

Guessing Vocabulary through Context in a Multimodal Medium: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

An extensive reading component has become a staple part of many EFL classrooms. While graded readers and similar texts have been shown to have a positive impact on second language learners, there recently has been a paradigm shift in teaching which reflects a more multiliterate curriculum. However, before any important changes can be implemented, rigorous and thorough research is imperative before introducing it to any course. With their increasing popularity in the mainstream media, American comic books have seen their interest rise among people of all ages. This unique medium has also shown to be significant in promoting literacy among native English speakers. However, with EFL learners, comic books often contain unknown vocabulary which may interfere with the understanding of the story. This study will investigate whether vocabulary can be learned in context through comic books, given its unique multimodal nature.

Introduction

Comic books have been long perceived as an inferior form of literature and had even been accused of actually discouraging literacy (Wertham, 1955). In fact, comics were blamed for everything from teaching children how to commit crimes to promoting homosexual behavior (Lent & Dunlavey, 2012). It was because of this misconception that the term 'graphic novel' was coined, as it is often referred to in academic circles. This was done in order to legitimize the medium and make it more marketable to a more adult audience (Chute, 2008). However, as more recent articles have shown, comic books are a unique form of literature in which many children find highly engaging, and can even lead to a

greater interest in reading (Norton, 2003). This is because these children tend to identify strongly with the characters presented in comics and thus a form of ownership takes place over the material. However, despite the vast amounts of papers written about the validity of comic books, there has been little done in the way of actual deconstruction of this particular multimodal medium.

The way comic books are actually read and understood have been found to be much more complicated than many have perceived in the past (McCloud, 1993). On the surface, they look to be simply a blend of sequential text and imagery in order to convey a story. These stories typically are told in just a few dozen pages and this may lead to the assumption that they are rather easy to read. However, this has been found to be a serious misconception. According to Schodt (1988), the average comic book reader spends more time per page than in Japanese manga. An analysis of American comics revealed that each panel has a plethora of information in both the text and illustrations. In general, there is more of an abundance of dialogue and narrations to accompany colorful and vibrant drawings. These pictures often contain more detail and are more intricately constructed than their manga counterparts. Due to their intricacy, the question arises whether or not introducing comics as an extensive reading component is appropriate for EFL learners.

Arguably the biggest obstacle for any reader, native or non-native, is traversing through the unknown vocabulary presented to them in any given text. For EFL learners, this can prove to be a significant source of frustration and may lead to a disinterest in reading as a whole. Obviously, the greater the number of words that a reader does not understand, the more likely it is for the comprehension of the text to be hampered. There has been extensive research on the relationship between vocabulary and the comprehensibility of books (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006); (Waring & Takaki, 2003). What has been found is that in order for a non-native reader to reasonably comprehend a story requires a 98% coverage

of all words (Hu and Nation, 2000). The ramifications of this study have been impactful in the way educators have approached choosing the materials that are chosen for extensive reading material. This means that a student can only have two or three unknown words per page, depending on the book that they are reading. Comic books, due to their inherent nature, contain fewer words per page than other traditional pieces of literature. Therefore, the question arises to whether there are also difficult words that need to be negotiated by the reader. If so, does not knowing these words impact comprehension similarly?

Nation (1985) argues that guessing vocabulary through context is a valuable strategy that can be utilized to help understand written text. However, comic books are very different from text-only prose in that they also have illustrations to help aid the reader in understanding the story. Each panel in a comic book can convey a certain message with only the text alone. With the pictures included, the story is further enhanced and adds a dynamic element unique to this particular form of literature. However, very little research has been done with comic books and how readers perceive them.

Participants

There were a total of 38 total students for this study. All the participants were Japanese learners majoring in English at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). All were 1st year students at the time of this study and had given consent to use their data prior to the publication of this article.

Methodology

Before the implementation of the study, it was necessary to choose an appropriate comic book for the participants to read. With a seemingly infinite variety of comic books at the disposal of readers, it can be rather daunting to settle on just one. In order to narrow

down the amount of choices, various restrictions and parameters were set in place, which included the amount of unknown vocabulary, genre and total length.

The first and most important requirement was that the potential comic book had to have the right amount of difficult vocabulary for the students to be exposed to. The current bestselling titles in The United States contained a vast amount of advanced vocabulary that was deemed too hard for EFL students. As a rule of thumb, it was decided that each page should not have any more than 4-5 difficult words. For this reason, many titles were shelved and ultimately eliminated from consideration. It was not surprising to discover that all of these titles contained many complex words since they were all geared more towards more adult readers.

The elimination of so many titles necessitated the need for a reevaluation of the genres being examined. Superhero genres (Spider-man, Batman and The Justice League) and horror genres (The Walking Dead) are among the most popular titles in America today. However, as stated before, these books contain a wide array of difficult vocabulary and would prove too discouraging for students to read. One genre that would seemingly be able to bridge this gap is a selection from a children's genre of comic books. However, even with the narrowed scope, there still is the lingering issue of how to select among the thousands of available kid's titles.

It was eventually decided that the comic book *Superman Family* (Baltazar & Franco, 2012) be used. The comic is based upon a familiar and very well-known character. In addition, Superman is easily recognizable, regardless of age, gender or culture. This particular title is aimed at a more younger demographic than its more mature sister titles. Just a brief glance at the content will reveal a more adolescent discourse that can be easily comprehended by most all EFL learners. In addition, the length of each book is about 20 pages, so it can be read in a reasonable amount of time.

After the comic book was chosen, a lengthy analysis was performed in order to discern exactly how many ‘difficult’ words were contained in the text. In order to identify this vocabulary, the entire comic book was transcribed and then processed through Lextutor, a web based word profiling software program. The words that lied outside of the K-2000 word General Service List (West, 1953) were assumed to be vocabulary that the participants of this study would find difficult.

After the words were identified, a pre-test with all said vocabulary was administered to the students. This was given to discern which words exactly the students did not know in *Superman Family*. After this was completed, a personalized handout with all unknown vocabulary was made and used to accompany the *Superman Family* comic book. The participants were asked to read the story in its entirety and then try to guess through context the words that they missed on the pre-test. The worksheet also contained open-ended questions in order to understand the thought process of the readers. The results were evaluated as correct, partially correct or incorrect. Partially correct signified that the students understood the gist of the word, but was unable to ascertain the nuance associated with it. Completely correct scores were only awarded to those responses that were able to satisfy that criteria. After the worksheets were finished, select students were then asked to participate in a formal interview to gain further insight on their thought process while reading the comic book.

Results and Discussion

After a careful analysis of *Superman Family*, the comic was found to have a total of 372 unique words (not including proper nouns). Of this total, 44 of these words were found to lie outside of the K-2000 General Service list. 36 out of these off-list words were chosen as part of the pre-test (eight were discarded as they were similar to the words found in their

native Japanese language or were deemed too easy). Table 1 describes the breakdown of the vocabulary in more detail, while results of the pre-test and post-worksheet can be found in Table 2.

Table 1: Lexis Range

WORD LIST	FAMILIES	TYPES	TOKENS	PERCENT
1000	205	250	776	80.25%
2000	37	38	60	6.20%
OFF-LIST	N/A	71	114	11.79%

Table2: Pre-Test Results

	Unknown Words (pre-test average)	Partially Known Words (worksheet average)	Completely Known Words (worksheet average)
Group 1 (19 students)	13.69	14%	29%
Group 2 (19 students)	13.32	21%	23%

As Table 2 shows, both test groups averaged just over 13 unknown words before the comic book was introduced to each participant. Of that set, less than half of the unknown words were either totally or partially guessed correctly. This means that over half of the words were not successfully guessed through context. Through close examination of the data and student interviews, some startling reasons for this revealed themselves. Because of the length constraints of this paper, three samples from the comic will be provided to further understand the results.

Picture 1 is an illustration of a meteorite from *Superman Family*. In the pre-test, seven students were not familiar with the word ‘meteorite’. However, after reading the panel, all but one was able to determine the meaning of the word. Some of the responses described

the word meteorite as a 'space rock' or 'a huge rock from another planet'. This example showed the instant benefits of having a picture to accompany the narration and dialogue.

Picture 1:



Picture 2 was another panel taken from the comic book and shows a man drinking a cup of coffee, accompanied by the action words drink and sip. 27 students did not know the word 'sip' prior to reading the comic, however 18 could partially deduce what this word meant (while three were completely correct). All of these 21 responses contained some form of the word 'drink', 'inhale' or 'sound'. When asked about their thought process, most all of the students cited the man drinking and the accompanying action word 'drink' as the main part of their reasoning. This shows how illustrations can help aid in comprehension, but still miss the nuance of the word.

Picture 2:



Finally, Picture 3 is an illustration of the villain of the story standing next to his battle suit. The panel clearly shows him taking off the cloth to reveal the suit in all its glory. The word ‘drain’ was used in the pre-test and 19 students did not know the meaning of the word. After the reading, only three were able to completely or partially get the correct answer. This particular panel proved to be the most insightful as many of the participants thought the word ‘drain’ meant to show or reveal. In the student interviews, some students relied solely on the pictures only to guess the words. However, as shown, this can be misleading. So, in over half of the cases in this study, the vocabulary could not be guessed correctly because either the context was not helpful or even deceptive.

Picture 3:



Conclusion

It was the hope of this study to show that vocabulary can be learned through the context of comic books, but the results clearly showed mixed results. In many cases throughout the

Superman Family comic, the reader was able to deduce the meaning of the word with the surrounding text and accompanying pictures. In other cases, the true meaning of the word was found to be either not helpful or even a bit misleading. Further research on this topic is certainly needed in order to help support these findings. It is the opinion of this paper that comic books should still be considered as part of a multimodal reading curriculum. However, instructors using comic books in the classroom may want to introduce the vocabulary to their students first in order to negate any confusion. Possible future research could attempt to address how much of an impact not knowing vocabulary will aid overall understanding of the story.

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