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Analyzing Comics in the Class of English

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Abstract

This action research had as objective helping students to improve their reading skills, specifically those related to comprehension and analysis. The participants were twenty six 5th grade students who were about ten years old. Comics were chosen as texts to analyze since they are a way of expression and are also surrounded by symbols and elements, in other words narratives and illustrated pieces of art. Besides, Zimmerman (2008) and Widioko (2015), who have studied and written about their use, support their use as long as they follow the level of the participants. The input should not be too high and however it has to remain challenging for students. There are plenty of ways to analyze a comic. Among we may focus on elements regarding the orientation aspect set, for instance, by Correa and Dominguez (2015) in which components like place, situation and characters are highlighted. For the sake of study and the nature of the setting, later explained we leaned over this approach and the afore-mentioned elements were the chosen to analyze here. Set in a public institution in Medellin (Antioquia, Colombia), this research aims therefore for a focus on the analysis of comics in terms of space, members and situations. Students followed a set of steps to get them familiarized with this kind of reading. We found that by the end, they were capable of analyzing and identifying these said elements it in a shorter amount of time as well as in a more accurate way.

Key words: Comics, place, analysis, reading, public elementary school.

Degree Requirement

This Project was developed and took place as it is necessary to obtain my Bachelor Education Degree in Foreign Languages Teaching (English, French) at the Universidad de Antioquia in Colombia.

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Preface

One of my first approaches to English teaching was in an elementary public school. There, materials and objectives were set from the very beginning, everyday they had something to do. During my first practicum I realized it was not like that everywhere. This first experience showed me how far we were from getting students to achieve the goals they had set from the beginning of the year. Nevertheless, I noticed the observed students seemed to be up to the challenge every time a new material was proposed. While I was attempting to share with them a somehow different kind of English class, I noticed that more than words and vocabulary, these students, as probably a vast majority of them, showed a tendency to enjoy more when drawing. When it came to apply and have them be part of the activities, I focused on written production mixed with them drawing their own comic stripes at first to take advantage of this tendency. Since we started in the second semester of the year, later on the students were promoted to the next grade, and I was assigned to a whole new fifth grade, with different needs and behaviors. The few times I had with them to get to know them better were not enough to make a real profile out of them. My professors suggested changing the focus to reading comprehension, but then again I did not want to drop comics as material to use. My advisor Camilo Dominguez showed me how outstanding it would be to teach students how to analyze a comic in many terms. I started to read about comics and what elements were present within them, I could not find any analysis so basic students were not going to get overwhelmed. I chose a set of elements found in an interesting article for my questions. Students were willing to work more with these activities, and it changed the way they were seeing English Class, with the never ending list of words to learn, to a more interesting focus while learning how to have a more successful interaction with the language.

Context Description

The setting of this project is Institución Educativa Miraflores, a public school in Medellín, Antioquia. The institution is placed in a homonym named neighborhood, right next to a university and three other schools with different social levels. The population in the institution is about 1250 students in primary and secondary levels. Many of these students come from middle-low income homes, with all the background it carries.

Twenty-six students aged between eight and eleven are the participants of this research project along with the cooperating teachers and me. The students are fifth graders with not too good proficiency in English. However, sometimes they express an interest in the language, but they do not seem to have a large amount of practice nor exposure to English. On the other side, the cooperative teacher has a children's teaching degree from the Universidad Cooperativa, a technology on preschool teaching from Tecnologico de Antioquia as well as 20 years of experience in the public sector. As for myself, I am a pre-service foreign language teacher. I am still a student by the time this project took place. Unlike many of my practicum colleagues, this is not my last course. Most of this is because I have been teaching for three years in the private sector. There I have dealt with mixed populations, including children, teens and adults, sometimes all at once in one course. When it comes to my idea about teaching, I always think it is to show students how we can easily learn a language through leisure. Not making it a duty, it is only a new code.

Regarding the English class, it takes place once a week on Thursdays. It has a length of one hundred and five minutes per session. It is thought to be fulfilled in four academic periods or trimesters. The plan that the class follows is a guide called Expedición Currículo. This curriculum is based on the standard goals set by the Ministerio de Educación Nacional.

The focus this program has is communicative; it uses the term Communicative Competence. Then, they divided into linguistic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic competences.

This plan the school takes from this syllabus is mostly divided in different sets of words or vocabularies related to a communicational topic (e.g. City places). They propose five benchmarks to have students assessed: Listening, reading, writing, monologues and conversation.

Problem Statement

The project took place in Colombia, a country in which little research had been done on comics as a possibility to foster reading comprehension as well as basic situational comic analysis. After a literature review through five Colombian journals in the last five years, I could only find one article related to comics. Moreover, I went further to Antioquia and then Medellín; a city with a noticeable background when talking about English as a common language to be taught. Following this, several laws on English teaching have been developed (e.g. Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo) so as to open it up for English to be widespread. I could only suggest that because of this there may be some pressure on the objectives students are supposed to achieve. Towards accomplishing the ideal of English as a second language in Colombia, most of the goals have been upgraded; now they may be way more challenging for students to achieve.

Despite the number of studies conducted in Colombia related to reading comprehension development, not too much has been done when talking about comics. Molina (2013) agrees with this when he highlights the lack of studies on strategies to improve reading comprehension. He is the only one who has published something about comics along the past five years among five chosen journals on teaching. In the same study Molina (2013) applies his proposal in which he uses comics as the main resource to improve students' reading skills. He did this on a population with very similar characteristics to Colombian students; however, it was not set in Colombia but in the United States. Nevertheless, the study showed positive results regarding the improvement of students' language skills.

I could observe the students don't have any actual material to follow, as a consequence their interest regarding English might be affected. Many of them had openly expressed their willingness to learn the language, but they also had admitted their expectations towards a class

in which they enjoy more what they are doing. The students are always active and seem wide awake; this often turns into a large amount of energy coming and going and perhaps it needs to be focused. When observing the teacher, I could get the opportunity to see how she handles the tons of energy her students have. It was remarkable the way she has her own way when it comes to discipline management.

Through a set of diagnostic tests I ran it has been found that students have some gaps regarding verb to be, pronouns and vocabulary. They also showed a pretty accurate idea of the pronunciation of these words. A second diagnostic showed how interested they were in the reading of comics. While doing it they posed more questions as they were looking forward to knowing what was next. The diagnosis pointed out their ability to identify several elements in a comic. When doing these tests it was taken into account the places where the characters were and it was noticeable how well they remembered these words after eight days of their exposure.

By using comic analysis focused activities, an improvement on their capacity to identify the different items present in a comic is expected while exposing them to vocabulary related with their curricular objectives.

Theoretical Framework

Comics

Comics are a sequential art; seeing it as a way of expression where creativity is a must, quite related to a discipline, an art in which images and literature play together to tell an idea or story (Eisner, 1985) which are meant to "graphically represent layout, organization, content, and linkages of information to create a conceptual idea of the information, location, meaning, and appearance" (Varvel and Lindeman, 2005). This kind of art also requires a set of steps in which the creator, writer or illustrator asks him/herself further questions such as what *makes a comic a comic*? And "an alphabet of symbols that represent ideas, objects, space and time" surrounds the panels in a comic (Huizenga, 2006). Ruggieri (2002) points out the huge pool of options we as teachers may have when using comics to encourage students to be interested.

Advantages of Using Comics

Hasssett & Schieble (2007) shares Ruggieri's idea and they also underline how comics actually enhance the students more for they are a great source of stimulation for students with not good enough reading skills or as a way to get attracted to those who may be a little reluctant to reading activities. Comics also profit student's imagination, foster reading comprehension and common sense (Zimmerman, 2008). Besides "knowledge that is represented non linguistically is stored in the form of mental pictures or physically sensations such as sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, and movement" Flynn (2006) A lot of researchers agree with students getting noticeable improvements; moreover some of them claim students get more engaged to written activities as they may look a lot more attractive to them and we could get this to happen we can rely on comics as pretty useful tools.

Comic Analysis

Comics are graphic narratives, a crossbreed between text and images; they mix up together so as to ask for a looking and a reading of a meaning (Chute, 2008) A comic as narrative it is, follows certain stages as it is presented in Correa, D., & Domínguez, C. (2014); being in general those stages: an abstract, orientation, a sequence, an evaluation, a solution and a coda. However, a comic does not follow all these stages; the abstract, for instance, quickly says what the text is about which is something we do not often find in a comic. Nevertheless, orientation establishes the body of a narrative: the characters, the scenario, the situation and actions Derewianka (as cited in Correa & Domínguez, 2014) These are features which can be found a comic; that is why the set of questions used to introduce comic analysis to the students will follow the previously mentioned aspects.

How to Handle With Comics

Liu's (2004) in his work he calls us to be cautious about students' level and to adapt comics, or choose them quite carefully in regards to the student's actual skills. He also notices how important is the input we chose in order to get students attracted to it. Some other studies highlight the need to have a specific rubric to assess students' results , some others go back to an even simpler idea: the input itself, how useful a tool, a comic strip, a storyboard or a two panel draw is for the class? Drolet (2010) in his paper suggests two requirements an input such as a comic must accomplish so it can be seen as convenient for our setting. These two key concepts are Communication (how pragmatic or really handy for actual communication?) And Expression (at what point can it promote an improvement in how they express themselves). Moreover, she goes beyond and sets comics as aids which share the two requirements; even more she claims comics are very capable of mixing these two characteristics.

Reading Comprehension through Comic

Using comics has been proven by Zimmerman to be a great possibility to promote reading comprehension if the settings are the right ones. In this paper it's also anticipated that some features like the kind of comics we use would undoubtedly affect the competence that will be working. A study run by Widioko (2015) showed the effect of using empty balloons comics attracts students and somehow could encourage them to fill the blanks with their very own ideas. It also suggests the need of teaching students firstly how these comics actually look so they could have an idea of what they expected, while doing this Widioko reported a better understanding of the topics they were exposed to. Students showed great potential while taking into account the level they were in (Widioko, 2015). In the same way in his paper the already mentioned showed us how an average person will almost always have the desire to fill it with something either of his own or something he learned before.

Comics are visual aids which are proven to be successful when teaching students while also profiting their imagination, not only when teaching writing, but also reading and thinking. Regarding the topic some studies like Torgensen (2002), Tunmer (1992) and Kress (1996) have actually shown there is real connection between draws and better results when talking about the attitudes the students may have towards an activity. We must never leave aside the requirements an input needs to be considered useful; among these the two key concepts: communication and expression and how comics include both concepts, they even mix them both. It is important to give students interesting characters and strong emotions with pretty attractive thoughts and how it will encourage them to create their own ones.

Research Question

How might the use of comics foster students' narrative analysis skills?

General Objective

To make students find more comprehensible and enjoyable the topics they are exposed to in class with more draws as they are shown on how to analyze the images they are given.

Specific Objectives

To make topics more comprehensible to students.

To reduce the amount of grammatical input given to students per class

To give students the tools to analyze a comic.

To have students fulfilling the objectives set in class

Actions

In order to fully support my results I have chosen a set of tools to gather the information I need to achieve. I have decided to use both quantitative and qualitative data. Therefore, among the tools I used, there is a series of tests run with the intention of gathering grades on grammar.

Pre-test

To get a better picture of the students' abilities using the language, I prepared a test which included a match-up activity regarding verb to be, a filling the blanks set of questions about the days of the week, some family members and a section where they were supposed to draw three city places and name them as well.

Journal Entries

Everyday different activities and interactions took place in the classroom, it was then necessary to record in some way all of these events happening in the daily development of the class. Hence, a journal was needed to fulfil this role. In a series of journals written right after the sessions I have attempted to illustrate the class as it was during my practicum.

Interviews

A journal can only show the vision of its writer, consequently a tool which could give a different view of what happened while I was there and how it is when I am not. Not only the view of the students, but also the teacher's thoughts about the class, have an important role. Taking into account this, I had an interview with the collaborative teacher in which we talked about her opinion of the students, her academic achievements and her experience in and outside *Institución Educativa Miraflores*. Besides, at the end of one of the sessions I had a word with three students regarding the class and the teacher.

First Attempt of Analysis

In order to compare and familiarize students with what I was expecting them to do, I asked them to analyze three comics, one of them in Spanish. The first two comics were drawn by cartoonists from The United States of America. The one in Spanish was an Argentine one. Five questions were made to them regarding where, who, what, why, by who.

Second Attempt of Analysis

Once the students had been familiarized with the expectations I had them to fulfill when doing an analysis of a comic, I ran another second attempt of analysis, but now they are supposed to have the tools to make a better one in contrast with the other. This time I chose Dik Browne's Hägar the Horrible, Bill Waterson's Calvin & Hobbes, Quino's Mafalda with the very same questions they had in the first attempt.

Development of Actions

Before I started my plan I had the chance to get a session with the students without implementing anything. During this first session students were introduced to a couple of places in the city and the basics on verb to be and family members. Then, the second session they had a test regarding what they were introduced to previously. During the test the students showed little care in the way they were answering as they openly admitted they had not studied for it. Three classes after this test, students were introduced to the first attempt of analysis as they were first shown some comics. This activity took the whole class as they asked for what they were supposed to do. Some of them did not actually do the activity since they copied because the objective of the activity was not clear for them.

A modeling was implemented, I brought another set of comics with almost the same questions they faced in the first attempt. Step by step I showed them what they were supposed to find and analyze in comics regarding the situation, the characters, the place, the objective and the author of the comic. As we were moving on the questions the students started to show what might be called interest in the activity. Three weeks later in which students did not have class for two sessions and the other was thought to make students get more vocabulary on what they can do in the city places they have been exposed to before. At the end of the last session, I had a space to talk with the students in charge of the cleaning and asked them some questions regarding the class and the teacher. They did not hesitate to answer my questions. After this I have got the opportunity of implementing the second attempt of analysis, this time a comic was removed and replaced by one more accurate for the students. The students already knew what to do and the analysis was done in twenty minutes. Students however pointed out the fact they were asked to do almost the same activity. Before continuing with the classes aiming for the objectives of the trimester, I had an interview with the CT in which we discussed her ideal of a class, her opinion on the

students' abilities, behavior and improvement since the first session; as well as her career and adherence to the *Magisterio*.

Findings and Interpretations

In order to highlight the improvement of students when analyzing a comic I took data from the first and second attempt of analysis. I firstly compared them regarding the time, the questions they made during both activities and the responses they gave. I took the interviews and the observations and categorized the information there within five categories including situations, students' and collaborative teacher's opinion as well as my perceptions regarding the implementations I did. Finally I took the grades the students got in the pre-test.

Time

Both the first and the second attempt activities were planned so it took the students about a quarter of an hour. The questions were both in English and Spanish so they did not have to make questions in terms of what was asked there in the paper. The first attempt took students one hour and twenty minutes to finish it. The second one took them twenty minutes.

Questions

As the test was thought to be as simple as possible (e.g. they were in English and Spanish), not many doubts were expected to be raised related the understanding of them; however, the students during the first attempt questioned about the meaning of some questions even in Spanish, some of them as the population or the objective the comic was intended for, seemed confusing for them. Once in the second attempt, the students already had the experience of these kinds of interrogations so they raised their own about specific information in the comic.

Responses

Some information was not clear for students at first, responses like *a boy* regarding the characters were pretty common during the first attempt. The situation was often confused with

the place and the objective and population of the comic were usually blank in their responses. Nevertheless, in the second attempt students were not only able to give more accurate responses (like the names of the characters and what was happening in the strips), but also capable of recognizing some of the places and objectives the comics had.

Experiences in situ

During the class, whether they were doing one of the attempts or not, students showed some behavior noticed by the teacher, by themselves and by me. During the first sessions in which students were only getting familiarized with the vocabulary they were going to face in the trimester, not very amusing attitudes arose among them. In the interview with the students they openly stated the lack of interest among them, for the activities were repetitive. According to her, students had an incredible lack of respect and sense of authority. However, once the first attempt had taken place, students started to show some interest in the activities, they were more willing to participate. The teacher later highlighted how they liked the classes where comics were used as they proceed to identify the different elements in it. After the Second Attempt while making a comment all together (students and I) shared some opinions, among them some highlighted how the now better understanding of the activities made them more interesting. All these allow us to bring out how students were more likely to do these kinds of activities.

Conclusions

Through the implementation of comics in the classroom several objectives have arisen. The main goal was to have students familiar with comics as a way of expression, also highlighting how texts are not always presented as plain words, but also with images. As I stated before, students found it easier to relate the meaning of the words when images were introduced along with the written word and set of words. Another idea was to show students how comics comprises certain elements which help understand them better: the characters, the place, the objective, the situation and the author. When trying to introduce this to students, some of them found it hard to understand; however, once they were led with someone (me) giving directions to answer the questions needed to be solved to get these elements: who? Where? What? Finally, getting the students to achieve the objectives set by the institution was one of the focuses I had into account too. Common city places were shown through comics and the questions set to analyze them. It was remarkable the change it operated on the students. By the end of the implementations students were able to analyze a comic in the terms set during the moderation and the first attempt. In the same way I noticed a better response regarding the learning of the aimed vocabulary.

Reflections

It was a whole new challenge when they told me I was going to have a different group from the one I got previous data: they were new students, a new teacher, new gaps and interests. It was hard for them to accept me at first. Their discipline was very hard to handle and they were used to doing their will. However, time passed by and we got to know each other a little more. We worked hard to fill a lot of spaces they had regarding vocabulary and pronouns. At the beginning many of the actions were delayed for they were working in these review activities. This process was both demanding and interesting as I had the opportunity to learn how to deal with more than one group and how the ideas one might have could easily change from one year to the other. Every minute in class was full of learning for us and not only regarding English. They shared their dreams, their likes and dislikes and felt comfortable with me; I could say it was the first victory.

I showed them the comics and they made a big noise out of it. They started to give names they knew and to make questions regarding the ones I had brought them beforehands. The teacher asked me if I was going to teach comics or English. I explained to the students how comics were full of symbols and messages and how they have a story and how every story has some elements. I felt better with this reaction; they were really interested and were looking forward to using them.

On the other hand, the writing and reporting of these experiences were quite hard for me to accomplish. Gathering the information and analyzing it was not very easy. Both the students and I had a full week gap in the sessions and it reduced the amount of time we had. Nevertheless, I had a great experience with the students. I have gotten the opportunity to know better how public teaching really works as I learned how to write down my impressions on it.

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Appendix A

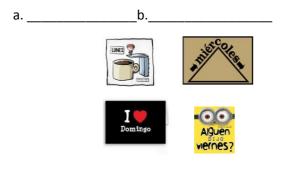
Pre-test

EXAM A1 II

INSTITUCIÓN EDUCATIVA MIRAFLORES

NAM	E:	GRADE:
1.	Write the word in English.	
a.	Hermano	
b.	Hermana	
c.	Papá	
d.	Mamá	
e.	Abuelo	
f.	Abuela	

2. Put the name of the picture.



C._____

d._____

3. Complete the questions using the verb *to be*.

AM ARE IS

ashe from C

b. _____I a student?

c. ____you a doctor?

- d. _____he good looking?
- e. _____we friends?
- f. _____they relate?
- 4. Use the correct *WH* question.

what, where

- a. _____is your name?
- b. ____are you from?
- c. _____are they?
- d. _____is your favorite food?
- e. _____is she from?
- 5. Use the correct possessive

my, your, his, her, our, their

- a. ____(mi) notebook.
- b. ____(tu) pencil.
- c. _____(su/she) eraser.

- d. _____(su/he) cellphone.
- e. ____(sus) shirts.
- f. ____(nuestro) car.

First Attempt

NAME:	DATE:
Nombre	Fecha

WHAT IS A <mark>COMIC</mark>? ¿Qué es un <mark>comic</mark>?



Second Attempt

WHO IS THE CHARACTER? ¿Quién es el personaje?

WHERE IS HE? ¿Dónde está él?

WHO IS THE AUTHOR? ¿*Quién es el autor?*

NAME:	DATE:
Nombre	Fecha

WHAT IS A <mark>COMIC</mark>? ¿Qué es un <mark>comic</mark>?



WHO IS THE CHARACTER? ¿Quién es el personaje?

WHERE IS HE? ¿Dónde está él?

WHERE IS THIS COMIC FROM? ¿Dónde puedes encontrar este comic?