

The Use of Graphic Novels as a Pedagogical Tool in Multilingual Classrooms: Expectations and Challenges

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Abstract

Graphic novels offer an accessible means of exploring complex concepts, experiences, and stories, making them an attractive avenue for educators worldwide. Given the increasing importance of pedagogical approaches that leverage multimodal representations in the process of acquiring one or more languages commonly observed in multilingual classrooms, it is essential to consider the potential benefits and drawbacks of integrating graphic novels into language learning environments, particularly in multilingual settings. This paper aims to explore the expectations of educators, and students, as well as the challenges related to the use of graphic novels as a pedagogical tool in multilingual classrooms. Graphic novels simplify difficult ideas by combining visual and text components, so improving understanding and involvement. Through contextualized language input and encouragement of reading interest, they help language development and literacy. Through many stories, graphic novels also help to promote cultural understanding and empathy. Their application suffers, too, in terms of curriculum alignment, resource constraints, and handling of various learning needs.

Keywords: Graphic novels, multilingual education, visual learning, classroom, pedagogy, literacy

Introduction

In today's globalized world, classrooms are increasingly diverse, with students coming from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Multilingual education aims to accommodate this diversity by promoting language proficiency in multiple languages, enhancing cognitive abilities, and fostering cultural awareness. Effective pedagogical tools are essential in this context to support students' learning and development. These tools not only aid in language acquisition but also help bridge the gap between different languages and cultures, making education more inclusive and effective. Traditional pedagogical methods, while valuable, often fall short in addressing the unique needs of multilingual learners, necessitating the exploration of innovative and multimodal teaching aids. Immigrant and refugee student numbers have also increased in European countries, influencing school populations. The heterogeneity in classrooms is a result of multiple languages and cultures. This growing diversification of classrooms presents new challenges and opportunities for teachers. Many of them feel a gap between the realities in their classrooms and the monolingual education they receive. This situation forces them to face their students' linguistic diversity by trying to build on it, overcoming the language barrier that sometimes separates them from their students and their academic success. In many European countries, however, the educational response to these dramatic transformations has been slow and uncertain. For many young children, school can be a place where they feel like outsiders due to their language, culture, and experiences. It is important to create a classroom environment that values and supports their identities. Teacher education programmes should expose educators to linguistic and cultural diversity, providing them with tools to support multilingual students. Multilingual classrooms can be challenging, with discomfort and confusion among students and a lack of tolerance for different languages. Teachers often underestimate the diversity within their classrooms and focus on homogenization through the national language. This exclusionary process must be addressed to create a more inclusive learning environment for immigrant students.

In the context of India, classrooms that include multiple languages are extremely important because the country has a wide variety of languages and dialects. The Indian Constitution acknowledges 22 scheduled languages, and many areas have their own unique linguistic identities (Constitutional Provisions Relating to Eighth Schedule, n.d.). This diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for the education system. In India, being multilingual is not only a part of education but also a cultural and social aspect that should be embraced in classrooms.

Teachers often struggle to meet the diverse linguistic needs of students, many of whom speak a different language at home than the one used for instruction in schools. This challenge is made more difficult by the socio-economic differences that impact students' access to quality education.

The 2020 National Education Policy (NEP) has highlighted the significance of using the mother tongue in education, particularly in the early years, to improve understanding and learning achievements. It promotes the use of local languages as a teaching medium, aiming to make education more inclusive and available (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Nevertheless, challenges in implementing multilingual education, like insufficient teacher training, resource shortages, and societal preferences for English, continue to pose obstacles.

Education has experienced changes fuelled by technological developments and by the greater cultural diversity of students, especially in countries like Canada and India. Contemporary literature has evolved, and schools need to incorporate diverse cultural perspectives. It is not always easy to connect canonical works to the values of dialogue and diversity. It is important to explore alternative sources and use the potential for innovation in literature.

Multilingual classrooms present unique challenges and opportunities, requiring specialized pedagogical tools. Traditional tools like textbooks and lectures often fall short of engaging students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, necessitating the exploration of innovative strategies. The effectiveness of these techniques demonstrates a shift towards multi-sensory, active learning methods that incorporate images, stories, and engagement. This is where graphic novels prove to be an overlooked educational resource that merges pictures, text, and conversation, allowing difficult concepts to be easily understood by people from different language backgrounds. Graphic novels offer visual context, cultural relevance, engaging narratives, and multimodal learning support. They provide clear understanding, share different cultures, captivate students, and accommodate diverse learners.

In India and other countries, educators are exploring new methods to involve students who speak multiple languages, and graphic novels are an attractive option. This approach combines the best aspects of current teaching methods, transforming classrooms into inclusive environments where storytelling helps language and literacy thrive.

2. Literature Review

Various pedagogical tools are employed in multilingual classrooms to aid language development and content understanding. The expectation usually associated with employing these visual tools includes improved learning and assimilation of subject matter. According to Gaskins et al., (1993) the use of narrative images in particular and illustrations, in general, aid in “comprehension and make the text more interesting” (p. 264). This holds for the use of graphic novels in educational research. Studies have established that graphic novels have a multifaceted impact on learners. For instance, Parker (2017) demonstrated significant improvement in students’ literacy skills, particularly in reading engagement and comprehension, when using graphic novels in a study involving Grade 4 students in California.

Graphic novels are being increasingly recognized for their ability to engage learners through a variety of literacy practices. According to Rycroft (2014), these novels provide a diverse and rich learning experience that integrates traditional text with visual components, helping students to develop literacy skills. Rycroft also highlights that graphic novels encourage critical discussions, empowering students to actively participate in their meaning-making process, which is particularly beneficial for addressing sensitive topics such as social justice, gender, and cultural identities (Rycroft, 2014).

Hurwich (2021) explores graphic novels’ role in promoting critical analysis of conventional texts, especially in educational settings with diverse backgrounds and cultural beliefs. She found that using graphic novels helped adolescent girls challenge their preconceived notions about gender roles and gain a deeper understanding of the original stories.

McCann et al. (2007) find that graphic novels “suggest potential contributions to our pedagogy and a particularly powerful capacity to interest students in how they learn through thinking and composing in multiple media” (p. 45). The assumption, then, is that graphic novels are effective as cognitive tools in the multilingual classroom. However, El Refaie (2012) observes that when engaging with the language of graphic novels, readers are compelled to focus closely on nuanced meanings and connotations.

3. Benefits of Using Graphic Novels in Multilingual Classrooms

Using graphic novels in teaching multilingual classrooms has the potential to change traditional English language learning practices and bring about educational integration, as well as foster cultural understanding. However, the degree of cultural integration may depend on the alignment of the graphic novels' content with the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students (Duncan & Smith, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The viewing and analysis of the graphic novel genre can act as a first step in the encouragement of visual literacy, which is often one portion of the curriculum. It lays realistic (drawback against pornography) in expressing what foreigners will generally think about Malaysians as un-British. The University of Malaya Library website (<http://umplib.um.edu.my/index>) displays graphic novels, and short stories for entertainment presented in English, as a worthy read in itself, and invites members of other cultures to make a special effort to cater for the needs and convenience of multiracial readers.

Graphic novels are valuable in the Indian educational setting, especially due to diversity. They provide an inclusive approach to learning, bridging gaps between students from different backgrounds. Works like *Harappa Files*, *Kari*, and *Ramayana: Divine Loophole* offers unique perspectives on Indian society, culture, and mythology. *Bhimayana* addresses social issues like caste discrimination. Incorporating graphic novels that reflect Indian culture and languages makes students feel represented and enhances the educational value of graphic novels for multilingual learners in India.

Important developments in visual literacy, a perceptive set of interpretive skills for reading and comprehension of visual information and/or "documents" of various kinds, including text, can also inform educational graphic novel reading. J.B. Carter (2007) also agrees and says that "Graphic novels can serve as a bridge to more complex texts, helping students develop critical reading skills and visual literacy" (p.48). Graphic novels help visual literacies—especially visual narrative communication—by means of language-specific intertwines and extensive inter-cultural reading practices can be shared, exchanged, postulated, tested, and refined. Therefore, regardless of dictionary or teaching journal recommendation, investigating and interpreting graphic novel panels can introduce mutually recoverable visual literacy processes.

3.1. Inspired Participation

Establishing an immersive and welcoming educational setting is crucial for nurturing the development of students, especially in classrooms with diverse language backgrounds. Equipping students with the necessary tools and techniques that enable them to fully engage in their learning journey is of utmost importance. One method that supports this objective is positive discipline theory, which is formulated by Jane Nelsen (2006). Positive discipline theory underscores the importance of creating respectful and supportive environments for students, encouraging their active participation without resorting to punitive measures. This theory prioritizes the cultivation of a sense of belonging and significance through positive communication, mutual respect, and encouragement (Nelsen, 2006). Graphic novels support this method by offering an immersive, approachable format that encourages curiosity and involvement. Through the use of visual storytelling, graphic novels contribute to creating a welcoming and supportive classroom environment, motivating students to learn at their own speed without worrying about criticism or setbacks. In this way, they promote the essential principles of positive discipline.

In a multilingual classroom, where some students are accustomed to sitting through the tormenting, confusing dead air when the lesson moves into the content they struggle to navigate alone, graphic novels offer a means to make the experience less intimidating and more participatory (Boerman-Cornell et al., 2017). The classroom thus becomes a place where learning can be plodding or exciting—depending on the student’s pace—rather than an assessment-driven space where value judgments dominate if children lack galleries of superficially labelled mistakes to overcome, and all the discursive space appears to be waiting on their tentative interpretation.

3.2. Diversity and Cultural Referencing

Like all society’s knowledge and products, cultures are dynamic. Always the outcome of cultural interaction and fusion is a unique culture. This is why one cannot discuss national or regional cultures, or their differences/diversities, without discussing a multitude of cultures and traditions, mixed cultures at different levels, a variety of perspectives that embody, reflect, and respect many kinds of thought, and the struggle to survive. Analyzing several cultural expectations

with their representatives can help to show their variety. Our planet is shrinking, getting more vibrant, and bringing us closer to people from many cultures, languages, religions, and backgrounds as we can see. Amazingly, many symbolic and cultural codes form the foundation of societies. Graphic novels can also exhibit diversity and cultures from many angles. Everybody's graphic novel expectations and possibilities will enable them to investigate art, culture, and surroundings. From the multilingual classroom teacher and student development, we can "see" many perspectives before assessing art. As Duncan and Smith (2009) rightly reflected on it; "Graphic novels offer a unique medium for exploring cultural diversity, allowing readers to engage with stories that reflect a wide range of experiences and perspectives" (p. 67).

Graphic novels are now used in Western classrooms such as "The Savannah (Ga.) College of Art and Design offers one of the top education programs in graphic novels in the country, but far from the only one. The Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art in Dover, New Jersey, has been devoted exclusively to the study of the form since 1976" (Karp, 2011). It is proving very beneficial, particularly for migrant and refugee children needing rehabilitation and integration. This is also evident in the research of Ramzi Darwazeh (2016), who used the graphic novel *Palestine* by Sacco "to assist students in understanding the benefit of a graphic novel in aiding our understanding of migration" (p. 35). He observes that

...students examined how the Palestinian refugees arrived in Jordan and the nature of the support provided to them by the United Nations and the Jordanian government. *Palestine* extended the students' understanding of the plight of the Palestinians as Sacco vividly portrays the reality facing the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. ...Furthermore, the students compared the advantages and disadvantages of using a graphic novel, such as *Palestine*, with other texts, such as UN publications, in informing their understanding of the Palestinian migration. As a result of the first half of the unit, students were able to develop an understanding of how graphic novels can help them better understand the migration by examining how visuals and narratives can inform their understanding in a social studies context (p. 35).

Graphic novels are increasingly used to link readers to the text, generate liminality and identification, and support ethnic literature. All have graphic novel-like advantages. Multicultural graphic novels discovered

in multilingual classrooms can encourage another good change in the classroom since mainstream American culture is a “blend” of drafts from other civilizations. The cosmopolitanism of the main culture will enable us to welcome variations.

4. Expectations of Using Graphic Novels in Multilingual Classrooms

Teachers expect graphic novels to resuscitate multilingual classes because they value the multimodal representation that they enable to present. They also reckon that multilingual students would find it easier to translate verbal language due to the presence of pictures as a non-verbal element of the medium. Teachers believe that students will be very enthusiastic about reading graphic novels and that it will make them willingly focus on their linguistic deficiencies. Students also expect the nature of graphic novels to provide additional meaning and to help them more easily understand the text. Similarly to Block, it is expected that graphic novels will facilitate the understanding of advanced vocabulary and grammar. It is also expected that graphic novels will help multilingual subject teachers, especially those teaching content through the target language, to better understand various methods of second language teaching.

It is important to note that the above-mentioned expectations hark back to an earlier emphasis that Block places on graphic novels. Additionally, Stephen Cary (2004) also underlines that through graphic novels, students can acquire strategies for understanding second-language printed text. They learn to understand text strategically: they are introduced to choosing the right passages relevant to a particular main idea for designing a panel, understanding sequence, decoding character relations, and so on.

4.1. Empirical Studies and Their Learning Outcomes and Benefits

The use of graphic novels in teaching and learning practices has several benefits, including improving literacy levels and language skills. In multilingual settings, graphic novels can support the development of all languages used in teaching, as well as enhance students’ cognitive processes. Incorporating graphic novels into classrooms can enhance language skills, reading understanding, and cultural knowledge, as substantiated by empirical research.

For instance, the use of graphic novels in English as a Foreign Language

(EFL) education has proven to be effective for 10th-grade International Baccalaureate students. Öz and Efecioglu state that graphic novels have a significant impact on students' grasp of literary concepts, inference skills, and vocabulary development. However, the study also found that while graphic novels did not greatly improve students' ability to answer comprehension questions or analyse comparison-contrast relationships, the visual and narrative components of graphic novels do engage students' critical thinking and understanding of literary devices, making them valuable addition to EFL curricula. The authors suggest incorporating graphic novels into EFL syllabi to take advantage of these benefits and enhance overall learning outcomes (Öz & Efecioglu, 2015).

Similarly, Aldahash and Altalhab (2020) examined how graphic novels affect the reading comprehension of EFL learners. Their study focused on Saudi EFL learners and involved 66 intermediate school students. The findings showed that students who read graphic novels performed better on reading comprehension tests than those who read traditional narrative texts. Both students and teachers believed that graphic novels help improve reading skills, increase motivation, and build vocabulary. The study highlights the potential of graphic novels as valuable teaching tools in EFL classrooms and encourages their wider use to enhance language learning.

The firsthand research shows solid proof that incorporating graphic novels into multilingual classrooms has the expected educational advantages. This makes them a valuable resource for improving literacy skills and creating an inclusive learning atmosphere. It is also our estimation that the variety of the presentations in this section supports the idea that graphic novel studies, and their utilization in EFL teaching, engage with a range of skills, attitudes, contexts and literacies that go beyond the mere teaching of reading.

5. Challenges of Implementing Graphic Novels in Multilingual Education

The integration of graphic novels into educational settings is not without its age-old challenges. In the field of multilingual education, however, many of these challenges curiously intersect with those encountered when introducing graphic novels into pedagogy. Firstly, there are significant linguistic and cultural barriers. There are very few multilingual graphic novels available, and those that do exist are almost

exclusively in the most widely taught languages French, Spanish, and English. Funding is cited both as a challenge for authors and publishers and as a prohibitive factor for educators looking to diversify their pedagogy. Likewise, educators feel that they are in need of training and professional development to use graphic novels in general, but especially multilingual graphic novels. Any text or novel in a foreign language is associated with decreased rigour by both educators and students, leading to a deficit in motivation. In a multilingual context, this results in poor perceptual ability to engage with the visual narrative based on the language comprehension or decoding level, and no reader identification.

Finally, academics of graphic novels continue to argue that their claimed educational potential likely leans over into the prescriptive and is rarely ever as evidence based as it should be, concluding that the status and approach to graphic novels in education are not predicated on empirical research (Downey 2009). The application of graphic novels in education then occurs without a clear procedure. This constitutes a remaining challenge in graphic novel pedagogy. Without an empirical research base, the benefits that graphic novels in general and in a multilingual context might confer are largely anecdotal and speculative. There are significant complications in establishing a base for graphic novel pedagogy. For this reason, the following systematic review studies the existing empirical research base on the use of graphic novels in educational contexts.

One concern is the limited availability of multilingual graphic novels for use in classrooms. This scarcity poses challenges to the goal of implementing graphic novels in education to support multilingual education and inclusivity. While translated versions are available for popular graphic novels, they may not fully meet the needs for multilingual representation. The focus of our exploration is to understand how graphic novels valuable learning resources in various languages can be. Teacher training is crucial in understanding how to effectively use graphic novels, develop teaching materials and tasks, and enhance students' skills in creating their graphic novels.

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

In sum, these arguments indicate that graphic novels have the potential to positively shape learner>s experiences in the classroom and their learning of a target language. Hence, this paper suggest that graphic

novels have shown us valuable sides to discuss concerning relevant issues in multilingual education because they embody a multifaceted pedagogical reality oriented towards a better comprehension of it. Graphic novels, with their combination of text and visuals, have the ability to simplify intricate concepts and capture the attention of learners in a way that conventional materials cannot. This is particularly important in diverse linguistic environments like India, where students have varying language backgrounds and often speak different languages at home than the ones used for teaching. Notwithstanding the title of this article, the narration proposed and revised can be extended to a wide range of personal stories who managed to develop advanced skills in a foreign language by using books in general.

Based on discussions, I suggest three areas for further study: exploring how to adapt and implement research findings in classrooms, promoting research on the use of graphic novels in multilingual classrooms, and informing policymakers about the trends and importance of multilingual education. This includes media-based approaches to ensure proper interaction among children from diverse backgrounds.

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