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COMIC STRIPS IN ELT: REVISITING "THE WHEN AND HOW"

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Universitas Abdurachman Saleh Situbondo

Abstract
Few know that comic strips can be used in educational contexts, particularly in English language classrooms. If associated with the purpose of language teaching, the use of comic strips is to facilitate students to develop their three learning domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Integrating comic strips in classroom activities will make the process of learning more meaningful. In Indonesian context, the teaching and learning process utilising comics is still rare to find. Most Indonesian EFL teachers usually only focus on enhancing students' reading comprehension skill when using comic strips in their teaching. They ignore other objectives such as providing the students' other language skills, introducing the culture embedded, or sharping students' learning domains. Such a problem occurs because the teachers do not know and are not sure of how to find good and suitable comics for their students. In addition to that, many teachers admit that it is quite difficult to prove and to convince the parents that comics can be used as stimulating, pedagogically-suitable learning media. Concerning the issue, this paper presents a comprehensive explanation on the nature of comic that suits the purpose of EFL/ESL teaching and and offers some best practices for English teachers to utilize comic strips in their teaching. It is expected that after reading this paper, EFL teachers in Indonesia can explore their belief and practice in implementing comics and bring up a new trend in EFL classroom.

Keywords: Comic Strips, ELT, Best Practices, Teachers

INTRODUCTION

Comics have been around for years. Literally defined, comic is sequences of images and sequential collection of words (Eisner, 1985). According to McCloud (1994), comic consists of images that transfer information or produce an aesthetic response for people who see it. From these two definitions, it can be said that comic is sequences of images with words that function to send messages to people who read them with aesthetical values. Trimo in Laksana (2015) classifies comics into two, namely comic strips and comic book. Comic strips usually consist of few panels of pictures of cartoons. They are usually found in magazines and newspapers, while comic books are collection of comics published in the form of a book. Nowadays, comics are way easier to find on the Internet.

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Who don't like reading comics? In Indonesia, the number of comic readers is quite high. There has been an explosion in the number of comic readers in Indonesia in the past two years. Around 13 million people read comics via mobile every day (Bungalan, 2018). Japanese comics are the most favorite. Nonetheless, along with the growing of Indonesian comic artists, local comics already have quite a lot of fans. The readers are mostly school-age children. Children usually spend most of their time reading comics because it is fun. Consequently, many parents think that reading comics is just a waste of time. Negative effects of reading comics, such as the immitation of comic characters' behavior, makes some people prohibit their children from reading comics. They find comics uneducating. Further, comics are even seen as an insignificant literary genre (Honarvar & Rahimi, 2011). This is because comics are considered poor in art and language that they only require their readers to see pictures instead of reading. Few believe that reading comics can give positive influences to children's learning process. Trying to respond to the negative views on comics, this paper tries to highlight the nature of comics in educational contexts and to offer best practices to use comic strips particularly in English classrooms.

Comics In Educational Contexts

The fact that some people feel apathetic about the use of comics in the teaching and learning process is undeniable. However, the conventional view saying that reading comics is disadvantageous has been criticised on a number of grounds. The fears about the negative impacts of comics are refuted by the use of comics in teaching and learning activities. Some critics claim that teachers can use comics as alternative media to deliver instructional materials. In line with the statement, some research have been conducted to see how comics relate to educational settings. Khalid, Meerah, and Halim (2010) prove that the use of cartoon is effective to trigger students' imagination and creativity. Comics can also be applied in numerous activities that involve students' active participation to build their own knowledge in learning Physics. Cartoon characters in comics also play a significant role in lessening students' Mathematics anxiety. The cartoon characters in textbooks can visually entertain students and attract their attention to learning. Through the depiction of human and life in cartoon characters, teachers can teach students life lessons implied in the instructions (Şengül & Dereli, 2010). Some other research seem to corroborate the notion that comics are beneficial as educational tools. Comics can help students strengthen critical thinking, foster memory, maintan attention and self control, develop skills of understanding and analyzing, and increase motivation (Anugerahwati,2017; Karakas, 2012; Piaw, 2012).

Considering the positive values given, comics also have positive impacts on English learning. Humola and Talib (2015) reveal that comic strips can enhance students' writing skills. They conducted an action research to see how comic strips were implemented in teaching narrative. After the teacher utilized comic strips in the teaching process, the percentage of the students who could write a narrative text was 88%. The utilization of comic strips in English language classroom is also illustrated by Maulana and Fitrawati (2017) who analyzed how comic strips were used to improve students' reading comprehension skills. Their research showed that the integration of comic strips and PQRST technique could level up students' rate in comprehending a text because of pleasant environment they created. There is even a comic-based teaching that can be an alternative for teachers. This is supported by a study conducted by Domkar (2010). He designed four projects-based use of comics to be integrated in teaching process. In the application, he made use of digital teaching aids to make his own comics and used them in the teaching activities. These activities were then made as a bridge to measure students' awareness in cultural differences. This study also shows that teachers can provide creative and meaningful instructional media with no budgets. There are still many results of research that show that the use of comics in language teaching has positive effects, mainly the ones on how to use comics in teaching language skills and competences (Widiseta, 2013; Klau, 2015; Lazarinis et.al. 2015; Ahmadi, Sadighi, & Gorijan, 2017). Waluyanto (2005) also adds that comics as educational media functions to convey the messages of learning.

Defining Comics In Elt Purposes

Before discussing when and how to use comics in English language classroom, let us define what actually comics are in EFL/ESL setting. Some people might get confused to define which one is comic and which one is not. Some may think that comic should be in the form of narrative mode, have some word balloons, and its characters are in the form of cartoons. Then what about sequences of cartoons without any speech? Are they categorized as a comic? Is a merely single picture a comic? Is a picture a teacher draws on a whiteboard a comic?

McLoud in Cimermanova (2014) emphasizes the importance of pictures/images in a comic. The pictures are the key of the success of message delivery. However, McLoud's definition is not supported by Harvey. Harvey in Cimermanova (2014) argues that pictures and speech of the characters both play an important role in a comic. Recine (2013) says that the boundaries to define comics may vary culturally and personally. Using the definition from comic study, if used in TESOL setting, comic should have a theme or a message and is

displayed in single or multiple panels. It does not have to tell a story either. Comic should also have imageries in it. Despite the unclear and different definitions given about comic, we can simply say that comic is an art form, or any other media similar to it, that has educational values. It can be in the form of single panel cartoon, comic strip, comic book, or graphic novel.

Comic Strips As Instructional Media

Benefits

Fundamentally, learning process is a process of communication. This communication involves teachers and students. A good communication between teachers and students requires good media as tools to deliver messages, and one of them is comics. In this context, comic strips are more frequently used in classrooms than comic books. Comic strip, as defined by Trimo in Laksana (2015), is short series of images that have a storyline and contain short messages. Teachers prefer comic strips to comic books because they are not time consuming to read. Thus, students do not have to spend a lot time reading comic strips because they can be understood easily. Besides, the storyline of comic strips is usually simpler than that of comic books. Furthermore, comic strips can be found in newspaper, magazines, and the Internet. Their easy accessibility and availability makes it easier for the teachers to use comic strips when teaching. On the other hands, just like other learning media, comic strips have strengths and weaknesses when used as instructional media. Teachers have to know that there are some rules to apply comic strips in their teaching. They need to consider *the when and how* to use comic strips in their classes.

Some reasonable arguments testify the benefits of using comic strips as instructional media. First, it is explained by Lazarinis et al., (2015). They state that comic strips have a power to improve the learning quality. Since most of the readers are children, they can be easily attracted to the pictures of cartoons in comic strips. Once feel attracted, the students will enjoy the process of learning. By using comic strips, teachers can provide students a meaningful learning process. As a result, the quality of students' learning increases. Using comic strips can also be used as a method to enhance students' critical thinking. When used in a discussion activity on the cartoon characters, for example, comic strips can fill up students' imagination. The still images of the characters will trigger students' mind to visualize the pictures in a real life. Sources provide some examples of teaching and learning activities that promote students' critical thinking, but overall, Anugerahwati (2017) emphasizes the integration of comic strips in enjoyable, fun learning activities. Comics strips can also be used as a door to introducing cultures to students. Through comic strips,

teachers can provide the students more exposures to new cultures and skills to respond them, whether to adopt or to adapt them. The visual forms of the characters in comic strips teach students real life social issues and popular trends. Last, comic strips are also effective to improve students' media literacy. Media literacy is most commonly described as a skill set that promotes critical engagement with messages produced by the media (Bulger & Davison, 2018:7). Along with the rapid development of media, it is important that students be equipped with these skills to adapt to new cultures. Students should know which cultures appropriate to them and which are not. Such skills can be taught to students through comic strips. In short, this implies that comics, in any form, have positive values in students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development.

Principles

Comics strips can be used as instructional media under some circumstances. Just like other types of instructional media, comic strips should be used appropriately. Summarized from Abidin (2016), Prastya (2016), Bates (2015), and Ramdhani (2015), there are some criteria, or we can say these as principles, for teachers in selecting media for teaching. These principles include learning purpose, learning method, efficiency, practicality, and availability.

Once teachers choose to use comic strips in classrooms, they have to make sure that the chosen comic strips suit the learning purpose. As stated by Chaffe (2018), learning purpose is beyond getting good grades. This is about acquiring the skills that have been plannned. After finishing a course, students expect that they will be able to apply the skills in real life. The learning purpose gives control to the teachers and students so that the learning process leads to the competencies to be achieved. For example, if the learning purpose is to provide the students with skills to describe an object, the content of the comic strips must be able to facilitate the learning process to reach the purpose. It is also good to keep images/visual of the comic strips close to related content to avoid confusion. The comic strips chosen should also refer to at least two out of the three learning domains, namely cognitive, affective, and psychomotor (Imran, 2014). Thus, comic strips are expected to benefit to the development of students' knowledge, attitude, and skill.

Selecting comic strips as instructional media needs a consideration on the learning method. Teachers have to know how they will use the comic strips beforehand. This can be seen from the lesson plan they design. When will they use the comic strips? At the beginning of the lesson? As a tool during the main activity? Or used in the closing session of the lesson? The most important point is that the use of comic strips should make the learning

process fun. Teachers can integrate comic strips in various learning method, such as active learning, social learning, or personalized learning.

The efficiency of comic strips is also vital if used as instructional media. Teachers are the ones who know how appropriate and how effective comic strips are in helping the students reach the learning purpose. Therefore, this depends on the teachers' skill at choosing which comic strips to use in their classrooms. To illustrate, if the learning purpose is to provide the students skill to be able to make a phone call, it is not enough to merely depend on the visuals a comic strip provides. Teachers should also add some real practices such as practices in listening to a phone conversation and practices making a phone conversation with peers. If by chance there are some comic strips available, teachers do not have to use them all in classroom. Choose the most effective one that can help the students reach the learning objective (Wati, 2009).

The practicality of comic strips should also be taken into account. According to Mahnun (2012), the practicality of instructional media is related to the media's ability to bridge students' different experiences and space limitation, to enable direct interaction between students and their environment (real life), to raise students' motivation and interest in learning, to uniform students' perception, to provide concrete and abstract experiences, and to instil concrete basic concepts and reality. As an example, when teaching descriptive text, teachers can choose comic strips that visualise the characters describing an object that is familiar to all students. The emphasis is in the choice of the object. The familiarity of the object to all students is important, so the students can relate it with the real life. However, this is also possible to introduce students to a new object. Their curiosity on the object will grab their attention and interest more. Whether or not to choose something familiar, the decision is up to the teachers.

The last thing to consider when selecting comic strips is their availability. Are the comic strips available? Are they accessible? If they are not, what will the teachers do? Borrowing, renting, buying, or developing ones? Comic strips can be found easily in magazines and newspaper. Nevertheless, are they appropriate? Do they suit the students' needs? Using the ones available online or in magazines and newspapers is the easiest. Teachers can also modify the content by changing the dialogues in the word balloons. As the last alternative, teachers can opt to develop their own comic strips.

Teacher-made Comic Strips

Using comic strips than animation in classroom is an advantageous and wise choice. Not all classrooms are equipped with high-tech aids. In addition to that, not every society is

craving for technology. Teachers can display comic strips by utilising technology, such as LCD projector or OHP projector. However, they can still use comic strips in a print form (Recine, 2013). The simplicity of comic strips is also a great thing because teachers can modify and even draw their own comic strips manually using a pencil or a board marker. Some research that focus on this topic reveal the success of developing teacher-made comic strips and their advantages for teaching (Hidayah, 2017; Aditya, 2016; Nafis & Sapir, 2016; Nanda, 2016; and Anggara, 2011). Considering their success, this section presents a brief explanation about parts of comic strips and highlights the simple procedure of developing teacher-made comic-strips.

A comic strip does not have to be delivered to students in a print form. Teachers can manually create a comic strip on a piece of paper. Here are six steps to creating a teacher-made comic strip (Marty, 2018). Marty suggests a three-frame comic for newbie creators. This is because as other forms of narrative, comic has beginning, middle, and ending parts. The very first step to create a comic strip is preparing ideas. The ideas cover the character(s), story line, and the speech. Try not to make too many characters. One or two characters are enough. Make sure to write down the ideas on a piece of paper. Second, draw the frames. Each frame must have the same size. Carefully estimate the size of the frames. It should be wide enough to put the cartoons, the word bubble, and additional details. Then, the next stage is drawing the characters. Sketching the word balloons is also done at this stage. It is better to use a pencil so any mistake that occurs can be erased. Adding the speech and lettering is the fourth step to create a comic strip. Write the speech in the word balloons and do not forget to check the spelling. Keep in mind that the lettering size can have different meanings. Lettering in full capitals means that the characters in the comic strip is shouting. After adding the speech and lettering, the next step is adding the details (background, shadowing, and facial expression). This will enliven the story. Finally, go over the pencil drawing by using a pen or a marker. Some colours can also be added as the completion.

Comic Strips In EFL/ESL Classrooms: Best Practices

As justified previously that comic strips give many benefits for an educational setting, this paper will also provide some examples of the use of comic strips in EFL/ESL classrooms. The attractiveness of using comic strips is that it does not feel like studying. Students are motivated by the storyline reinforced by the visual elements, and these ease the students to comprehend the story (Koch, 2017). This is appealing and useful to be used by language teachers. Yet, some teachers may still feel at loss to what kind of activities to do

with comic strips. The followings are some examples of best practices of using comic strips in EFL/ESL classrooms.

1. Arranging pieces of comic strip. Teachers can cut a comic strip and ask the students to put the pieces in the correct order. This activity can be done individually or in group, depending on the complexity of the storyline. A reading class can apply this activity to measure students' comprehension. Teachers can train the students to sharpen their word recognition skill as well. As an addition, this activity can also be applied in a speaking class or a writing class. After arranging the pieces of comic strip, the students can retell the story in an oral or written form.

https://boingboing.net/2014/12/23/update-ivan-brunettis-nancy.html

Figure 1. Jumbled Comic Strip

2. Filling word balloon. Teachers can modify a comic strip by erasing the speech in the word ballons and ask the students to fill them with their own words. This activity can be used in teaching narrative text. Such an activity is also useful in promoting students' creativity and imagination.

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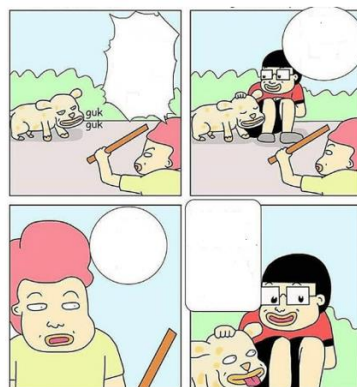
Figure 2. Comic Strip with Empty Word Balloons

This is also possible to erase only some speeches in the word balloons. The students are to fill the empty word balloons to complete the story. The story starts the same way, but it may end differently, depending on students' ideas and creativity in making up the story.

Figure 3. Incomplete Word Balloons

However, if teachers decide to use the former type of activity, they have to make sure that the visual of the comic strip is clear enough for the students to understand. Even without the speech, the pictures should be able to create a storyline by itself.

3. Discussion. Comic strips can also be used to foster students' critical thinking by giving an opinion about a certain issue. This train students to see an issue from different point of views. By doing so, they will learn how to see things differently. This activity can be carried out in a speaking class. Having the students debate on a certain topic is interesting. Teachers can divide the class into some small groups and ask each group to discuss the topic. Later, each group needs to present the result of the discussion and it can be objected by other groups. Sounds fun!

Figure 4. Comic Strip to Promote Critical Thinking

4. Teaching drama can also be carried out by utilising comic strips. Teachers can ask the students to act out a comic strip. The comic strip chosen for teaching drama can be the quite complicated ones, except if the drama is acted out by elementary students.

5. Who says that comic strips cannot be used in a listening class? Teachers can provide a listening podcast; it can be in the form of narrative text, and provide a comic strip that has been cut into some parts. The students should arrange the parts based on the

story they hear from the podcast. The students can also retell the story while showing the arranged comic strip to their friends. Another alternative is by providing some comic strips and asking the students to choose which comic strip represents the podcast best. Still, this activity requires teachers' hard work because the teachers need to prepare the podcast beforehand.

6. Still relates to listening class, teachers can also prepare a comic strip with empty word balloons. After playing a narrative podcast, ask the students to fill in the word balloons with speeches. The speeches should help the visual of the comic strip to create a story.

7. Jigsaw. Jigsaw also enables comic strips to be used in EFL/ESL classrooms. Teachers can give a part of comic to one student and ask him/her to describe it to his/her group members. After all members describe their parts, they have to agree on the correct sequence of the comic strip, but this is still done without showing the comic parts.

8. Comic strips are also good media in exposing the students to new cultures, such as when in a CCU class because usually comic strips are culturally contextualized. Thus, by doing so, teachers can bring in the target language cultures. At the same time, teachers can also teach students how to appreciate other cultures.

9. Interested to teach students figurative languages in a new way? An example is as follow.

http://mistymfall2105.weebly.com/assignment-3---comics-cartoons--graphic-novels.html
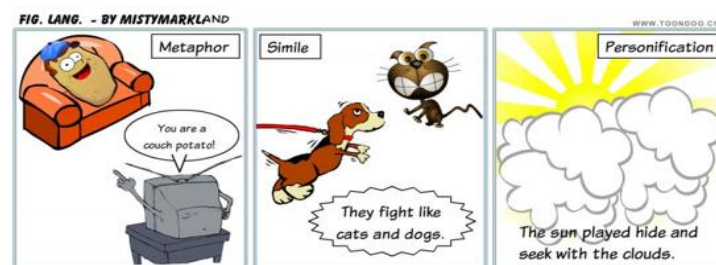
Figure 5. Figurative Language in Comic Strip

10. In case the curriculum requires the teachers to teach students persuasive text, asking the students to create an advertisement by drawing a comic strip is also doable. Referring to the definition of comic that it does not have to be in narrative mode, this activity is also a clear example that comic helps.

11. Teaching translation? Ask the students to bring in a comic strip in their L1 and assign them to translate the speeches in the word balloon into English. Easy!

From some examples given, it is actually easy to use comic strips in English teaching. The only problem lies on teachers' intention and willingness. Still, teachers can design activities in the classroom as desired while paying attention to principles in selecting the comic strips.

CONCLUSION

Even with its unclear definition, comic strip is irrefutably strategic to be used in EFL/ESL setting. Teachers can easily use comic strips in various classroom activities without ignoring the nature of comic itself and the principles to use comic strips as instructional media. Even when their existence is inaccessible, teachers can still use comic strips by developing teacher-made comic strips. However, the main purpose of using comic strips in EFL/ESL class is not merely as an alternative instructional media. Comic strip is basically a tool to help teachers teach the students to use the Language, English. Teachers can design and prepare various activities by utilising comic strips in the teaching and learning process to develop students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills. The development of the three domains will help the students learn to use the language. Practically, the use of comic strips should be able to facilitate the students the language skills so they can use the skills in their real life.

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