

Graphic Novels as Pedagogical Tools in the Indian Classroom: Teachers' Opinions

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Introduction

Graphic novels and comics have been considered mostly a medium for entertainment for children and adults. However, considering their strong impact, this medium may very well serve as an educational tool (Gretchen, 2006; Mallia, 2007; Tatalovic, 2009). In this paper, we will report the findings from interviews conducted with middle school English teachers to assess their awareness, opinions and willingness regarding the use of graphic novels as instructional material to teach ESL learners in Indian classrooms.

Twenty female English teachers from three schools in Mumbai affiliated to three different education boards (SSC, CBSE and ICSE) were interviewed. An analysis of their responses revealed that the majority of them had several concerns regarding the use of graphic novels in classrooms. These included lack of familiarity, proper training and integration of graphic novels into the existing traditional syllabus. Also, they had never used graphic novels as a teaching tool; however, most of them were positively inclined towards using them in the classroom. Other concerns raised by these teachers included managing syllabus completion deadlines, handling a large number of students in the class and lack of resources, among others. In order to encourage the effective use of comics and graphic novels in the Indian ESL context, policy makers and teacher educators need to address these concerns seriously.

Evolution of Comics and Graphic Novels in India

India has a long tradition of aided learning, the earliest reference being the stories of *Panchtantra* composed around 3rd century BCE, which were used for teaching politics and leadership to the heirs of the king. In the last three decades, comics have become popular reading material for children albeit not in a very serious manner. *Diamond Comics*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, etc., have created vast distribution networks throughout the country and are read by thousands of children in various languages. As a corollary, the graphic novel has emerged as a good variant, both for children and adults alike by incorporating a variety of themes, including popular classics.

Graphic novel is defined as: “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993). Orijit Sen's “River of Stories” in 1994 was recognized as India's first graphic novel. However Sarnath Banerjee's, “Corridor” in 2004, became India's first commercially successful graphic novel in English. Since then, the popularity of graphic novels has augmented vastly. “The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers” (2007), “Kari” (2008), “Private-Eye Anonymous: The Art Gallery Case” (2008), “Hotel at the End of the World” (2009), “Moonward” (2009), “A Gardener in the Wasteland” (2011), etc., are some of the famous Indian graphic novels.

The field of Indian graphic novel publishing has also widened exponentially during the last few years, with the entry of new exclusive comics publishers such as Vimanika Comics (2008), Campfire Graphic Novels, Holy Cow Entertainment (2011) and others. Campfire Graphic Novels that came up in 2008 publishes graphic novels based on Indian mythology, biographies, classics and other original stories. Girija Jhunjhunwala, Director, Campfire Graphic Novels informs in an article in the *PrintWeek* magazine¹, “Today, almost 15-20 of our titles are a part of the CBSE extra-curriculum study list. Thus, the books are not just recommended in schools or picked up by teachers; they are also recognized by education boards like the CBSE”. She adds that 12 of their titles have been picked up by the Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan, an autonomous body under the Government of India. Titles such as *Mother Teresa: Angel of the Slums*, *Conquering Everest: the Lives of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay*, *Sundarkaand: Triumph of Hanuman*, etc. are part of both the CBSE and Kendriya Vidyalaya recommended list. The graphic novel employed for our current study, “Oliver Twist” by Charles Dickens, is also a Campfire Graphic Novels publication from its classic genre. It is used in one of the Kendriya Vidyalayas (location of the study) in Mumbai.

The popularity of this genre has led to a new trend of comics cafés and libraries in India, especially in cities such as Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai. The first Annual Comics Convention organised in India in 2011 was dedicated to creating unique events and giving fans, exhibitors and partners of this medium a platform to celebrate their everlasting love for comics and pop culture. Since then, this convention is organised every year. Considering the strong impact of comics and graphic novels on children and adults, this medium may serve

not only as a means of entertainment but also as an efficient educational tool.

Graphic Novel as an Instructional Tool

“The affective role of instructions is to the fore in comic strips: their aim being to attract and motivate less-able learners...” (Hartley, 1994, p. 87). Comics/graphic novels are considered an enhancement to enjoyment and an inducement to the utilization of other elements that would then help cognition (Mallia, 2007). Many researchers feel that comics serve the purpose of decoration (Bell & Gower, 1998; Goldstein, 2008; Hill, 2003; Prowse, 1998; Romney & Bell, 2012; Viney, 2006); by attracting students and motivating them to read. Research has revealed (Liu, 2004, p. 226) that presenting students with a visual representation of words can help them overcome comprehension difficulties (Gyselinck and Tardieu, 1999). In fact, use of images to support reading comprehension is common in many classrooms. The positive effect of multi-modal texts on comprehension can be explained by Paivio's dual coding theory (Liu, 2004, p. 752). According to the Paivio, human cognition consists of two subsystems that process knowledge simultaneously, with one processing verbal information and the other dealing with visual information (Sadoski & Paivio, 2001). Presenting students with a written text accompanied by graphics as opposed to a written text alone, allows readers to activate and integrate both the visual and the linguistic systems, and this interconnection helps readers generate inferences about the text (Sadoski & Paivio, 2001).

Gradually, comics and graphic novels are becoming a more accepted form of literature. However, research regarding graphic novels vis-à-vis its pedagogical use is still in its infancy in the context of India. Nevertheless,

using them as supplementary materials in the classroom can add variety to the existing textbooks and encourage self-reading. Moreover, reluctant readers will find them easy to comprehend. Let us now explore Indian teachers' opinions on the use of graphic novels in the area of language teaching².

Methodology

In addition to assessing teachers' awareness, opinions and willingness to experiment with a form of text which is different from the usual prescribed texts, namely graphic novels, in their classrooms, we also wanted to find out whether this popular medium of entertainment is being currently used for language teaching. We will also look at the support the teachers may require in using these materials in their classroom teaching.

The field work for our study involved informal, one-to-one semi-structured interviews with the teachers of the schools selected for the study. The data received was analysed to examine the beliefs of the participants regarding the use of graphic novels in the classroom. The specific details of how this study was carried out have been discussed in the following sections.

Twenty female English language teachers from Mumbai (India) participated in this study. The teachers belonged to the age group of 28-54 years with a school teaching experience ranging from 4-29 years. All the teachers were teaching in middle school, i.e. they all taught at least one or more of the Classes VI, VII or VIII, or all of them. All the teachers had postgraduate degrees in English and 15 (75 per cent) also had a B.Ed. degree. The teachers were from three schools, each affiliated to the three main boards in the city, namely CBSE (Central Board of Secondary

Education), SSC (Secondary School Certificate) and ICSE (Indian Certificate for Secondary Education).

The questions for the interview had 16 pre-determined questions. These included information about the grades taught by the teachers, their teaching experience, academic qualifications, age, and their views on the existing materials used in the classrooms and the learners' responses towards these materials. Questions regarding existing teaching and supplementary materials used in the classrooms, teachers' familiarity with graphic novels, their views on using graphic novels for language teaching in middle school, etc., were also asked. In addition to the pre-determined questions, other questions also emerged during conversation with the participants. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Teachers' Opinions

The existing school textbooks have stories and poems with very few illustrations and very limited colours. Regarding the prescribed materials (main reader and workbook) used in the class and the learners' response to them, 90 per cent of the teachers mentioned that they were boring and that the learners' response to them was largely unenthusiastic. One teacher stated that textbooks should be more colourful since colours impact children of all ages. About 60 per cent of the teachers mentioned that the learners feel bored in the class since the book looks very dull. They emphasized the importance of having pictures in the textbooks to help learners engage better with the text; their current textbooks lacked relevant pictures. Another 25 per cent of the teachers suggested that their students preferred to read short stories over long story

books; also they were more interested in watching film adaptations of famous novels rather than reading them. Only 20 per cent teachers said that the current textbooks were good enough.

On being asked what could supplement the prescribed materials, most teachers chose films (78 per cent) followed by power point presentations (60 per cent) and activity based learning (45 per cent). Only 20 per cent of the teachers said that graphic novels could be used. This response was not surprising as most teachers were not familiar with the graphic novel genre: out of the 20 interviewed, only 5 teachers (25 per cent) were familiar to some extent with the idea of a graphic novel. Only one teacher had read a graphic novel ("*Maus: A Survivor's Tale*" by Art Spiegelman).

Participants were asked whether they had ever used graphic novels as part of a lesson plan or class activity. While 85 per cent of them had never taught using a comic strip, 15 per cent of the teachers pointed out that they had taught a lesson in the Class VI CBSE book - this was in the form of a comic strip. Some reasons provided by the teachers for not using graphic novels in the classroom include: unfamiliarity with the genre, lack of awareness of the availability of these novels in the market and lack of training in using graphic novels as tools in the classrooms. Some of the teachers expressed the need for readymade materials for teaching, such as text books in graphic novel format with comprehension exercises and other related activities. A practical concern with regard to the use of graphic novels in the classroom was related to their procurement for the entire class as these books are not a part of the prescribed syllabus and most parents would

be reluctant to pay for them. The teachers also felt the need for guidance on how to choose relevant graphic novels to suit the prescribed syllabus for different grades. Two of the teachers said that they had never thought of teaching through graphic novels.

The responses of the teachers who had taught the lesson given in comic strip format reiterated the motivational and instructional advantages of the medium. They reported that the learners were actively involved in the lesson and enjoyed the activities constructed around it. Teachers were asked whether they would like to have graphic novels as prescribed texts. Out of 20 teachers, 18 (90 per cent) felt positively inclined towards the idea. They felt that graphic novels would be more effective teaching materials than textbooks. They were of the opinion that the current textbooks were very dull and so the use of comics and graphic novels might get struggling learners interested in learning and encourage them to speak about the characters and illustrations of the comics. Gradually, this medium could become useful for language teaching. Some teachers suggested that out of the two books prescribed in the school syllabus, the supplementary reader could be in graphic novel format since visuals definitely worked better than text alone. They also proposed that graphic novels be used to facilitate language skills through dialogue-writing, indirect-direct speech, subject-verb agreement, etc.

However, several issues were raised by the teachers, which need to be kept in mind before using graphic novels in the classroom. They are:

- Lack of time to introduce innovative tools such as graphic novels as there is immense pressure to complete the syllabus on time.

- Students of Class VIII and beyond consider themselves too mature for comics and prefer to read serious literature over comics for fear of being considered childish.
- Owing to the “simple language” used in comics, the level of English of the students might go down.
- It might be better to provide the students with something more challenging than comics since comics involve illustrations and the students' imagination may take a back seat in playing a role in learning.

Overall, though the teachers were open to using graphic novels as supplementary materials along with the regular textbooks, they were not in favour of replacing the regular textbooks with graphic novels. They also felt that certain aspects of English could not be taught through comics or graphic novels; for example, they expressed doubts as to whether poetry could be taught through comics and insisted that only a textbook would be appropriate for teaching poetry.

Discussion

The findings of the present study clearly indicate that a large majority of teachers, at least in urban areas such as Mumbai are open to the idea of using comics/graphic novels as instructional materials. A vast majority of teachers were not happy with the existing materials and felt that there was a scope to bring in supplementary materials in the form of films, power point presentations and activity based learning. Even though some teachers saw graphic novel as a potential motivational tool for students, other pedagogical benefits of graphic novel also needed to be understood and the teachers trained accordingly.

In order to address their concerns presented earlier in the paper, the teachers felt that pre-service and in-service training were required to address these issues. The school administration also has to play a key role in imparting training to the teaching staff on the effective use of graphic novels in the classroom. In addition, educational policy makers should encourage teachers to use the graphic novel medium by including it in the syllabus either as supplementary reading or at least by converting some lessons into graphic medium.

The present study has a few limitations. We have taken a small sample size belonging to the same sex from just one place and there is no involvement of other stake holders such as parents, educational policy makers, administrators and of course the learners. With a larger group from diverse backgrounds our findings would have been more comprehensive. Nevertheless the present study gives us an insight into the beliefs of a section of teachers.

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modality of presentation in both mediums where picture and text both are presented sequentially to convey meaning.

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Endnotes

¹ <http://www.printweek.in/features/telling-stories-graphics-20953>

² Words “graphic novels” and “comics” will be used interchangeably in this paper as the focus is on the