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Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom

June 2006 — Volume 10, Number 1

Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom

Author: Stephen Cary (2004)

Publisher: Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann

Pages

ISBN

Price

Pp. vi + 224

0-325-00475-7 (paper)

\$23.00 U.S.

Introduction

In *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom*, Cary has written a useful supplement typical textbooks and graded or simplified readers with less traditional authors. Teachers with a theoretical framework, handy responses to skeptics, a wealth of useful classroom activities, and a wealth of useful classroom activities.

comics. Teachers new to comics will find enough here to make good use of them with second language learners. If you are already familiar with comics, you will probably find some new ideas.

Style

Cary is serious about advocating the use of comics for second language learning, but this is done in a way that is accessible to all. With both the medium and the author's personal connection to the subject, he writes in a way that is both accessible and engaging. Cary also works in instructive anecdotes from his own reading and sharing of comics with second language learners and teachers, and that comes through loud and clear in this book.

A reader who wants to get a quick overview of *Going Graphic* will find sprinkled throughout the book testimonials from both teachers and students. These testimonials come from a wide range of people and offer a variety of ideas of ways that comics may be used effectively in a wide variety of teaching situations.

The writing is very well supported by plenty of artwork. You will find a few photographs of comic book covers and examples of comics themselves. Even teachers who are comics fans will probably find a few new titles. Without this book, I never would have found the charming works of Brian Ralph, *Comic Book Conversations*, and content is represented in these examples. Some of the most intriguing comics reproduced in the book are those contributed by second language students. Such samples can be used to encourage

Contents

Going Graphic is divided into four main sections. "Theory and research" opens the book with a discussion of comics in the language classroom. The two practical sections, "Questions" and "Activities", make up the bulk of the book for teachers. The closing section, "Resources", is an annotated list of recommended comics and websites.

Theory and research

Teachers with little background in comics will find useful definitions of comics jargon and a discussion of the history of comics. Cary sticks with Eisner's (1985) brief definition of comics as "sequential art". Although this is usually considered a very thorough and accessible exploration of comics, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (pp. 24-59) and discussion of comics in a way that teachers can use to articulately explain comics. The lack of *Understanding Comics* in *Going Graphic* is an oversight, but it is more than outweighed by the quality of the other sections.

As readers might expect in a book for language teachers, Cary is on much stronger ground when it comes to language teaching ideas. He emphasizes Krashen's theory of comprehensible input and how it can be applied to the teaching of second language. He also explains how comics may fit content-based teaching practices and focuses on content-based teaching from a literacy perspective. According to Cary (p. 24), comics readily fulfill the requirements of practical communication, learner-centered communication, and rich content and language. The author is correct to

language. (The text is in English, but the ideas could be used equally well to teach, for example, non-English comics resources in the final section.) Nevertheless, *Going Graphic* is clearly a valuable resource for research in California.

Questions

The questions and answers section for teachers will be very helpful for instructors wanting to use comics in the center—but anticipate opposition. Comics are sometimes viewed as a trashy genre filled with stereotypes. *Going Graphic* gives ready answers to concerns about the applicability and appropriateness of comics, and how to be selective in using comics and how to respond professionally to others who may not understand. I made this entire chapter available as a free sample download from <<http://college.heiner.com>>

With these questions out of the way, Cary addresses the applicability of conventional reading strategies to L1 to L2, and how images may or may not aid readability. Readability is central to his argument. He offers yourself how to get reluctant students interested in reading authentic L2 English and how to answer these tough questions head on. Comics reduce the amount of text on a given page to a manageable level, and give students whole stories that they can complete in a reasonable amount of time.

Activities

There are thirteen fully explored activities, with sub-sections between two and sixteen pages each. Each activity includes materials, a brief description, topics and strategies, background, step-by-step process, and underpinnings are briefly presented for each activity, but the emphasis is on the process. The activities are designed to be used easily and apply them successfully in many classroom situations. Sample professional development materials make the lesson's ideas concrete for both teachers and students.

In my classes, I incorporated several of Cary's ideas as is, or with slight modifications. The Missing Panels (p. 88) activities were all useful and enjoyable for students. These reading activities are designed to stimulate imaginations and should trigger stimulating discussions. Interactive Journal offers advice on how to address teacher concerns about workload with this kind of exercise. I found journals focusing on comics in my classes at Japanese universities. Using an overhead projector in the classroom, I displayed comic panels, giving students the visual and text support for later oral presentation. Students copy the text from the websites in a small notebook and responded to the content or the language forms on the panels. I asked them to present their comics to the class each week.

The Activities section closes with twelve Quick Takes: one- or two-paragraph explanations of the activities. The explanations elaborate on the ideas in the preceding Activities. All are illustrated with examples. I have tried the Quick Takes in the classroom. I found Between the Panels (p. 145) and Character Interviews (p. 146) most useful with my classes. In the former, the images and text on the page support students as they interpret the panels), which can be narrated aloud to a partner. Character Interviews are a variation on

persona of a comic character and are interviewed by classmates. The key is to allow students to make their own observations and statements, but reading comics is not perceived as arduous research.

Resources

The final section is an extended appendix listing various resources for teachers. The many resources were available on the publisher's website. Lists such as "Comics Made into Films" become long lists of URLs into browsers can be tiresome. Heinemann should consider putting these resources in a way that in no way detract from the value of the printed book, but instead would add to it.

Conclusion

Going Graphic reads like a labor of love. Hence we should not be surprised that Cary's enjoyment is infectious. That he was prompted to use comics to teach ESL via his own experience of the challenges of learning languages is very refreshing. Cary remarks that "lots of teachers have forgotten what it is like to be a language learner" (p. 65); but he has not. *Going Graphic* is not just a well written teacher resource but a resource for language learners—including the author. Though he is quick to point out that comics are not for everyone, from his own perspective as a second language learner with his experience as an instructor and his own experience as a language learner, more teachers should give comics a try. In *Going Graphic*, Cary gives teachers the resource they need to get started.

References

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Writing interview protocols and conducting interviews: Tips for students new to the field of

A guide to interviewing children: Essential skills for counsellors, police lawyers and social workers

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