was very positive. In the interview they claimed that they absolutely recommended using comic books for those who desire to improve their English proficiency. The participants pointed out that reading comics was an effective way of learning English, easy to use, attractive, and useful for improving reading and oral skills and to learn vocabulary.

Conclusions

Comic books can be certainly used to motivate learners and capture their interest. In this study, there is significant theoretical support for using this kind of tool with language learners. The use of comics can significantly decrease the affective filter and motivate students to learn and read. Furthermore, comic books stand for a great opportunity to interact with the English language. They can be used in different moments during the language class. For instance, they can work as warm-up or follow-up activities, or they can even be the main focus of a course or unit.

Some reading skills limitations can be overcome by regular and gradual reading of comic books and graphic novels. Nevertheless, there must be a careful selection of the chose text to make sure it is still understandable and not demotivating to learners. In other words, the chosen comics must be suitable to the students' proficiency level.

It is undeniable that using comics and graphic novels can lead to the development of visual literacy. This means

that learners can be trained to exploit images, visuals and fonts to be more sensitive to reading the textual context. As a result, their reading skills and techniques can improve, and this might lead them to learning autonomy. Also, the mastering of these reading strategies leads to more effective learning and supports positive motivation.

Several authors in the field of language learning have accredited comics and graphic novels to have important benefits. Comics not only attract reluctant readers' attention but also are used to teach advanced vocabulary and themes. This study demonstrated that the bright colors and popular characters that comics contain are positively more engaging than traditional texts. Besides that, the topics displayed by comics and their vocabulary level are not sacrificed for the sake of entertainment. These texts can be challenging for language learners and a great tool for language acquisition.

Although comics have been around for years, it is now that facilitators are taking them seriously in educational settings. Research has proven comics to be an option for struggling and reluctant readers. Comics and graphic novels can lead students into exploring others texts such as magazines and books. This study found that many language learners begin with comics and move on to harder reading. Also, incorporating text and visuals causes readers to examine the relationship between the two and encourages deep and critical thinking.

Implications for Teaching

The effectiveness of visual aids in education has been well established through extensively published research. Evidence supports the argument that student learning is affected positively when text and illustrations are presented together. A form of visual communication that combines both, visuals and text, is comics. Comic books combine content through the written word and artwork to create a narrative that appeals to readers not only artistically, but also informatively.

As reviewed in the earlier sections of this research, comic books have been considered as a contemporary and engaging form of literature that deals with topics ranging from business ethics, social issues, environmental issues, to human healthcare experiences, beliefs, and concerns. Although this is true, there is still resistance to the use of this genre as a pedagogical tool in some circles at the university level. Educators are on both sides of the debate. Most of the resistance is because the combination of text and images is considered fine for children's books, but not for college education where students are expected to read "real books."

Regarding this issue, the mature subjects that some comic books cover show their use as complementary readings in academic settings. The potential of this unexploited resource can definitely turn into an effective method in language courses. The use of colors and the interaction of text and visuals in comics and graphic novels make students not only find a personal connection with the characters, but also identify with the characters in their own unique ways.

Comic books stand for a fresh way of presenting information which encourages students to read, understand, and reflect upon them. Students recognize the basic form or comics, but including them in a course can catch students unexpectedly in a positive way, and this can lead students to become more energized and engaged in the given work.

Many of today's students were raised in an environment filled with interactive visual media. Creative advertising campaigns, smartphones, and video games are filled with images. Due to this abundant visual media, language students display less interest with unillustrated, text-heavy books, and expect to find similar interactive visual characteristics in their educational materials. The strong point of comic books is the visual representation of the story and the information. The format of comic books, with abundant visuals and limited text, creates a harmony between the students experience in their everyday lives and their learning experiences, thus motivating them to learn more about the information presented.

This study found that comics use noticeably facilitated the reading comprehension of the experimental group participants. Once again, it was proven that students should be provided texts with a visual material (comics in particular) in their reading comprehension classrooms. Teachers might even create their own comics together with their students, and present them in the classroom for developing high-level thinking.

Furthermore, the effect of comics on reading comprehension largely depends on the quality of the repetition effect. When readers are able to integrate the information from the text and from the illustration, these two work, as if the information was presented twice, thus enhancing performance.

Another implication based on the findings of this study is for the material developers. The material developers for reading comprehension must be very careful at selecting their reading comprehension texts and the illustrations they provide with those texts. In the same manner, classroom teachers should use comics or other visual aids

very carefully considering the proficiency level of their students.

This study should be replicated in different contexts with different proficiency levels, and age groups. Moreover, future research can deal with different text types and different visual materials than the comics such as pictures, maps or photographs. Therefore, the effect of visuals in reading comprehension can be rather clear for language teachers and materials developers.

Finally, the research method used in this study is recognition tasks such as matching and multiple-choice items. Future studies could also include other research tools such a recall protocol which requires language production for comprehending a text.

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