

Rosana Satorre Cuerda (Ed.)

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Rosana Satorre Cuerda

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NOTA EDITORIAL: Las opiniones y contenidos de los textos publicados en esta obra son de responsabilidad exclusiva de los autores.

29. Graphic novel as a didactic resource: dependence of the results on the academic level of the students

Dubova, Veronika; Zaragoza Castelló, María Gloria; Revis, Andrew; Palmero, Mercedes; Formigós Bolea, Juan Antonio

Universidad de Alicante

ABSTRACT

We have implemented a teaching model using graphic novel to help English language learners with vocabulary acquisition. The experience has been carried out at three different levels of English language proficiency: (1) basic level (A2-B1) with VET students of Administration and Finance, (2) intermediate level with first-year students of the degree in English Studies at the University of Alicante (level B1) and (3) advanced level with fourth-year students of the degree in Translation and Interpreting at the same university (level C1-C2). The students did a reading exercise in two parts: the first in graphic novel format and the second presented as a plain text. They were asked to detect the meaning of 20 words, 8 of which appeared in the graphic novel part, 8 in the plain text part and 4 words that did not appear in the texts, in order to detect possible self-learning. The students answered the test before and after the session. Later they also filled in a satisfaction questionnaire. The results show that students learn vocabulary introduced with visual support better, especially at lower levels. The satisfaction survey manifests that most of the students liked the experience and want to repeat it. Considering these results, we conclude that the use of graphic novel for teaching vocabulary is an effective resource, especially at low levels of language proficiency.

PALABRAS CLAVE: vocabulary, graphic novel, language learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Linguistic competence in several languages is an essential element for the personal, academic and professional enrichment of students, broadening their options for mobility, access to different types of education and better integration into the labour market. Aware of this reality, fifty years ago the General Education Act introduced the teaching of English for the first time in Spain at the compulsory education stage (Ocaña Villuendas, López Gayarre, Morales Gálvez, Arrimadas Gómez, Ramírez Nueda, 2001). In the specification of this first implementation, it was already recommended to apply a teaching methodology different from that of any other subject (OM. 24-X-77, 1977), without compromising the achievement of some very ambitious objectives. By way of example, the aforementioned ministerial order proposed that students should learn to use a “basic vocabulary” of 250/300 words in the sixth year, 300/350 more words in the seventh year and 350/400 in the eighth year. That is, 900/1050 words at a level equivalent to the current second year of Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO). In spite of the good intentions, these objectives were not achieved by most students.

Despite the good intentions of educational programmes, despite the desire of families and society in general for children to learn English, and despite globalisation and technological neologisms, the linguistic competence of Spanish students is far from what is desired. At the Council of Europe meeting held in Barcelona in 2002, governments committed themselves to redouble their efforts to improve the multilingual competence of European citizens, but it does not seem that success has been

achieved either, at least in Spain. Proof of this is that in 2012, the results of the European survey on language competence concluded that Spanish students are far behind our European partners, and half of those surveyed declared that they receive private English tuition to complement the lessons they receive at school (P.176). These poor results in comparison with Europe are constant over time: the latest Education First report from 2020 ranks Spain 34th in the world in terms of English language proficiency, behind all European countries.

Spain's failure in the teaching of English should lead us to reflect on teaching methodology. If fifty years ago it was recommended to use a different methodology to that of other subjects, the results show that we must continue to try new teaching strategies to see if results are improved.

As a small contribution to the search for alternative methodologies, in this paper we show an experience based on the use of graphic novels as a didactic resource, especially to try to improve students' reading skills and the learning of new vocabulary.

The concept of the "graphic novel" is not new. In literature, it seems commonly accepted that the first mention of this term was made by Richard Kyle in 1964 (De Blasio, 2020), (Patrick, 2011), (Panton & Walters, 2019) and that the first self-proclaimed graphic novel as such was *A Contract with God*, published by Eisner in 1978 (Lacoste, 2019), (Panton, M., & Walters, 2019). However, in Spain, the first mention of this term was made with the series "Travesuras de bebé (Baby's pranks)" in the magazine *Monos* (1904-1908) (Guiral i Conti, 2017) (Figure 1), although it does not correspond to the current concept of graphic novel. In any case, the first graphic novel as such was also earlier than the American one: it was published by Ediciones Reguera (Figure 2), whose presentation stated: "The graphic novel will introduce you to the best novels of world literature by means of explained drawings. Each issue will contain the complete plot of a novel of love, adventure, passion or intrigue, always dedicated to the elderly. Two issues will appear every month". (Gómez Salamanca, 2013, p. 69).



Figure 1. Baby's pranks.

IMAGE EXTRACTED FROM: *Monos Magazine*, No. 1. (1904). Downloaded from the Hemeroteca Digital. National Library of Spain. Downloaded from: <http://hemerotecadigital.bne.es/issue.vm?id=0003819813&search=&lang=en>



Figure 2. Collection "la novela gráfica", number 1.

IMAGE EXTRACTED FROM: Tebeosfera, cultura gráfica. La novela gráfica, Ediciones Reguera EMSA. Downloaded from: https://www.tebeosfera.com/colecciones/novela_grafica_la_1949_reguera.html

Despite being pioneers in the creation of the graphic novel, the commercial success of the graphic novel in Spain came in the 1980s, after the success of this concept in the USA, which was introduced in Spain as “comics for adults”.

The use of graphic novels as a didactic resource is not new either. It was published many years ago that students prefer reading comics to conventional texts (Witty, 1941), so it is reasonable to think of their use as a didactic resource. Some works propose its use for non-language arts classes like math, science, art, social studies, and foreign languages (Guarino, 1998) and also in order to bring literature closer to young people (Schwarz, 2002). In fact, in the proper Spanish context, it seems that its use is becoming widespread to achieve didactic objectives of all kinds, such as to raise awareness of the effects of the civil war in the Basque Country (Saitua, 2018), the construction of feminist identity (Fuentes, 2020), the didactics of writing in one’s own language (spelling, accentuation, punctuation and writing) (Hernández-Meneses, 2019), the Jihad (Brooks, Cutler, Sanjakdar & Liou, 2020), and even for learning Foundations of Physiotherapy (Rocamora-Pérez, López-Liria, Aguilar-Parra, Padilla-Góngora, Díaz-López & Vargas-Muñoz, 2017).

In the specific case of English language teaching, there are experiences that positively value the use of this didactic resource (1) for the improvement of reading comprehension (Kennedy & Chinokul, 2020), (Aldahash & Altalhab, 2020) because it gives instant gratification to the student, superior to that of conventional texts (Kennedy & Chinokul, 2020), (2) for vocabulary improvement (Rothenberger, 2019) (Handayani, 2018) and (3) to increase motivation towards English language learning (Hoffman, 2018) (Bakar & Yunus, 2020).

The objective of this work is to check the effectiveness of the procedure and analyse the extent to which its usefulness may be different depending on the initial level of the students’ knowledge.

In this same section we have seen numerous papers that defend the effectiveness of the use of the graphic novel as a didactic resource for vocabulary learning, but in none have we found a comparison among different levels.

2. METHODS

2.1. Description of context and participants

The experience has been carried out at three different levels of English language proficiency: (1) basic learner level (level A2-B1) with students of higher vocational training in Administration and Finance, (2) intermediate level with students of the first year of the degree in English Studies at the University of Alicante (level B1) and (3) advanced level with students of the fourth year of the degree in Translation and Interpreting at the same university (level C1-C2).

2.2. Instruments

No extraordinary tools were needed for this work. The texts were part of an entire chapter of a graphic novel. One half of the chapter was photocopied from the original and the other half was converted into plain text describing the scenes depicted in the vignettes and reproducing the dialogue. The words for the pre- and post-test were selected on the basis of their complexity, assuming that most of them would be unfamiliar to the students.

The pre-test and post-test were administered to the students in paper, and the responses were then entered into an online form created ad-hoc to automate the tabulation.

The satisfaction survey was carried out using online forms and questionnaires from the University of Alicante.

2.3. Procedures

The experience consisted in administering, as a normal class activity, a reading exercise in two parts: the first in graphic novel format and the second presented as a plain text. These two parts formed a complete chapter of a graphic novel. In each of the parts, students were expected to learn eight new words, idioms or expressions. In order to analyse the effectiveness of the procedure, a questionnaire was designed in which the students were asked to detect the meaning of those 20 words: eight words were taken out of the graphic novel, eight more from the plain text and four words that did not appear in the text and were not mentioned in class, whose purpose in the questionnaire was to detect the possible self-learning of the students, that is, to what extent they are able to and eager to look up the meaning of new or unknown words, without the need for the teacher's explanation. The students answered the questionnaire before and after the session. Afterwards, and by means of another questionnaire, they were asked about the degree of acceptance and enjoyment of the activity. Learning was quantified by measuring the increase in the number of correct answers in the final test compared to the initial one.

3. RESULTS

The classroom intervention consisted of a twenty-word vocabulary test (the PRE-TEST) containing eight words whose content was to be explained by means of a graphic novel, eight words that were explained according to the traditional textual method and four words that were neither in any text nor explained, but which acted as a control, in order to quantify the students' possible autonomous learning. Once the didactic intervention had been carried out, the same test (the POST-TEST) was repeated, thanks to which the students' evolution could be quantified.

As far as the objective improvement of learning outcomes is concerned, the data in Table 1 show that the didactic intervention was positive in all cases, even in cases where a word was not explained in class and it were the students who looked up the meaning after seeing it in the pre-test.

Table 1. Number and percentage of hits for each of the questions (by types of question).

		PRE-TEST		POST-TEST	
		Hits (N)	Hits (%)	Hits N	Hits (%)
Vocabulary introduced through graphic novel	Question 1	44	37,93	98	90,74
	Question 2	108	93,10	107	99,07
	Question 3	76	65,52	96	88,89
	Question 4	27	23,28	64	59,26
	Question 5	98	84,48	106	98,15
	Question 6	59	50,86	86	79,63
	Question 7	64	55,17	76	70,37
	Question 8	73	62,93	86	79,63

		PRE-TEST		POST-TEST	
		Hits (N)	Hits (%)	Hits N	Hits (%)
Vocabulary entered using plain text	Question 1	64	55,17	96	88,89
	Question 2	83	71,55	98	90,74
	Question 3	3	2,59	108	100,00
	Question 4	43	37,07	82	75,93
	Question 5	97	83,62	95	87,96
	Question 6	102	87,93	102	94,44
	Question 7	50	43,10	52	48,15
	Question 8	57	49,14	94	87,04
Vocabulary that was not explained	Question 1	37	31,90	68	62,96
	Question 2	64	55,17	77	71,30
	Question 3	86	74,14	96	88,89
	Question 4	86	79,63	95	81,90

Statistical analysis of the results shows that students learn vocabulary introduced through the graphic novel better than through plain text: there was 24.04% increase in the number of correct answers for words introduced through the graphic novel and 18.50% for words introduced through plain text. Segmentation by level shows that the difference is mostly at the lower levels, but the effect is almost irrelevant at the more advanced levels. (see Table 2).

Table 2. Overall improvement of the results according to the procedure used to introduce the word to the learners.

		Hits (N)	Misses (N)	Hits (%)	Misses (%)	Improvement (%)
Vocabulary introduced through graphic novel	POST-TEST	718	145	83,20	16,80	24,04
	PRE-TEST	549	379	59,16	40,84	
Vocabulary entered using plain text	POST-TEST	726	137	84,13	15,87	18.50
	PRE-TEST	609	319	65,63	34,38	
Vocabulary that was not explained	POST-TEST	327	105	75,69	24,31	14,91
	PRE-TEST	282	182	60,78	39,22	

However, this improvement is not homogeneous. The results show that the improvement differs according to the level of the students (see Table 3). Vocational training students, who are not very familiar with the English language, show very little improvement in vocabulary knowledge when there is no teacher intervention, but they are the ones who improve the most when the graphic novel is used as a resource. First-year English students, who are more inclined to study the language, improve

with or without the teacher's intervention, although they also show better results when vocabulary is explained using the graphic novel. Translation and Interpreting students improve in all cases, with and without didactic intervention (see Table 3 and Figure 3).

Table 3. Overall improvement of the results according to the procedure used to introduce the vocabulary to the students and their academic level.

	Non-Intervention	Plain text	Graphic novel
CFGS Administration and Finance	5%	21,98%	29,49%
Degree in English Studies	12,98%	11,78%	20,91%
Degree in Translation and Interpreting	20,29%	25,61%	27,67%

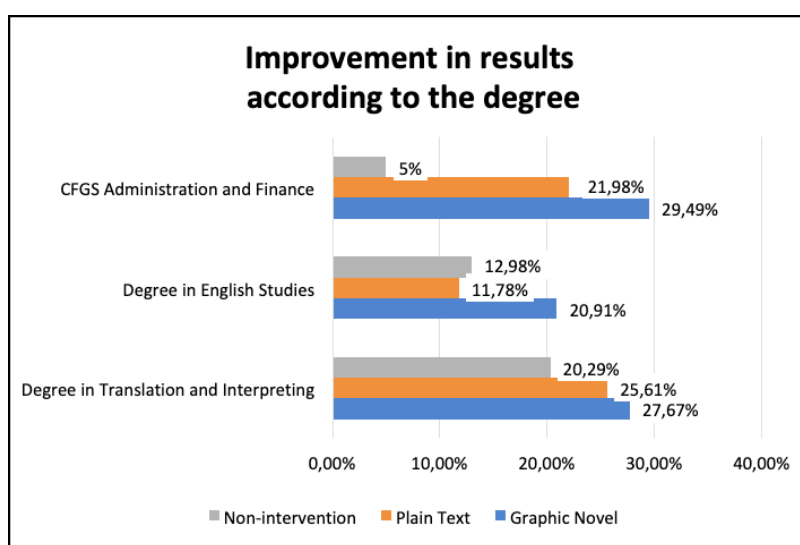


Figure 3. Improvement in results according to the degree.

To find out how satisfied students were with the use of the graphic novel, an anonymous online survey was carried out and answered by 109 people, 75.29% of whom were women. The majority age groups were 20-24 years old (59.63%) and under 20 years old (33.94%).

The analysis of the satisfaction survey shows that (1) 92.66% liked the experience (see Table and Figure 4) and (2) 95.41% would like to do more exercises using the graphic novel (see Table and Figure 5).

Table 4. Answer to the question "Did you like the experience?"

	Total	%
Yes, I liked it	101	92,66%
I would have liked it better if it were just comics	4	3,67%
I would have liked it better if the language had been easier	2	1,83%
I prefer traditional reading exercises	2	1,83%

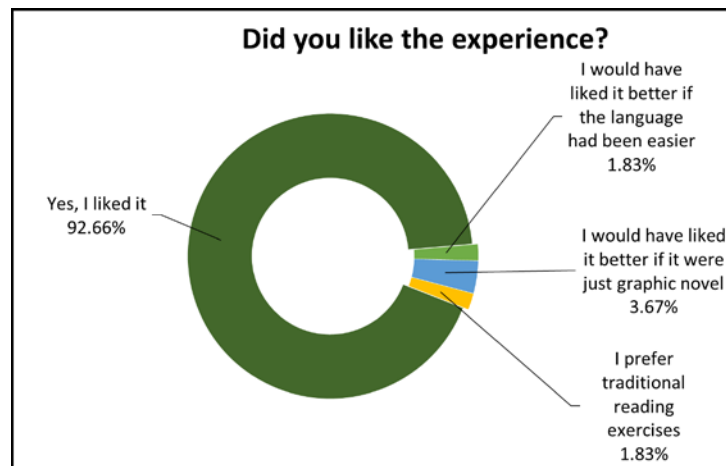


Figure 4. Answers given to the question: Did you like the experience?

Table 5. Answers given to the question: “Would you like to do more similar exercises using graphic novels or comics in your English class?”

	Total	%
Yes, I found it interesting.	104	95.41%
It's not clear to me.	3	2.75%
It is boring.	1	0.92%
It doesn't bring anything new.	1	0.92%

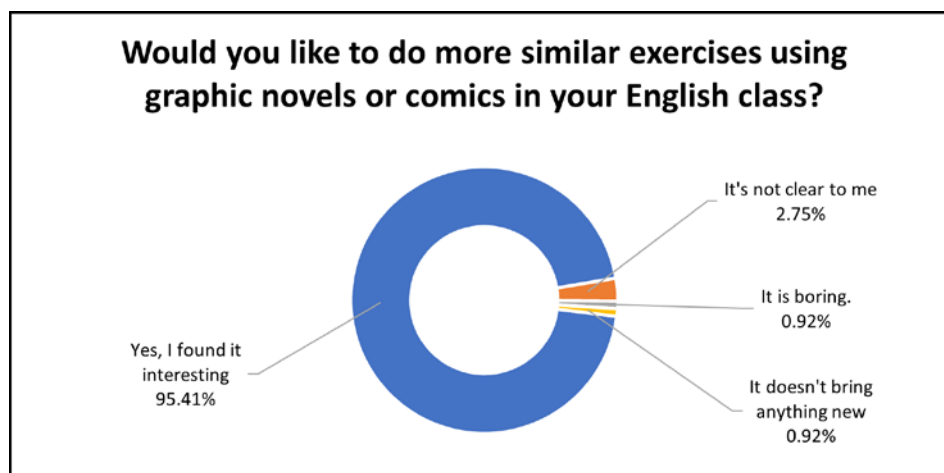


Figure 5. Answers given to the question: Would you like to do more similar exercises using graphic novels or comics in your English class?

However, with regard to the level of difficulty of the texts, the responses were less unanimous and less positive. 66.06% of the respondents considered the texts to be of similar difficulty to the usual class exercises, and 31.19% considered that they had found the texts a little difficult to understand. In any case, the very negative response options were practically non-existent.

Table 6. Answers given to the question: “Rate the DIFFICULTY compared to “normal” reading exercises in English class.”

	Total	%
Similar difficulty: easy to understand	72	66,06%
It took me a WHILE to understand it, but it wasn't a drama either	34	31,19%
I had a VERY hard time understanding it, I needed a lot of help to understand it	2	1,83%
I think it was IMPOSSIBLE to do	1	0,92%

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The experience has been positive from a pedagogical point of view and has also been well accepted by the students. The analysis of the results has shown that the higher levels of English proficiency have acquired a self-learning capacity that makes them less dependent on the didactic resource used. Proof of this is that in the Translation students there was an improvement of more than 20% in the number of correct answers in the words that were not explained at any point. This percentage is one third lower for the students of English Studies and 75% lower for the vocational training students.

On the other hand, perhaps related to the above, it is shown that the lower levels of instruction are particularly sensitive to the teaching methodology used. Perhaps because for them English is an obligation and not a vocation, there is a very positive response to innovative methodology. It can be seen that when there is no explanation, there is no improvement in vocabulary knowledge, and there is no motivation, but when a traditional teaching model is implemented, they improve their performance and when this is done with a didactic resource that motivates them, they improve their performance much more than the students at higher levels.

In view of these results, we conclude that the use of graphic novel for teaching vocabulary is a possible and effective resource, especially at low levels of language proficiency.

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