

TEACHING ENGLISH WITH A CHILLY FORMAT: THE GRAPHIC NOVEL!

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Abstract

Recently, the term graphic novel is commonly used in the educational area, and it's often associated with another term, which is '**comic book**'. In a typical perception, the graphic novel provides an interesting way to communicate language concepts with a number of characteristics that may help students learning in a more effective manner rather than traditional textbooks. Given that it has been introduced in school lessons, it has certainly represented an opportunity for teachers.

However...what exactly is a graphic novel? It is a didactic tool. A graphic novel, as its name suggests, is a novel that tells a complete story via illustrations. A graphic novel will offer the type of resolution that one expects from a novel, even if it is part of a series. Effectively, this makes a graphic novel longer and more substantive than a comic book, which is a serialized excerpt from a larger narrative story.

Humankind has long told stories via images, beginning, perhaps, with the cave paintings of ancient civilizations. It was in the twentieth century, that we witnessed the rise in the use of comic books, which experienced a golden age during the Great Depression and World War II with the ascendance of Marvel and DC Comics. The Cold War era saw comic books and novels emerge into what is now known as a graphic novel. The term "graphic novel" traces back to an essay written by Richard Kyle in the comic book fanzine *Capa-Alpha* (although to this day there is not one fixed definition of "graphic novel"). The term is thought to have become mainstream with the publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* in 1978.

The authors provide an overview of the graphic novel format and its use in school lessons. The work is aimed at describing the most important steps of this format, with its implications for teachers and students, and the theoretical base that highlights how and why it can be a useful tool to present content relevant for the current generation of students. The authors provide examples of how the graphic novel medium could be applied to English concepts and conclude with the future prospects of this studying/teaching tool.

Keywords: *Graphic novel, digital technologies, comic, teaching, medium.*

1. Introduction

It could be argued that 1986 was the year of the graphic novel. This year included the publication of the first volume of *Maus*, the release of the first issue of *Watchmen*, and the entire serial run of *The Dark Knight Returns*. Although none of the aforementioned works were originally printed as graphic novels, all three were serialized before being collected and rereleased; it would be difficult to ignore the impact that they have had on the medium (Hoover S., 2012).

The birth of the graphic novel cannot be dated back to a precise moment in the cultural history of the twentieth century, but it has depended on a long process of evolution which in many respects is still underway. In the book *The Ten-Cent Plague* (2008) David Hajdu pointed out that the first graphic novel published in the United States in 1950 was probably *It Rhymes with Lust* written by Arnold Drake and Leslie Waller and illustrated by Matt Bsaaker. It was an innovative work of art, thought of as a novel and published in one single volume, which at the time was defined as a picture novel ("novel for images"). Being a novelty, unfortunately, it was not understood and therefore unsuccessful. The American publisher, Richard Kyle, in 1964, was first publisher to use the diction of the graphic novel together with the graphic story. He wanted to draw the attention of American readers and artists to the quality of contemporary Japanese comics (*manga*) and French (*bandes dessinées*), trying to free the American comic book from its mediocrity and its vulgarity. Conventionally, however, the authorship of this definition is attributed to the American cartoonist Will Eisner (1917-2005), with his *Contract with God*, published in 1978. Eisner's work is divided into four stories, the first of which has the same title as the book and tells the story of Frimme Hersch, a pious Jew who lives in the Bronx and whose daughter is tragically taken away from him.

The story focuses on Frimme's rebellion against God, his feelings, his interiority and his changed relationship with his neighbour. For the first time in the comic book serious and important issues are treated: religion, society, politics, daily life, the interiority of people, topics which are typical of the great literature. Eisner's work represented a small revolution at the time: until then the comic book, especially the American one, was mostly linked to stereotypes, characters and stories of little depth or to the figures of superheroes, whereas with this text a new way of narrating life became effective.

A further turning point for the development and definition of the graphic novel was in 1986, when *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman was published in volumes, a novel that tells the story of the Shoah by staging anthropomorphic figures of mice (to represent the Jews) and cats (for the Nazis). The publication of the volumes 'as a result was gradual but rapid in many countries and in particular in ours, the ennoblement of a field of artistic creativity, the recognition of its validity, of its diversity but also of its interweaving with other arts and forms of expression and other fields of knowledge» (Goffredo Fofi). Starting from that date we can in fact find a greater awareness in artists, on one hand, who sought unprecedented expressive potential from this innovative way of mixing words and images, and on the other, in readers, that little by little constituted an increasingly mature and quantitatively more consistent group, being able to guide and require a more mature typology of products to the publishing market.

What about in Italy? According to Luca Raffaelli (journalist, comics expert) the birth of the graphic novel can be attributed to our country, with the works of Guido Buzzelli (*La rivolta dei racchi*, 1966) and Hugo Pratt (*A ballad of the salty sea*, 1967). During that year very cultured author, Dino Buzzati, also rightfully entered among the great classics of the twentieth century literature, published the *Poema a fumetti* (1969). Alongside the authors, critics too began to examine comics as an object of study, as well as Umberto Eco in *Opera aperta*, *Apocalyptic and Integrated*. In the following years the Italian comic strip was characterized in an innovative way thanks to the works of Andrea Pazienza (1956-1988), Bonvi (1941-1995), Guido Crepax (1933-2003) and to the thrust of magazines such as "Linus", "L'Eternauta", "Corto Maltese", "Comic Art", "Pilot", "Frigidaire", whose pages hosted many talented contributors (Senna P., 2018).

In the last few years, the Italian panorama has been very vast and complex, and the graphic novel has increasingly assumed the characteristics of a free genre capable of dealing with themes typical of the great expressive arts. This has resulted in works such as *LMVDM. La mia vita disegnata male*, in which Gipi takes a journey through his childhood and youth; *Igor's Quaderni Russi and Quaderni Ukraini*, halfway between a reportage and a journey of the soul; *Paolo Bacilieri (Sweet Salgari, Sul pianeta perduto and the albums of Napoleon and Dampyr)*, capable of imprinting particular incisiveness on his drawings thanks to the very particular use of framing and transitions between vignettes and those of Lorenzo Mattotti, including for example *Dottor Nefasto*, *Fuochi* and the adaptation of Stevenson's novel *Jekyll & Hyde*, where an expressionist work of image deformation is carried out (Bavaro, V. & Izzo D, 2009).

Since 1986, graphic novels have grown considerably, both in sophistication and popularity, to the point where they deserve attention in higher education. This is especially true for academic librarians. Current academic library literature includes a good deal of scholarship on the history of the medium and offers advice on building and maintaining collections (Ellis & Highsmith, 2000; Nyberg, 2010) but very little about how to integrate graphic novels into instruction. It is important to explore the characteristics of graphic novels that make them a valuable resource for librarians who focus on research and information literacy instruction, to identify skills and competencies that can be taught through the study of graphic novels, and to provide specific examples of how to incorporate graphic novels into instruction. be taught through the study of graphic novels, and to provide specific examples of how to incorporate graphic novels into instruction (Hoover S.,2012).

2. Method

2.1. Graphic novel: One, a hundred, a thousand

Not all comics are graphic novels, but all graphic novels are comic books and claim the freedom typical of this instrument of expression. When we talk about graphic novels, we refer to a particular genre whose goal is to tell a story through the use of words and images, using a structure similar to that of a novel. Contrary to the seriality of the strips we find published in newspapers or magazines, graphic novels are usually self-contained. Exactly the same as in the case of novels, in fact, graphic novels have structure, ways of managing the plot and psychological characteristics of the characters comparable to literary ones (Palmeri M., 2019).

This is another reason why the graphic novel is mostly (but not always) published in a standard (or at least recognizable) format, similar to that of the book. It is a free and strong autonomous genre, capable of absorbing a considerable variety of elements from other arts (literature, painting, music, cinema, television). The main characteristic of graphic novels is the very close relationship between text and image,

which differentiates them from all others making them unique and the fact that they are able to modulate in different directions and narrative orientations. There are many different genres: autobiographical, experimental, historical, dystopian, science fiction. There are experimental graphic novels (whose purpose is precisely to experiment with the potential of the genre), others that follow historical (such as Spiegelman and Eisner) or (auto)biographical narratives (Emmanuel Guibert, Gipi, Manu Larcenet, Marjane Satrapi). There are graphic novels of fantasy, fantastic or surreal type (David B., Sienczyk, Vázquez), others that narrate parallel realities (such as Moore and Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*, Moore's *Watchmen*), but also journalistic narratives and chronicles from current events (Joe Sacco, Joe Kubert) and there is no shortage of even re-actualizations of comic book superheroes, whose characters are re-read with greater psychological and inner depth (on the character of Batman in Franck Miller's *Return of the Dark Knight*) or re-readings and re-adaptations of literary classics (Senna P., 2018).

2.1.1. Is it a Comic Book or a Graphic Novel? To make the best use of graphic novels, it is important that educators and scholars approach them in a serious manner. Clarifying terminology and establishing context can help to dispel such misperceptions.

The difference between Graphic Novels and Comics? Mixing up comic books and graphic novels can seem like a simple error but the terms “graphic novel” and “comic book” are not synonyms. Although both formats feature illustration-based storytelling, they have distinctions that reveal substantive differences.

A graphic novel, as we said before, is a novel that tells a complete story via illustrations. A graphic novel contains a beginning, middle, and end. A graphic novel will offer the type of resolution that one expects from a novel, even if it is part of a series. Effectively, this makes a graphic novel longer and more substantive than a comic book, which is a serialized excerpt from a larger narrative story (Goldsmith, F.2005).

A comic book is an excerpt from a larger serialized narrative (it can be difficult to read a comic book if you haven't read the comic that comes directly before it in series) that is told via illustration. Famous comic book publishers include Archie Comics, Marvel Comics, and DC Comics. From the mid-twentieth century through the present day, these publishers and other similar companies have issued comic books on a weekly or monthly basis in the form of books or as pieces of sequential art called comic strips, which are published in magazines or newspapers. These comics contain excerpts from long-running narratives that can last for years or even decades.

Is there a difference between the graphic novel and the common newsstand comic? Yes and no: the answer remains unclear, and that it was probably easier to answer this question in an affirmative way a few years ago. The comics sold at newsstands today, in fact, are very different from those that could be found, for example, fifty, thirty or even twenty years ago. Comics have progressively become free of ordinary and approximate or poorly edited drawings and contents, being easier to find, even in products destined for newsstands, albums of great graphic quality with scripts worthy, if not of a novel, at least of an excellent literary tale: characteristics that bring comics much closer to the concept of graphic novels. Let us take for example, the publications of Sergio Bonelli, such as *Julia* - whose scriptwriter Giancarlo Berardi has accustomed for years his readers to exciting events and narrative rhythms marked with great skill, thanks also to the use of a group of high-level illustrators - *Dampyr* and *Napoleone*, or some of the texts in the *Le Storie* series, or the reinterpretation of characters that have become part of the collective imagination, such as *Tex*, through the use of great names on the international comics scene (in February 2015 the first issue of the annual series "*Tex d'autore*" was published, with subject, script, cover and drawings by Paolo Eleuteri Serpieri). Take into consideration a courageous publishing house, Editoriale Cosmo of Bologna, which in the last few years has offered at newsstands great masterpieces of international comics, "translating" into the newsstand format works of great artistic and literary value, which rightly (and for the most part) can be considered graphic novels (Goldsmith, F.2005).

Therefore, Frezza's opinion that today's comics are "particularly pushed towards the graphic novel" is uncontroversial, in the sense that in some of them we can feel the air of the great meditated and successful narratives. However, these are "serial" works, not conceived as a novel, but as a story that continues, often with events that are scarcely linked to each other; and this is a difference not only of form, but also of substance. Even in these serial comics, however, one can find one of the typical traits of novelistic literature from which the graphic novel is inspired, namely the inner development and psychological depth of the characters. Because of all these elements, it is not always easy to set a precise limit to what is or is not a graphic novel (Frezza G., 2008).

2.1.2. Our fun learning experience: A graphic novel in a classroom or educational setting.

The notion that graphic novels are too simplistic to be regarded as serious reading is outdated. The excellent graphic novels available today are linguistically appropriate reading material demanding the same skills

that are needed to understand traditional works of prose fiction. Often, they actually contain more advanced vocabulary than traditional books at the same age/grade/interest level. They require readers to be actively engaged in the process of decoding and comprehending a range of literary devices, including narrative structures, metaphor and symbolism, point of view, the use of puns and alliteration, intertextuality, and inference. Reading graphic novels can help students develop the critical skills necessary to read more challenging works, including the classics. In addition to the connections to analysing text, graphic novels inspire readers to understand and interpret information differently from how readers process prose. In a world where young people are growing up navigating narratives presented through websites, video games, television, films, and increasingly interactive media, learning and maintaining visual literacy is a necessary skill. Today's world of stories contains far more than just prose, and readers who are skilled at understanding and being critical of multiple formats will excel (Jacobs, D. 2007).

Graphic novels have become increasingly popular in the classroom as a means to engage English language learners (ELL) in new ways (Christensen L.L., 2007). The accessible and diverse content of graphic novels can inspire critical discussions by encouraging students to become 'agents' of their own meaning-making experience (Boatright, 2010). Using both text and sequential art to tell what are often serious, non-fiction narratives, many graphic novels use intelligence and humour to explore sensitive issues of race, social justice, global conflict and war (Christensen, 2007). The wide range of stories and perspectives delivered through this multimodal medium are capable of inspiring a deeper level of engagement for students as they relate the stories to their own experiences (Chun, 2009).

In an ever-globalizing world, in which the literacy experiences of students, as well as their cultural, social, linguistic, and technological backgrounds, are both diverse and evolving, the use of graphic novels as a pedagogical tool has offered various benefits, English language teachers have had an opportunity to introduce students to a form of literature:

- **Uniquely** placed between the old and the new and offering perspectives not embraced by traditional literary discourse.

- **FUN!!!** Students love the visual and colourful nature of these stories, which provide an opportunity to shift the focus of the lesson.

- **Visuals!** Visuals not only attract students' attention, they help support the meaning of the story. Pictures also make stories easier to remember.

- **Flexible!** It is not necessary to use a full story to take advantage of a graphic novel. With a few charts you can create a whole range of activities for the classroom, for individual, pair, or group work.

- **Used to develop the four skills in an integrated way.** Many of the versions for teaching English have a recorded version. The audio can form the basis of the listening activities.

- **Used to focus on language:** spoken language in dialogues, narrative text and discourse markers in captions, but also indirect speech, descriptive language to describe pictures, and onomatopoeic words such as Splat, Boom, and Yikes!

- **They have been used to integrate technology into lessons.** There are many programs for creating digital comics that students can use to bring their stories to life. They develop creativity and imagination.

- **Used for activities** to do before (prediction work), during (confirmation of predictions), and after (creative work) the students have read the story.

In addition, teachers with the use of graphic novels have promoted:

- **Motivation** Graphic novels powerfully attract and motivate kids to read.

- **Discerning readers** Graphic novels can be a way in for students who are difficult to reach through traditional texts.

- **Benefits for struggling readers, special-needs students, and English-language learners'**

Graphic novels can dramatically help improve reading development for students struggling with language acquisition for various reasons.

3. Result

The comic book has endured over a century of literary scrutiny. Though once relegated to minority status, the medium, most recently accessed through the popularized graphic novel, offers its readers a valuable alternative window through which to view the world. Through the existing literature and studies on the use of graphic novels in classrooms, the question: "How can the multimodal and socially diverse material in graphic novels be used to encourage ELL students and reluctant readers to draw from their own experiences, perspectives and multiliteracies to construct meaning and participate in a critical literacy experience?" was investigated (Rycroft, 2014).

It has been shown that graphic novels have proven effective in reaching students from diverse linguistic and social backgrounds in ways that traditional literature cannot. The scaffolding that the

combination of image and text offers, allows students to both contextualize and conceptualize the words while offering flexibility for interpretation and discussion of meaning. This increased access to the meaning making process helps to include all students in critical discussions surrounding topics of relevance and importance. As many of the topics and viewpoints considered in graphic novels are unique to this medium, they allow students to see that diverse perspectives are both recognized and celebrated through the educational discourse. While the medium itself can act as a springboard from which to investigate other forms of text, the perspectives as well, provide a frame through which further readings can be analysed (Rycroft K. F, 2014).

Furthermore, as the future of literacy is changing with the dynamics of evolving literacy practices shaping the ways in which we communicate, graphic novels offer a unique reading experience to prepare for multimodal communications. Technology and the Internet are rapidly changing the ways we read and process information. As not all schools are equipped to prepare students for the demands of technology's influence on literacy, graphic novels can bridge the gap between print and onscreen reading. A multiliteracies pedagogy embraces the changing needs of literacy and fosters students' critical awareness of multimodal texts by using students' own resources (Chun C. W., 2009).

The ability to critically analyse the multiple forms of literature that surround us is essential in a world that is rife with power relations. Graphic novels, through their diversity of styles, language, interpretations, and most importantly, creators' perspectives, can introduce students to literature they might never otherwise encounter (Schwarz G., 2006). As Schwarz states, "perhaps, new media can serve the old purposes of helping adolescents learn about others, appreciate differences, identify injustice and intolerance, and become motivated to act for a better world. A tall order, but worth a try" (Schwarz G., 2007).

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