



Going Graphic

*Comics at Work in the
Multilingual Classroom*



Stephen Cary

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Questions

Teachers' Questions About Comics

In the last chapter, we answered two fundamental questions about using comics with second language learners: Why use them? and Do they work? In this chapter, we tackle a host of additional questions regarding the ins and outs of comics implementation.

Teachers have questions, of course, with any new instructional material. Comics, however, always generate more than their fair share. And for good reason. Long-standing concerns over the appropriateness and educational value of the materials have made them rare birds in the schools. Consequently, few teachers have ever seen comics “in flight”—enthusiastically read, discussed, written about, and created by students. Moreover, few have ever seen comics-centered activities modeled or even heard comics mentioned in university teacher-prep programs or staff development workshops.

This scarcity of both comics and information on how to use them produces a ton of questions any time I’m in a university class, school, or conference and mention The Fusco Brothers, Baldo, Alison Dare, or a favorite graphic novel in the same breath with second language development. Over the past several years, I’ve kept track of the many questions teachers pose about comics. The teachers have come from all grade and experience levels and their most frequently asked

questions form the basis of the chapter. The questions are organized in five categories:

- curriculum fit
- appropriateness
- variety and availability
- cost and durability
- readability

I've framed the questions as teachers typically ask them and have tried to capture the pragmatic tone and natural give-and-take of a workshop setting. Though some readers may have already jumped ahead to the activities chapter, I'm hoping most of you are still with me right here. Information gleaned in this chapter won't guarantee the success of all comics activities, but should smooth their implementation, help you avoid common pitfalls, and increase the amount of language and content learning for your L2 learners.

Curriculum Fit

How big a part should comics play in my classroom?

As a comics fan and teacher who's seen the learning power of comics across the grades, I'm tempted to answer: A huge part! Understanding, however, that students, teachers, and programs come in all shapes and sizes, with vastly different instructional needs and goals, the answer must be slightly muted: As big a part as you, your students, and the Program Powers That Be deem wise and workable.

Ok, what's generally wise and workable?

Keeping in mind the need for curriculum variety, teachers using comics—or any material for that matter, other than mandated materials—naturally let learning payoff dictate amount of use. The more learning teachers get from comics-based activities, the more you see them using comics. Time devoted to comics varies greatly, from K–5 teachers who do a daily ten- to twenty-minute comic strip activity, to middle school teachers occasionally encouraging comics during SSR (Sustained Silent Reading), to high school and adult ed ESL teachers who

may do only one comic book or graphic novel unit in a semester or a year.

Those examples may give the impression that comic usage automatically decreases as we move up the grades. Though often the case, the rule is hardly ironclad. In fact, I've run across enough counterexamples in my consulting practice to know that upper-grade and adult ed teachers are just as likely as lower-grade teachers to use comics, if the teachers have adequate information on their use and, again, are getting plenty of learning mileage from them.

Of course, it's also possible that even with the right information and the potential for lots of learning, comics may simply not be the smartest way to go. A good example is the adult ed teacher I coached a few years ago who was teaching a short-term class of beginning to early intermediate second language learners. These newly arrived immigrants needed basic get-the-job English and we both decided that helping them read the classified ads, use the bus system, and get through a job interview offered more than comics.

So, comics aren't for all teachers in all settings?

Right. I'm not promoting comics as the be-all-end-all material. Granted, I'd love to get more teachers using comics, given the medium's language-building potential and its woeful underutilization in the multilingual classroom. But Ziggy, Zippy, and Batman won't turn a beginner into a near-native speaker in a year. And by themselves, Mutts and Frank & Ernest strips won't build high levels of literacy for all our second language learners. I'm selling comics here, but I'm selling them in moderation, as part of a harmonious mix of materials and activities. Comics work, but they don't work miracles.

Comics can play a significant role in some settings; for example, in elementary classrooms, or in adult ESL American culture and conversation classes. They can play an important, but smaller role in high school ELD (English Language Development) and SDAIE (Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English) classes, and a smaller role still in EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) programs for hotel workers or electronics assemblers. Finally, comics may have only a walk-on part or no part at all in most university EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses.

Comics, like any material we use for second language development—from ESL readers and Internet news reports to academic

writing texts and travel brochures—must help us meet student needs and program goals and objectives. When they do, let's use them; when they don't, let's not. That said, teachers new to the material are usually surprised at how often comics fit the bill—meet those needs, goals, and objectives—and in how many different settings, and with so many different types of students.

Appropriateness

I'm uncomfortable with the sexual, sexist, and violent images in some comics. Why would I sanction their use in the classroom?

You wouldn't. And neither would I, unless I could use those images in a high school or adult learner classroom to critically examine issues of sexuality, sexism, or violence in society. Instructional material needs to work for both students and teacher. Teachers put off by certain comics and not wanting to use the material as grist for the thinking mill can share their concerns with students and suggest—and provide—alternative titles.

But there are some really raunchy comics on the market, right?

Right. Along with raunchy books, magazines, video games, computer games, films, and TV shows. Comics are no different from any of those other media in terms of raunch; raunch comes with the entertainment territory. What teachers new to comics may not realize, however, is that, again, like other media, comics are multifaceted and offer a broad range of content. Raunch is only one small part of a very big comics world.

OK, but even a non-raunchy comic can have an objectionable image or two. Won't a tiny bit of nudity, for example, upset some students and parents?

Guaranteed. I call this the "naked buns" effect. It's the rare student or parent who objects to the *words* "naked buns." But an *image* of naked buns can set off fireworks. Place a comic in the classroom showing somebody's unclothed backside, and suddenly you've got an irate parent calling you at home to complain. The calls will quadruple with an

unclothed frontside. Ironically, the “naked buns” effect bolsters the case for comics. The power of images to command attention, to move, to directly communicate, explains, in part, why comics are such a powerful learning medium.

So, bring on the naked buns?

Obviously, we use discretion when choosing materials. We want them grade appropriate and there seems little sense in picking comics we know many students and parents will find offensive when other comics will do the instructional job just as well. But at some point, our use of comics—with or without a naked bun on display—may offend someone. Most teachers are willing to accommodate the offended student or parent by offering alternative material whenever possible. The more serious problem comes from those parents who, in their zeal to protect their own child from what they see as moral, philosophical, or political corruption, demand that the offending comic be pulled from the classroom or library, thereby denying other students access to the material.

The American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom compiles data on challenges to school and public library materials. If you do have a comic challenged, it will be in exceedingly good company. Here’s a list of the ALA’s top ten most challenged books between 1990 and 2000 (American Library Association 1990–2000).

1. *Scary Stories* (series) (Alvin Schwartz)
2. *Daddy’s Roommate* (Michael Willhoite)
3. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Maya Angelou)
4. *The Chocolate War* (Robert Cormier)
5. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Mark Twain)
6. *Of Mice and Men* (John Steinbeck)
7. *Harry Potter* (series) (J. K. Rowling)
8. *Forever* (Judy Blume)
9. *Bridge to Terabithia* (Katherine Paterson)
10. *Alice* (series) (Phyllis Reynolds Naylor)

What’s the best way of handling a challenge?

I’m not sure there is a “best” way, but here’s one way that’s helped several teachers deal successfully with material challenges. Always

listen respectfully to any student or parent objection, explain you had no intention of giving offense, and offer alternative material to the student when possible. Then make it clear—in as diplomatic a manner as you can muster—that under no condition will you purge the comic from the classroom and deny other students the chance to read something you believe has such high educational value.

If for any reason parents aren't satisfied, it's essential that we inform them of their right to appeal and to take their concern to the principal or district office personnel. Most schools and libraries have a formal set of procedures in place for material challenges. If your school is without one, the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom can help you create a set. Please see Chapter 4 for ALA contact information.

So, expect a challenge if I use comics?

Not at all. Challenges are relatively rare. But it makes good sense to be ready if one arises. Know what to say and know what to do. What is much more likely than a full-blown challenge is a simple query from a parent asking the Why comics? question, comparable to the Why videos? or Why field trips? questions. Most parents aren't anti-comics, but they typically need a little reassuring that comics will have some learning payoff. Older students, and especially adult learners, will need the same reassuring. So we reassure. One way of doing that is to share some of the information from the theory and research chapter. Keeping our students and parents informed of what we're doing and why we're doing it will prevent most problems.

Variety and Availability

Beyond the superhero and humor comics, what's available?

Everything. That answer may surprise you if you skipped comics as a kid and if your current comics reading is limited to a few favorite yuck-yuck strips in the morning newspaper. Superheroes abound, of course, and lots of comics are humorous and remind us why comics are called comics: the first examples from the late nineteenth century were mostly played for laughs. Over the last hundred years or so,

however, comics have expanded far beyond the comical. These days, both Batman and Broom Hilda have some pretty stiff competition. Today's comics are published in a broad range of genres, from mystery, horror (see Figure 2-1), fantasy, sci-fi, and romance, to western, war, politics, history, biography, and contemporary fiction (see Figure 2-2).

Chances are, there's at least one type of comic that will catch the interest of most students at any age and grade level. To get a feel for the diversity of offerings, readers may want to thumb through the comics review section in Chapter 4.

I think of comics as fast reads, even those with denser text. What's available for longer, prolonged reading?

Lots. Comics come in all sizes, from single-panel cartoons and the typical three-to-five-panel comic strips, to comic books (usually about thirty pages) and the much larger, book-length graphic novels. One-shot gag cartoons like *Strange Brew* or *In the Bleachers* are a quickie read with minimal amounts of text. Graphic novels like Craig Thompson's *Blankets*, Jeff Smith's *Bone* series, Katsuhiro Otomo's six-volume sci-fi adventure *Akira*, or Koike and Kojima's *Lone Wolf and Cub* samurai epic at twenty-eight volumes and over nine thousand pages—delivered direct to your classroom door by forklift truck—provide students with extended reads.

Are girls reading comics as much as boys?

Not yet. Walk into any comics shop or comics convention and you'll see dramatically more males than females thumbing through the bins and standing in line to get a favorite artist's autograph. And the vast majority are young, in their teens to late twenties. Literacy studies and interviews with comics retailers confirm the relatively small number of female comics readers in the United States. In their survey of nearly six hundred seventh graders at two middle schools in Southern California, Ujiie and Krashen (1996) found that boys read comics considerably more often than girls. A little over 80 percent of the boys reported reading comics "always" or "sometimes." Only half the girls read comics at the same frequency. A little over 17 percent of the boys said they "never" read comics versus nearly 50 percent of the girls.



FIG. 2-1a "Confessions" by Samuel Kienbaum and Jeff Faerber originally published in Garish Zow Comics (no. 5). Copyright © 2004 by Samuel Kienbaum and Jeff Faerber. Reprinted by permission of Hidden Agenda Press, <www.hiddenagendapress.com/>.



FIG. 2-1b continued. "Confessions" by Samuel Kienbaum and Jeff Faerber originally published in Garish Zow Comics (no. 5). Copyright © 2004 by Samuel Kienbaum and Jeff Faerber. Reprinted by permission of Hidden Agenda Press, <www.hiddenagendapress.com/>.



FIG. 2-2 "This Is" by Thien Pham originally published in Garish Zow Comics (no. 5). Copyright © 2004 by Thien Pham. Reprinted by permission of Hidden Agenda Press, <www.hiddenagendapress.com/>.

Owner Joe Ferrara of Atlantis Fantasyworld in Santa Cruz, California, reports that only about a quarter of his customers are women (“Better

Field Sketch: Crossing Gender Lines

I'm a librarian at a K–5 school with a huge population of second language learners, mainly Latino students. Overall library circulation went way up after introducing comics about five years ago. All grades are reading them, both boys and girls, with a lot of students crossing traditional gender lines. For example, boys are reading Archie and Betty & Veronica and girls are reading superheroes like Batman. Second language students at all English levels gravitate toward the comics. The visuals really help! Students get excited by the comics. I remember one fifth-grade boy, a hard-to-reach kid, a real reluctant reader, begging me for all the issues of Bone. It makes quite a difference when you give students what they want to read! Some teachers who were originally against having comics in the library have changed attitude. They have seen the positive effects of comics on students' reading skills and overall interest in reading.

—Carolyn Accatino, Librarian
Meadow Homes Elementary School
Concord, California

Retailing: Expanding Your Sales to Women” 2001). But many girls and women do read comics, and in ever growing numbers. Joe Field, owner of Flying Colors Comics in Concord, California, reports that the number of his female customers has doubled over the last eight years, moving from 15 percent to the current 30 percent (personal communication 2004). Three factors help explain the increasing female readership. First, the rise of the graphic novel over the last two decades and the growth of webcomics over the past few years have given female (and all) readers far more choices in comics style and content. Second, more publishers—and more women artists—are targeting female readers. For example, English translations of shojo manga (Japanese girls' comics) like *X/1999 Sonata* and *Rg Veda*, from the four-woman design team known as CLAMP, are extremely popular with middle school and high school girls. And three, advocacy groups like Friends of Lulu and Sequential Tart work tirelessly to boost female readership and female involvement in all aspects of the comics industry.

Again, this is the readership picture in the United States. Change countries, say to Japan or Mexico, and the picture changes to include many more female readers.

Where can I find a good selection of comics?

Your best bet is your local comics shop. There are about thirty-five hundred shops in the United States. To find one, call The Comic Shop Locator Service toll free at 1-888-266-4226. The same service is online at <http://csls.diamondcomics.com/>. Punch in a zip code and you'll quickly have the names, addresses, and phone numbers of your three closest shops. To locate additional stores in the United States as well as comics shops in other countries, try

The Master List of Comic Book and Trading Card Stores at <http://www.the-master-list.com/>.

Shop owners know their comics and are teacher-friendly. Joe Field, of Flying Colors Comics in Concord, California, is a great example. If you let Joe know you're a teacher, he'll take you on a guided tour of the shop and help you find comics in specific genres and with appropriate readability levels. Joe also makes presentations to school faculties and shows examples of various titles for possible use across the curriculum.

Until you've spent some time in comics shops, you may well need a little help in finding what you're looking for. Unlike bookstores that organize by subject and author within subject, comics shops group most of their titles by publisher: DC, Marvel, Fantagraphics, Dark Horse, and the like. Because the by-publisher shelves contain multiple genres, it's easy to miss some great comics unless you've got the time to pick through hundreds of titles.

Most shops have a children's section for the under twelve set. Though upper-grade and adult-school teachers may have the tendency to pass this section up, please don't. You may find something here that interests—and profits—your beginning- to early-intermediate-level students. If you can't get to a comics shop, the next best bet is online ordering. Once you've located a friendly cyberstore, take a virtual tour through the comics aisles and use that plastic money!

Nearly all public and many school libraries have comics. The variety and number of titles, however, vary widely, usually in direct relationship to how comics-friendly and how comics-aware library staff are. Some of the chain bookstores like Borders and Barnes and Noble have small graphic novel sections. The key word here is "small." Once you've seen what's available in a full-fledged comics shop—real or virtual—you'll likely skip the chains. Many independent and used bookstores also have graphic novel sections. But again, the selection is very limited. By the way, be prepared for the occasional mix-up when asking bookstore staff where you can find the graphic novel section. Most employees will know the genre, but not all. One young fellow in a used bookstore in San Diego suggested I try the adult book shop a few blocks north.

Unfortunately, the worst place to look for comics is where anyone old enough to remember hula hoops and 45 RPM records used to buy

them: newsstands and drugstores. Check a newsstand or drugstore today and if you're lucky, maybe you'll find a Looney Tunes and an Archie's Pals & Gals for sale. Maybe.

Cost and Durability

What do comics cost?

The average single-issue comic costs around \$3.00. Trade paperbacks, larger softbound titles often collecting an entire story run of single issues, run anywhere from \$13.00 to \$15.00. Teachers on a tight budget, think used. And by used, I don't mean the vintage, collectible comics, some of which can set you back an entire salary check. A few will take an entire year's salary. By used, I mean comics in the \$.25 to \$1.50 range. You'll often find used comics at this price in comics shops, especially during sales.

The best way to stock a classroom with comics on the cheap, however, is to pick them up at garage sales, fleamarkets, and thrift shops. A fourth-grade teacher told me she bought over a hundred comics for under ten dollars at a church bazaar. I keep hoping I'll hit a garage sale and find a 1938 Action Comics No. 1 featuring the first appearance of Superman for a quarter. A No. 1 recently sold for nearly \$90,000 ("Cage Sells Comics Collection" 2002). So far no luck, but I regularly find lots of great low-cost comics for the teachers and students I work with. By the way, save your ninety grand; you can read every page of Action Comics No. 1 online at xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/PRINT/comics.html.

Comics seem pretty flimsy. Do they hold up?

The standard, single-issue comic will be dog-eared, ripped, and shot in a month, if it's a popular title that freely circulates in the hands of lower-grade kids. You'll get a little more mileage out of it in the upper grades. With single issues, regardless of grade, keep a big roll of clear packing tape at the ready. Softbound trades, bound instead of stapled like single issues and printed on better paper, will last as long as any other paperback in your classroom library. That said, don't be surprised if the comic trades wear out considerably faster than their non-

comic counterparts, not because the comics are made with standard materials, but because students are reading them more.

Readability

Can I find comics for my low-, mid-, and high-end L2 readers?

Yes, if you're willing to genre hop. It's much tougher to find all the readability levels you need when sticking with one type of material, say western comics or furies (animal strips). With activities that cut across genres, with "Adopt-A-Strip" (see Chapter 3), for example, where students choose a favorite strip and track and share plot developments over several weeks, locating titles at various text levels is little problem.

There are comics for emerging, developing, struggling, and near-native-proficient readers. Comics range from laid-back easy to big-sweat difficult and everything in between. Text-to-picture ratio, the average amount of written text per page or panel in a comic, varies widely. As a general rule, as it varies, so does vocabulary load and the number and complexity of grammar structures.

Comics come wordless, like *Gon* (see Figure 3–7) and *The System*; text-light, as in *Climbing Out* (Figure 2–3) and *X/1999 Sonata*; text-medium, like *WJHC: On the Air!* (see Figure 4–7a & b) and *The Yellow Jar*; or text-heavy, as in Raymond Chandler's *Philip Marlowe: The Little Sister* and the *Age of Bronze* series (see Figure 2–4).

Consider the reading span in newspaper comics. Based on the number and range of words per strip, Wright and Sherman (1994) determined the readability grade levels of over six dozen daily comics. Average levels ran from a low of 1.8 (*Gasoline Alley* and *Mickey Mouse*) to a high of 7.3 (*Tank McNamara*). *Garfield* weighed in at 2.3, *Amazing Spider-Man* at 4.1, and *Doonesbury* at 6.4. An earlier analysis (Wright 1979) looked at comic books and found a similar spread, from a low of 1.8 for *Archie* to a high of 6.4 for *Batman and Superman*. A strip like *Sylvia* or *Pearls Before Swine*, and many graphic novels, like Moore and Campbell's *From Hell* or Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer prize-winning *Maus*, are written at a much higher reading level, have more text, and provide a challenging read for more proficient high school, college, and adult readers.



FIG. 2-3 From *Climbing Out* by Brian Ralph. Copyright © 2002 by Brian Ralph. Reprinted by permission of Highwater Books, <www.highwaterbooks.com/index.html>.

How accurate are those official comics readability levels?

About as accurate as official weather forecasts. They give us a starting point and that's about it. The Weather Channel says there's a chance of rain tomorrow and we throw an umbrella in the car just in case.

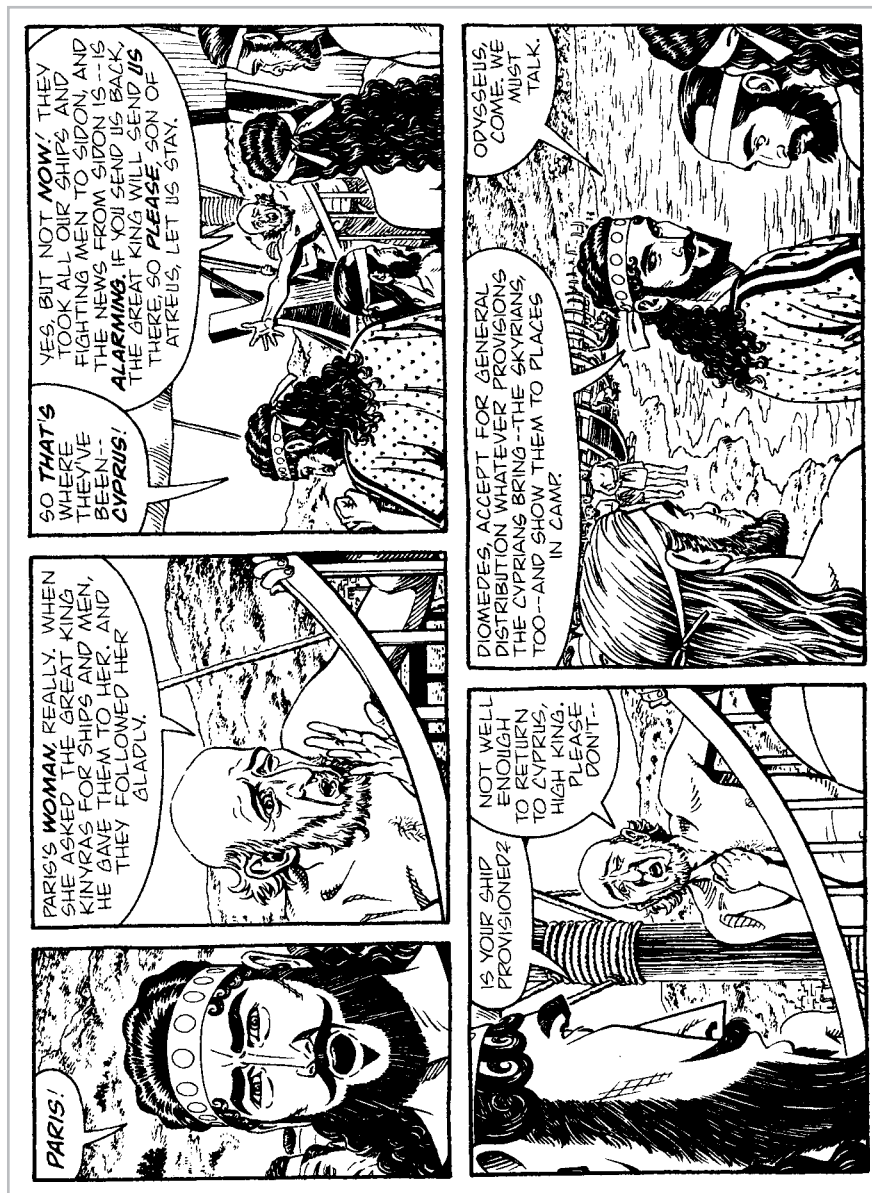


FIG. 2-4 From *Age of Bronze: A Thousand Ships* (vol. 1) by Eric Shanower. Copyright © 2001 by Eric Shanower. Published by Image Comics, <www.age-of-bronze.com>. Reprinted by permission of the author. All rights reserved.

Wright and Sherman peg Garfield at 2.3, and if we've got some kids reading at about a second-grade level, we might start with Garfield. But before anyone runs out and loads up on 2.3 Garfield or 6.4 issues of *The Dark Knight* (a.k.a., Batman), let's post three caveats:

One, the readability measures cited above were based on what's readable for native English speakers, not second language learners. Obviously, "grade-level" comics that are an easy to challenging read for native speakers at a given grade can be a tough to near impossible read for students new to English at the same or even higher grade level.

Two, readability measures are inherently limited because they fail to factor in readers' schemata—background knowledge that helps us process, order, and make sense of the world, including the world in comics. Prior life experiences related to the content of our reading make that content more understandable, more readable; fewer experiences, lower readability.

And three, it's important to remember that the readability measures were determined on words alone, not on words and pictures. In comics, pictures support the words, making the written text more comprehensible.

So, take readability levels with a grain of salt?

Better yet, a whole shaker. Comic text that appears well above the "just-right" independent reading level of a second language learner may be far more readable than expected, if the student is interested in the comic, has prior knowledge about the content, and if there are plenty of visual clues to aid comprehension. Conversely, comic text that appears at or a bit below the "just-right" level may be a more difficult read in the absence of interest, background information, and good pictures. Of course, we can't assume that all students know how to read the pictures, even when they're good.

Some students can't read the pictures?

Right. In fact, many teachers can't read the pictures, or better said, don't take the time to read the pictures. As a longtime comics reader, this surprised me when I first began doing comics activities in staff development workshops. During our twenty-minute block for

individual reading, teachers often zoomed through comics at the speed of light. Others thumbed through titles from back to front, as you would a *People* or *Sports Illustrated* magazine while sitting in a dental office waiting for a cavity check. Pictures and picture sequence were frequently slighted and disregarded.

I soon learned to preface comics activities with an anecdote about a first-grade boy I observed some years ago. The little boy was lying on the classroom rug, absorbed in a picture book. I sat beside him and began reading along, letting him turn the pages when he was ready. He moved through the book at a snail's pace, his eyes and fingers lingering over every picture.

At one point, he looked up at me and asked—perhaps echoing the words of his teacher—if I was “reading the pictures.” I assured him I was and that I was taking time to read all parts of the pictures so I didn't miss anything. He smiled and signaled his approval with an “OK,” and we continued reading, milking the pictures for all they were worth.

Do the pictures in comics guarantee basic comprehension?

I wish they did. Wordless comics aside, pictures help with comprehension and typically provide a significant boost, but unfortunately never guarantee it. How much help pictures offer depends in large part on the ratio of pictures to text—how much of the story is told with art versus how much with words. Beginning second language learners rely on—and require—lots of pictures to get the story; students with more L2 literacy generally require fewer pictures. That much is obvious. What may be less obvious is the fact that comprehension, especially for beginning and many intermediate students, depends not just on the quantity of pictures in a comic, but on the type of pictures. Details matter.

So I could have a picture-heavy comic that bombs?

You sure could. Picture detail, like comic content and text length and density, runs the gamut from stick-figure sparse to full-bodied lush to comics with more detail than an IRS audit. Some pictures consistently and directly support and clarify the narrative; they quite literally illustrate the text. Other pictures offer the reader only occasional and

indirect support. Depending on the comic activity and how much comprehension is needed for success with the activity, the amount and type of picture detail can be critical.

For example, let's imagine we've got beginning to intermediate English readers and comics with light to medium amounts of text. Students read individually, then do a mini-book talk, summarizing the comic for their classmates in small groups. To summarize successfully, they'll need at least a moderate level of comprehension, and reaching that level will take plenty of picture detail to illuminate the story line. What if those details are missing? Let's take a look at a talking head strip (Figure 2-5), a type of comic typically short on visual clues. Though the visuals show who's talking (Pig and Zebra), they offer no help with the critical aspect of the strip—the content, what Pig and Zebra are talking about. Better visuals, not in the artistic sense (I love Stephan Pastis' drawings!), but in terms of detail and a closer visual-to-text match, help students grasp more content.

For example, in Jason Lutes' *Jar of Fools*, details of clothing (a frayed jacket), personal hygiene (unkempt hair, beard stubble), and living conditions (cluttered apartment, chipped wall paint) help readers understand the basic who, what, where, when, and why of the graphic novel's down-on-his-luck protagonist. Pick up another comic where the artist-author has chosen to tell a story with a sparser visual style or with more written text, and second language learners may not have the visual detail they need for adequate comprehension. Not all visuals are created equal.

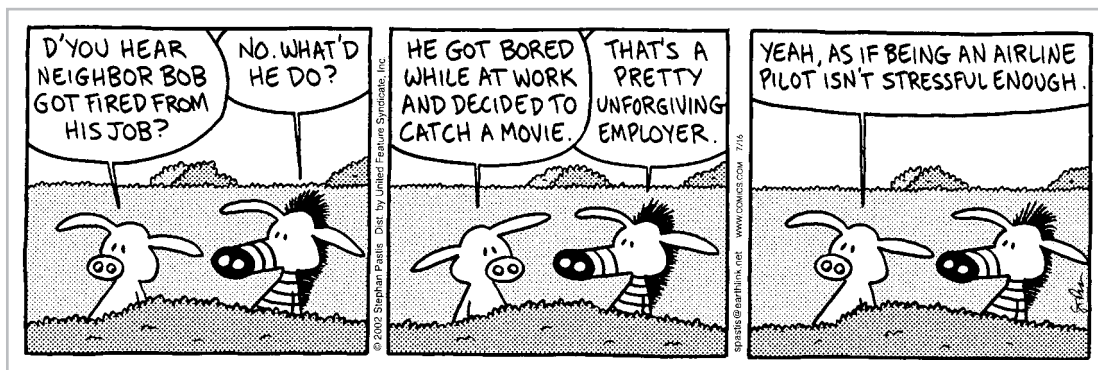


FIG. 2-5 From *Pearls Before Swine* by Stephan Pastis. Copyright © 2002 by Stephan Pastis. Reprinted by permission of United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

Does that mean we've got to check every comic's visual-to-text match before using it?!

Only if you're a teacher with no life beyond school. The rest of us may do the occasional checking, say when we're after that just-right comic strip for an overhead modeling on affixes or multiple word meanings. But most of the time, it's the students who do the checking. When given the choice and a wide range of comics to choose from, students will gravitate to comics they find comprehensible, that make sense.

Isn't there a danger that students will read the pictures and skip the words?

Not if they want the whole story. And they'll want the whole story if it's a compelling story. With most comics—other than wordless comics, of course—if you don't read the words you don't get the story, or at best you get only a small part of the story. Naturally, students with lower second language reading skills rely more on the pictures for making meaning. Using the visuals is a smart reading strategy. I used it repeatedly in the fall of 2002 while teaching in mainland China and shopping for essentials at a market and a pharmacy. My skill in Chinese reading is only a little better than my skill in piloting a commercial jetliner, which is to say, near nonexistent. Beyond the characters for hotel, restaurant, and men's room, I'm at a loss. Reading the pictures enabled me to buy bottled water instead of carpet cleaner and toothpaste instead of itch cream.

Yet even students with beginning-level L2 reading skills will tackle some written text along with the visuals, assuming, again, a high-interest comic and especially if students are experienced comics readers in L1.

Have a lot of ESL students read comics in their first language?

Tons. If you have students from Japan, it's almost guaranteed. Between 90 and 95 percent of all literate Japanese read comics, the highest comics readership of any country in the world. Large numbers of students from Mexico will also be comic book literate. In Mexico, around 70 percent of readers read comics (Mayfield, Mayfield, and

Genestre 2001). In a fascinating political history of comics in Mexico, Anne Rubenstein (1998) confirms the huge readership: “Historietas [comic books] are tremendously popular (even in 1990, after two decades of declining circulation, eight of the ten best-selling periodicals were comic books), and their popularity cuts across lines of region, age, gender, and even class” (p. 8).

The number of comics readers in other countries, like France, Italy, Korea, and Taiwan, though not as substantial, is still high compared to the relatively low U.S. readership (not counting newspaper strip readers). U.S. estimates vary widely. Brent Frankenhoff, managing editor of *Comics Buyer's Guide*, pegs the number of comic book readers at 1 to 1.5 million (“Hey Kids, a New Holiday!” 2003). Other industry experts like Joe Field of Flying Colors Comics in Concord, California, estimate U.S. readership at 3 to 4 million (personal communication 2004).

How does experience with comics in L1 help students read comics in L2?

Experienced comics readers know the form, the basic conventions used in drawing and writing comics. For example, they know the difference between thought and dialogue balloons. They know that large, non-bubbled text is typically a sound effect and that a string of nonsense symbols like #?“@?#*?! isn’t nonsense at all but an unprintable obscenity that could make a sailor blush. Wavy lines signal movement or smoke. Add flies to the wavy lines and you’ve got a rotten smell. Comics readers know that a dotted body outline indicates invisibility and “X’s” on eyes equal unconsciousness or death. They know you’ve got to read between the panels for missing information. And most important, they understand that visual text and written text are interdependent, working together to inform, spin a tale, make a joke, or in the case of the best horror comics, scare the stuffing out of you. Even our young, less experienced readers often reveal an awareness of comics conventions. Benjamin Li, one of Kia Foster’s second graders at Kitayama Elementary School in Union City, California, clearly understands the difference between dialogue and thought balloons (see Figure 2–6).

Proficient comics readers take the time to read the pictures and the words. Because most comics conventions are universal across languages, conventions learned with first language comics makes



FIG. 2-6 Thinking of Love. Benjamin Li, grade 2, Kitayama Elementary, Union City, California.

reading comics in the second language easier. Easier, but certainly not a breeze, especially when we consider our beginning-level L2 readers.

What can comics do for my highly reluctant L2 readers?

Get them reading for a start. And keep them reading if we use the right comics. Readability is determined in part by the amount of text per page and the total number of those pages in a selection. This word-count factor is especially critical for early intermediate to intermediate second language learners asked to read page after page of grade-level text containing hundreds and hundreds of unknown words.

I'm an intermediate-level reader in Spanish, my second language. I can comprehend—and enjoy—short magazine and newspaper articles. But give me a 300-page mystery novel and I'll be lucky to make it past page 5 knowing I've got another 295 pages staring me in the face. The task of dealing with that many pages filled with so many stumbling-block words is simply too daunting. I'm worn out before the detective even reaches the murder scene. Add some pictures, however, and I'll dig in, reading captions and some of the nearby text. Add lots and lots of pictures, as with comics, and I may go the distance—if I'm interested in what I'm reading.

Field Sketch: A Breakthrough with Garfield

I do a reading workshop with my Intermediate ELD students. Finding age-appropriate material at very low reading levels has been my biggest obstacle. I have one student in particular who has very low skills and is frankly not particularly interested in learning more English. I gave him a Garfield comic book for silent reading today and he loved it. I asked him to write briefly about what he read and he wrote a half a page. This from a student who won't do homework and needs to be coaxed into doing classwork. I think the pictures are important visual clues to the language for him. I am hoping to get him to write more by creating his own cartoons at a later date.

—Erika Raffo, English Teacher
Elsie Allen High School
Santa Rosa, California

Field Sketch: Second Language Learner Fatigue

I like reading, but most of the time I just read Chinese. Because I could read the very deep, very thoughtful ones. Of course, I know I support [suppose] to try more English books. but too much vocabulary words to continue. Thanks for the wonderful comic books. It helped me so much. [unedited comments]

—Christina Guan, Freshman
Elsie Allen High School
Santa Rosa, California

So comics help fight L2 learner fatigue?

Help, yes, but they don't knock it out completely, of course. I'm still a bit fatigued after reading a Bolillo and a Vaquero, two of my favorite comics from Mexico, and both have manageable amounts of text and plenty of helpful pictures. Making meaning in a second language is no easy feat. But without the text reduction and visuals, I'm shot. So are a lot of our second language students. Large amounts of written text overwhelm beginning L2

readers and can soon tire and demoralize intermediate and even early advanced readers.

Overwhelm and demoralize? L2 reading gets that bad?

It can. Unfortunately, lots of teachers have forgotten what it's like to be overwhelmed and demoralized by L2 reading. Most of the teachers I work with haven't done any sustained second language reading since their last high school or college foreign language class.

In workshops and university courses, to give teachers a feel for what many of our second language learners experience with L2 reading, I'll bring in some native-level short stories written in languages other than English: Spanish, French, Italian, German, Mandarin, Japanese. Teachers choose a story in a language studied in school or one they knew as a child, perhaps, but later lost, then take the story home to read on their own.

I ask them to spend an hour—if possible—making as much sense of the story as they can. Some use bilingual dictionaries, some use context clues, and others a combination of the two to get the reading done. In follow-up discussions, most teachers report that they stay with the reading from ten to thirty minutes, then call it a day. Few, except those with higher levels of literacy in the target language, last the full hour; it's just too frustrating to do all the dictionary and context guessing work and still miss large portions of the story.

So the teachers feel the same pain as their second language students?

Not quite. As we discuss the L2 reading, teachers admit how tough and tedious the assignment was and declare an enhanced or newfound empathy for students tackling text in a second language. But they also acknowledge that what they experienced is only mildly comparable to what their

Field Sketch: Tintin to the Rescue

I tutored a Spanish Immersion student, an English speaker, going into third grade a couple summers ago. His favorite books in the world were Tintin. He was a very reluctant Spanish speaker—could do it, but claimed to “hate” Spanish. So I found him Tintin in Spanish, and he just had the best time figuring out who all the characters were and what the catchphrases and jokes were in Spanish. It was the most motivated I'd ever seen him. His mom said he even voluntarily picked it up, which never happened with any other Spanish text. I Xeroxed a few of the strips, whiting out the print, and had him write them. He enjoyed that too, and especially wanted to go back and compare what he'd written to the “real” words.

—Deborah Palmer, Doctoral Student
Language, Literacy, and Cultures in Education
University of California at Berkeley
Berkeley, California

Field Sketch: Why I Read Comics

The comic books [comic strip reprints] . . . are easy to read because they have pictures and they are funny, interesting, and the best thing is that they are short. [unedited comments]

—Jesús Gaona, Freshman
Elsie Allen High School
Santa Rosa, California

students experience. The workshop or university reading assignment is voluntary, short, and ungraded. Make it more like school—mandatory, long, and worth a letter grade and a notch up or down in self-esteem—and you come closer to reality for second

language learners.

Whenever possible, I follow the first reading assignment with a second, this time using comics in several languages. Teachers move from tedium to challenge, from sinking to swimming (or at least floating) in second language text. They read for longer periods of time. And many use the same word students use to describe their comics experience: fun.

Field Sketch: Reading Manga

After reading the graphic novel, *INUYASHA* (see Figure 2–7): We can find action and love, accompanying with beautiful pictures. People, who like read manga [Japanese-style comics] won't be disappointed. It's very easy to read. The sentences are very short. Sometimes, they are not complete. Vocabulary is very informal. Advantages: The pictures help you understand the story. Learn new informal words. Have fun. [unedited comments]

—Caroline Nguyen, Student
Chuck Kaspar, Instructor
Intermediate/Adv. ESL Adult Education Class
Independence Adult Center
San Jose, California

Some of my native English speakers read lots of translated Japanese comics. Are these titles workable for second language learners as well?

Manga, the Japanese term for comics, are especially workable. All things being equal, specifically genre and age of target audience, manga titles are generally text-lighter than their American counterparts, often significantly lighter (see Figure 2–7). Far fewer words per page make the comics a natural with students new to English reading.

Manga titles, first published in Japan, are adapted by U.S. publishers like Dark Horse Comics or VIZ for the English-speaking market. The publishers—and let's thank them and the ESL gods for this!—use native English speakers as translators. This means we're spared travel menu English, as in "break apart cattle" for "shredded beef" and "dropping liquid" for "dipping sauce."

Manga are popular with large numbers of comics readers in this country and you'll find dozens of titles lining the shelves in most comics shops. Japanese comics have inspired and influenced a number of American artists who now draw manga-style—characters with big eyes, small mouths and noses, wild hairdos, and exaggerated body dimensions; and action that often explodes beyond the panel.

Some manga are read front-to-back, others back-to-front. What's going on and what do I use with my L2 students?

Like Hebrew, Arabic, and Farsi (Persian), Japanese is read right to left. For a comic in Japanese, this means starting at what English readers

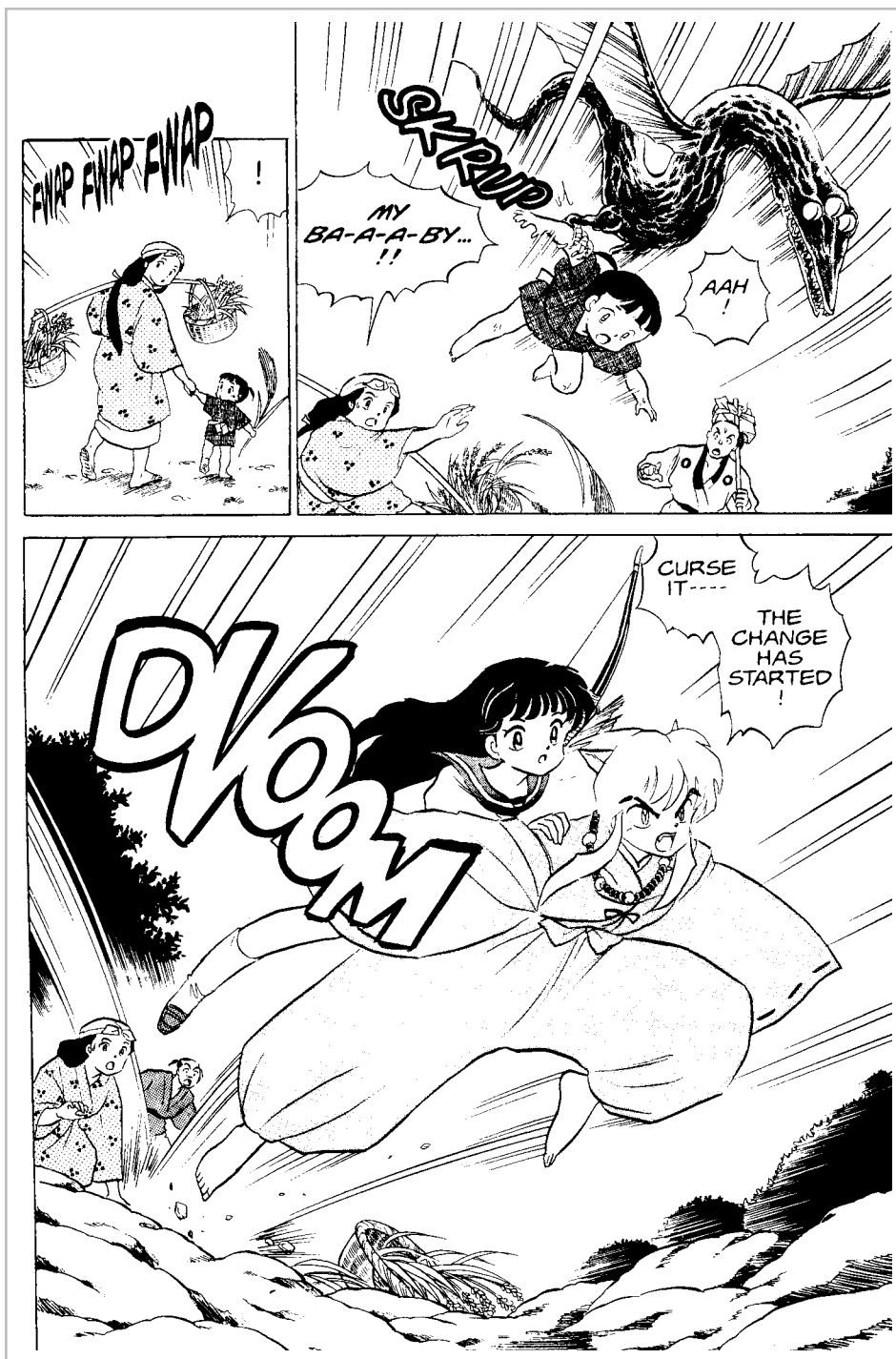


FIG. 2-7 From INUYASHA: A Feudal Fairy Tale (vol. 1) by Rumiko Takahashi. Copyright © 1997 by Rumiko Takahashi/Shogakukan, Inc. First published by Shogakukan, Inc. in Japan as "Inuyasha." Reprinted by permission of VIZ, <www.viz.com/>.

would call the “back” of the book and reading toward the “front.” This right-to-left movement holds panel-to-panel as well as for dialogue and descriptive sections within a single panel. U.S. publishers print what are known as “flopped” or left-to-right versions of manga for English readers. Many English manga editions are flopped, but not all. A growing number of titles, like *Dragon Ball Z*, *Cowboy Bebop*, and *Paradise Kiss*, are translated to English but retain the right-to-left format, staying true to the original layout and giving the comics a more authentic Japanese feel.

Like most teachers I know who are using manga, I’ve steered clear of the non-flopped, right-to-left variety, believing such a format only muddies the reading waters. Why have students reading right to left when English is read left to right? Why take a chance on even slightly disorienting students while we’re working so hard to get them comfortable with the conventions of English reading? Staying with left-to-right manga makes sense for most students, but perhaps not all. A teacher in one workshop told me he used right-to-left titles with a couple ESL fourth graders who were good readers in their native Japanese. The teacher felt the right-to-left format provided a familiar reference point for these students and helped them bridge to English reading.

Do the jokes in lots of comics make them too difficult for my beginning second language learners?

If read alone, yes, even with a good bilingual dictionary at the ready. The puns and sarcasm in *The Fusco Brothers*, the American teen in-jokes in *Zits* and *Archie*, the American business spoofs in *Dilbert*, or the comic political ironies in *Doonesbury*, *Boondocks*, and *La Cucaracha* make for tough reading. Without a teacher or more English-proficient classmate to mediate, not only will your beginners find joke-heavy comics incomprehensible, some of your intermediate and a few of your advanced learners will too.

Even comics that appear joke-light can be a challenge. Let’s take a “simple” single-panel Ziggy cartoon as an example (see Figure 2–8). Getting the joke entails more than comprehending the basic text, including the “pulling your leg” idiom, and correctly inferencing that the harried mouse threatened the cat with a lawsuit. The humor, in large part, hinges on understanding the litigious nature of American



FIG. 2-8 Ziggy by Tom Wilson. Copyright © 1998 Ziggy and Friends, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Universal Press Syndicate. All rights reserved.

society. Students from home countries where people are not as quick to drag their neighbor to court may miss the joke.

A teacher-facilitated discussion or a “buddy read,” where beginners work with native speakers or more advanced L2 learners to get the jokes, can turn a comic that would have been an impenetrable and frustrating read if processed alone into something understandable, funny, and meaningful.

Add-A-Panel

Materials: comic strips

Description: Students expand a strip's story line with their own panels.

Topics and Strategies:

- predicting while reading
- learning comprehension strategies while learning language
- importance of text reduction
- student-made comics as popular reading

Background

This activity hinges on students' ability to make logical predictions. Proficient readers continually predict as they move through text. Prediction, a type of inferencing, keeps us engaged in what we're reading and helps us make better sense of the text (Anderson and Pearson 1984; Keene and Zimmermann 1997). What we may fail to appreciate as adult native speakers, however, is that our predictions are possible because we understand all or nearly all the words we're reading. Few second language learners have that advantage as they read in L2.

Young early readers as well as older students who are non- or semi-literate in their first language are often asked to do double duty: learn a fundamental reading skill like predicting while also learning the meanings of the words needed to exercise that skill, in this case making those predictions. The reduced, pictured-supported text in comics makes the comprehension job and, hence, the prediction job a lot easier.

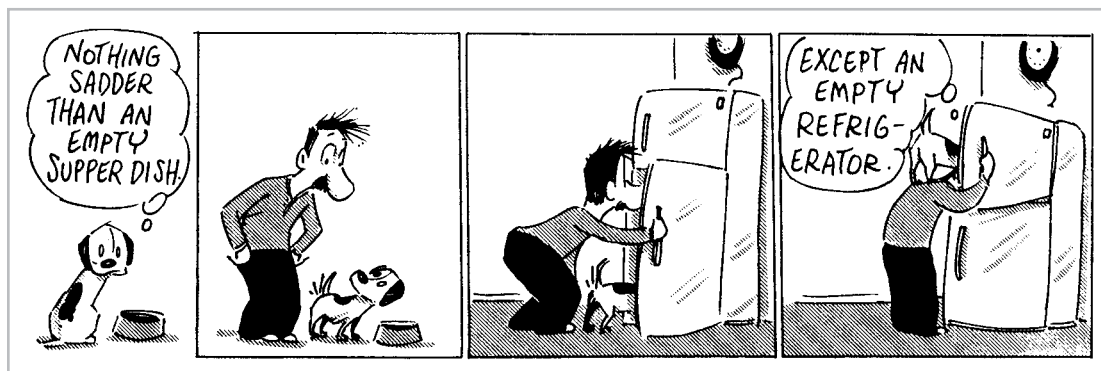


FIG. 3–2 *Mutts* by Patrick McDonnell. Copyright © 1996 by Patrick McDonnell. Reprinted by special permission of King Features Syndicate.

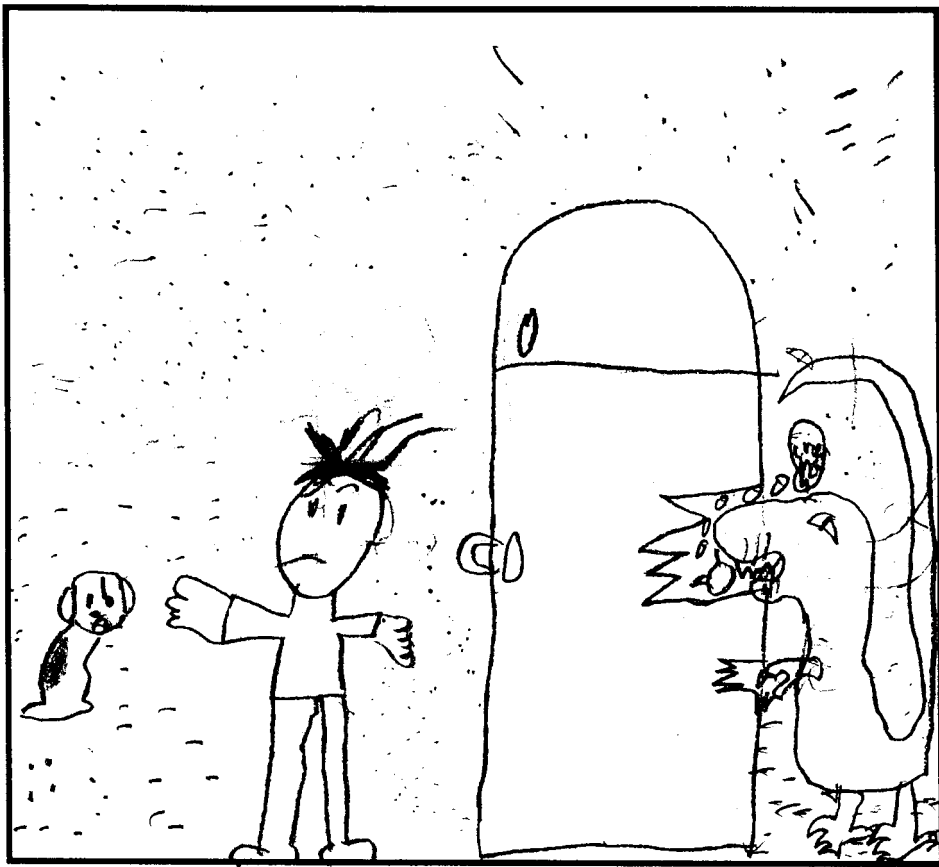
Process

With Add-A-Panel, I typically have elementary-grade students add a single “what happens next?” panel to a strip. Steven Jaurigui, one of teacher Pamela Heyda’s second graders in San Mateo, California, took a *Mutts* strip (Figure 3–2) and added a panel featuring a very hungry dinosaur (Figure 3–3a). Working with the same comic, classmate Hannie Hararah showed the next logical action: heading to the store for food (see Figure 3–3b). Some students, however, like second grader Quang Pham in teacher Kia Foster’s class in Union City, California, may add several panels (Figure 3–4, and Figure 3–5), extending the story with another full installment. Middle school through adult ESL students sometimes like to serialize a favorite base strip. Some of the story arcs from older students can run to a dozen or more three-panel “chapters.”

For the inevitable “I-can’t-draw!” students, I’ll model a panel or two with basic stick figures or suggest that the strip’s illustrations be used as drawing guides. If the activity is done in pairs, art-anxious students can turn to their partner for drawing help.

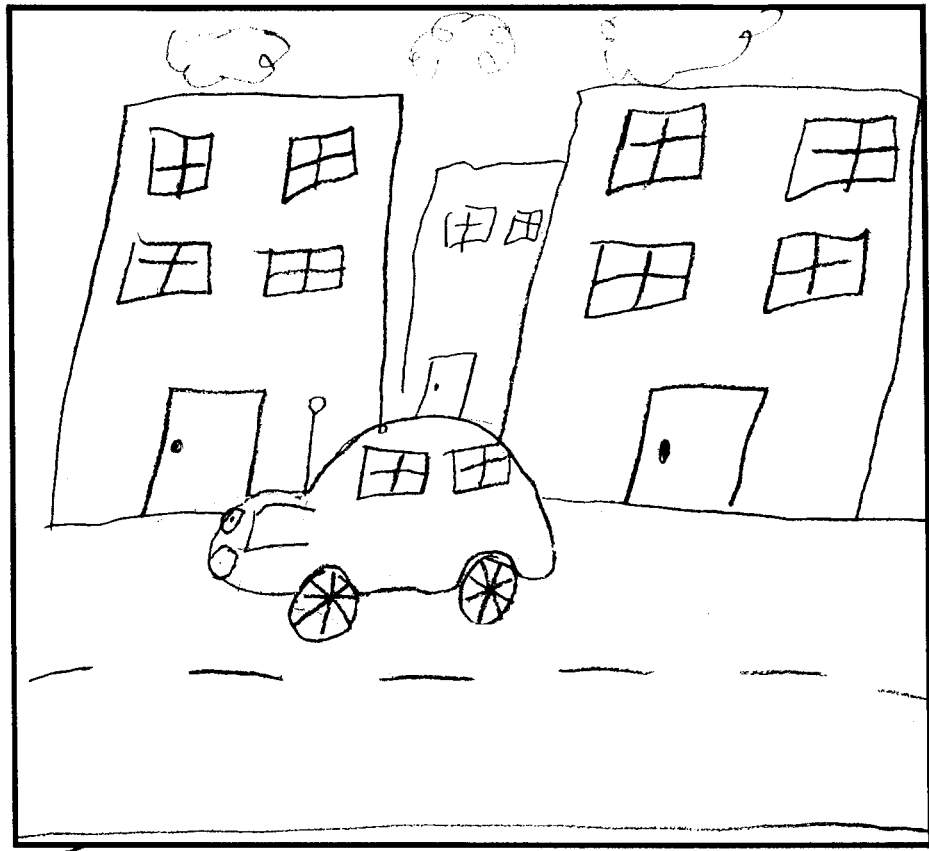
Expanded strips are popular reading items. At the end of the activity, expect a flurry of strip trading around the classroom. Though I usually offer a choice of strips, I sometimes have all students add on to the same strip. Students enjoy reading their classmates’ different takes on the comic, and the variations in story line and language provide lots of grist for the discussion mill.

Another option worth exploring is a class strip. One student adds a panel to the “starter” strip and then passes it to another student, who adds a second frame. The strip continues to circulate around the classroom (or expand at a center) until every student has had a chance to contribute. Panels can be completed after students have finished other work or taken home to be worked on and shared and discussed with parents. Some strips are finished in a day; others develop more slowly and might take a couple weeks to complete. Added



I think a dinosaur
eats all the food
and they go to
the store.

FIG. 3-3a Hungry Dinosaur. Steven Jaurigui, grade 2, Horrall Elementary, San Mateo, California.



They are going to
the grocery store to
buy some dog food.

FIG. 3-3b Trip to the Store. Hannie Hararah, grade 2, Horrall Elementary, San Mateo, California.

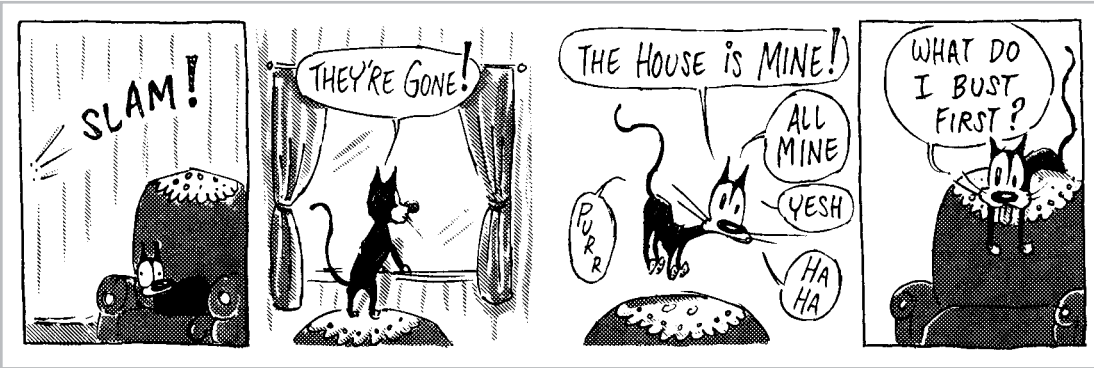


FIG. 3-4 Mutts by Patrick McDonnell. Copyright © 1996 by Patrick McDonnell. Reprinted by special permission of King Features Syndicate.

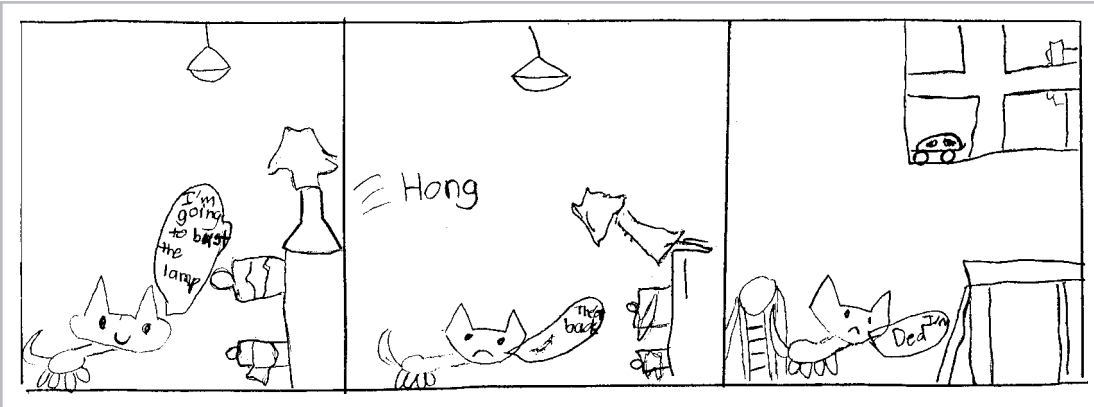


FIG. 3-5 Busting the Lamp. Quang Pham, grade 2, Kitayama Elementary, Union City, California.

panels can be assessed in terms of the degree to which they logically extend the strip's story line.

Funny or Not?

Materials: cartoons and comic strips

Description: Students work in pairs or small groups, figuring out the jokes in comics and rating them on a humor scale.

Topics and Strategies:

- wordplay in humor
- culturally bound humor
- using mixed language proficiency groups
- making text-to-self connections
- difficulty of “outside” jokes
- importance of teachers trying activity themselves
- learning language, learning culture

Background

Jokes are tough in a second language. The humor in comics often hinges on a single word. Miss that key word and you miss the joke. Worse, students may know the key word and still miss the joke, since wordplay typically relies on alternate meanings to generate the laugh. Students operating with only one

definition for “stable” or “pitch” will find the two Grimmy strips (Figures 3–10 and 3–11) incomprehensible.

It gets tougher: Besides the frequent wordplay, jokes are culturally bound. Miss or misunderstand a key cultural reference or an aspect of the cultural backdrop in a comic and again, you miss the joke. The Monkey Business strip (Figure 3–12) may be a “head shaker” to students unfamiliar with actor Brad Pitt or baffled by a cultural norm that permits girls to comment on a boy’s physical appearance. Even “bolder” comments appear in Figure 3–13. And without knowing the slang term “wedgie,” the strip is over for a student before it begins. Culture-bound comics are demanding reads, even for those students with intermediate to advanced L2 proficiency who may know the meanings—and multiple meanings—of hundreds and hundreds of content words. I remember one intermediate-level fourth grader struggling with a Citizen Dog strip and declaring, “I know all words! All! But what is mean, Teacher?!” She knew the words, but not the culture.

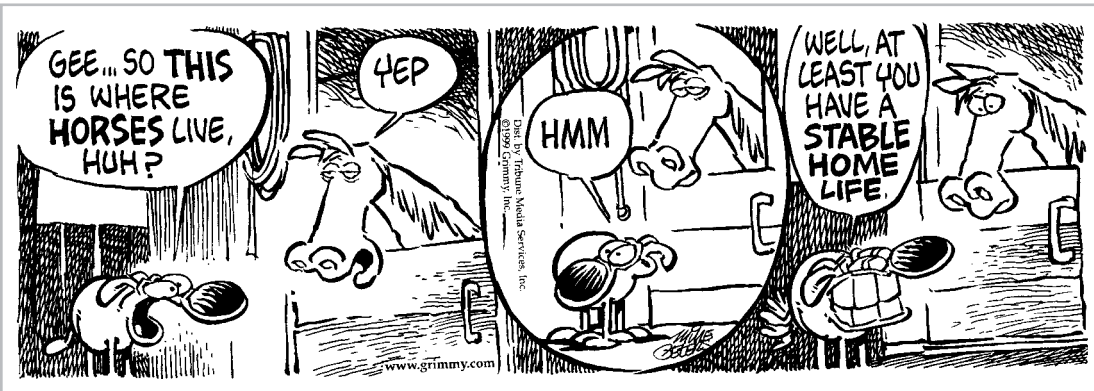


FIG. 3–10 Grimmy by Mike Peters. Copyright © 1999 by Grimmy, Inc. Reprinted with special permission of King Features Syndicate.

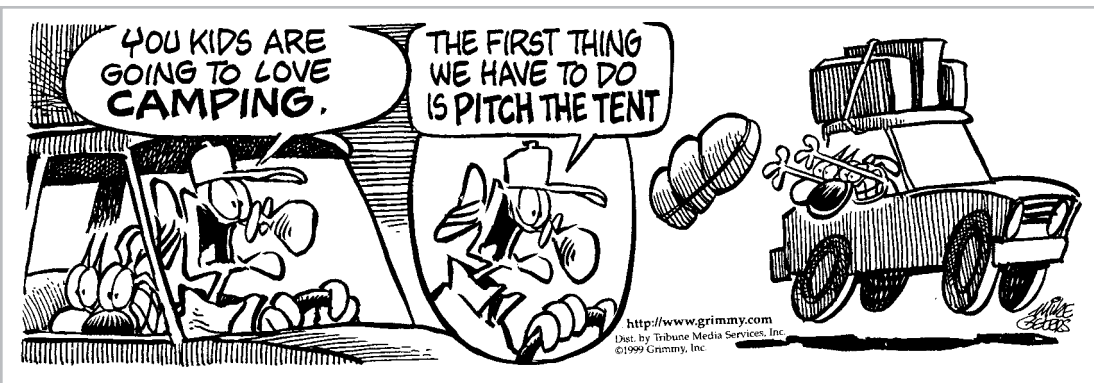


FIG. 3–11 Grimmy by Mike Peters. Copyright © 1999 by Grimmy, Inc. Reprinted with special permission of King Features Syndicate.

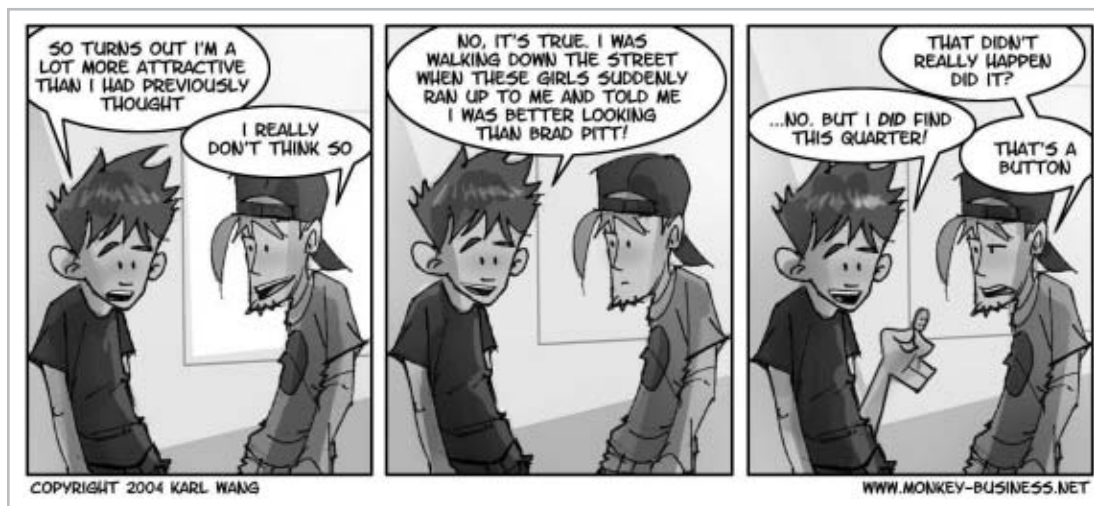


FIG. 3–12 Monkey Business by Karl Wang. Copyright © 2004 by Karl Wang. Reprinted by permission of the author, <www.monkey-business.net/>.

Let's take a Shirley & Son strip (Figure 3–14) as an example. The strip will mean little if, one, you don't know what a toaster is and, two, you've never heard of that all-American snack favorite, the "poptart." In addition to the two explicit references (one visual, one verbal), readers must also understand the strip's implicit information, including the fact that lots of American kids:

- must fix their own breakfast and snacks;
- eat on the run;
- and rarely use any appliance other than a microwave.

Without those implicit, "under the surface" items, the comic won't be fully comprehensible or funny.

Process

After modeling the basic process at the overhead with a sample comic or two, I set students off to work. Whenever possible, I use mixed language proficiency groupings so that beginners always have help at hand. Three questions guide student work:

1. What does the comic SAY? Students decode the cartoon or strip, no easy feat for L2 beginners dealing with a new set of sound-symbol relationships.
2. What does the comic MEAN? Students discuss alternate meanings (this phrase means . . . , but it could also mean . . .), pinpoint trouble spots (What does the boy mean here . . . ?), and use their prior knowledge combined with visual and text clues to understand the comic.



FIG. 3-13 Mr. & Mrs. Smarty Pants by Penny Van Horn. Copyright © 1998 by Penny Van Horn. Reprinted by permission of the author, <www.pennyvanhorn.com/>.

3. Is the comic FUNNY? Students make judgment calls on the comic's humor. Lower-grade students rate the comic as: not funny!, funny, or really funny! Upper elementary, secondary, and adult learners use a point scale, running from 1 (a total loser!) to a high of 5 (made me laugh out loud!). Three students in Beverly Williams' sixth-grade class in Daly City, California, made widely differing calls on the Baby Blues strip in Figure 3-15. Alaa Hammoudeh gave it a 1 because something in the strip did not ring true. He asked, "How can you see her loose tooth is nasty?" in his comic response log. Classmate Michelle Pimentel, on

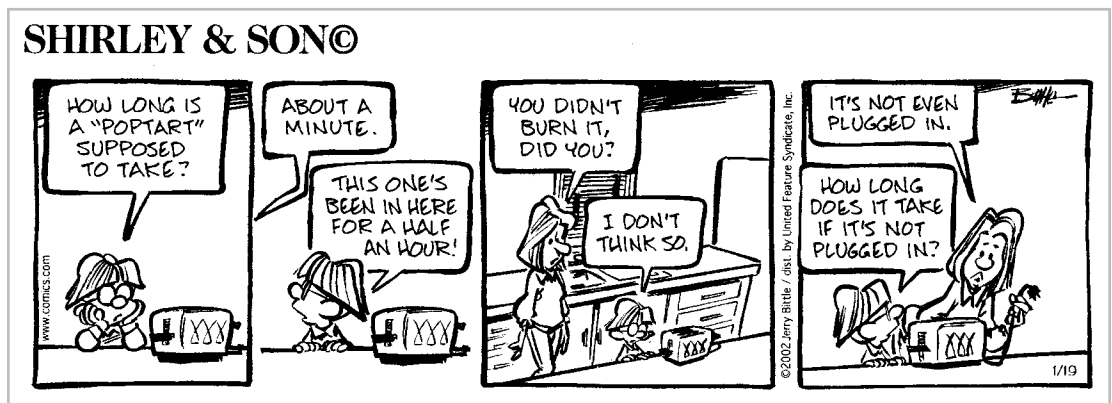


FIG. 3–14 Shirley & Son by Jerry Bittle. Copyright © 2002 by Jerry Bittle. Reprinted by permission of United Feature Syndicate, Inc.



FIG. 3–15 Baby Blues by Jerry Scott and Rick Kirkman. Copyright © 2001 by Jerry Scott and Rick Kirkman. Reprinted by special permission of King Features Syndicate.

the other hand, thought the comic was a winner. She gave it a 5 and commented that “The crying baby boy in the cartoon is like my little brother always bother [bother] me.” Katia Lopez took the middle ground and rated the strip a 3. She explained that “. . . everytime when I get a loose tooth I look the mirror and I think it’s gross. I gross myself.” Evidently “gross” was a little funny, but not funny in the extreme.

I often have pairs make collective judgment calls. Having small groups reach consensus on whether that Soup to Nutz strip was a washout or a winner will generate lots of great cross-talk, but may take the entire school day. And some groups won’t be able to agree on a rating given a year. As an alternative, I ask each person in the group to rate the comic. Numbers are then averaged to determine the group rating. A companion question to number 3 is always: What makes the comic funny? Or not funny? As students rate comics and present their “funny reports” to the class, they return to the text (written and visual) for

evidence to substantiate their ratings. Requiring evidence creates the need to read and reread carefully and critically.

Throughout the activity, students are encouraged to connect happenings and emotions in the comics to their own experiences. Lots of humor is universal. Regardless of the cultural makeup of your classroom, most students will be laughing at the same jokes. But not everyone. A joke or anecdote is often funny because we see ourselves reflected in it; our laugh is the laugh of recognition. Humor that lies outside our realm of experience is not as easily recognized. “Outside” jokes may be seen as odd and humorless, or in comics with several culture-specific references, not seen at all. Some jokes will fly right past some students. Second language learners, especially beginners, may rate these “outside” jokes considerably lower on the funny scale than their more L2-proficient and native-speaking peers.

Make sure you’ve got a good pair of walking shoes for this activity. Running shoes might be even better, since you’ll be racing from group to group, trying to get to everybody dying to share ratings with you. Students will also want to know how you rate the comics. Is that Loose Parts cartoon funny? Or *really* funny? Beyond asking for your opinion—and your evidence for that opinion—students will have dozens and dozens of questions related to comic content. Even in a class with mostly intermediate to advanced L2 learners, you’ll be regularly asked to mediate, to clarify the written and visual text information in the comics—to help students get the jokes.

One of the best ways to understand the challenge facing your students with Funny or Not? is to try the activity yourself in your second language. If you’re at an intermediate or early advanced level in L2, you’ll be surprised at how many comprehension snags there can be, as a teacher who tried the activity in Spanish told me, “in one little bitty comic.”

Time Traveler

Materials: comic books

Description: Students research social issues using comic books from various eras.

Topics and Strategies:

- comics as research materials
- social issue change across time
- lively talk for language development
- vintage comics reprints

Background

A number of the early comic book action heroes and superheroes (action heroes with unearthly powers) are still going strong. Superman (1938), Batman (1939), The Flash (1940), and Wonder Woman (1941), for example, continue their fight against the forces of evil and injustice everywhere. And unlike the rest of us mere mortals whose middles expand and tops thin with time, these guys (and gal) are looking good. In fact, most look better than they did over a half century ago. Many of the villains and supervillains, the characters comics fans love to hate, have also been around for years: The Joker and Catwoman (in Batman, 1940), Lex Luthor (in Superman, 1941), Two-Face (in Detective Comics, 1942), and Cheetah (in Wonder Woman, 1943), are still bad to the bone, as irrepressibly and deliciously wicked as ever. And thank heavens, since without them, our heroes and superheroes wouldn't need to be nearly as heroic.

Yet despite the consistency of some characters and core elements—the superhuman powers, the skintight costumes, the dual identities, the mix of science fact and fiction, and our hero's one fatal flaw, green kryptonite for Superman and the bracelets of submission for Wonder Woman—superhero comics have changed on numerous fronts over the decades. So have other genres of comics. Both the similarities and differences across eras provide students with a mountain of interesting material for small-group research and discussion.

Process

In Time Traveler, students work in small groups with two sets of comic books. Set one contains recently published titles, set two has comics anywhere from two to six decades older. Students read comics from one era, then “time travel” to another via the second set. As they move back and forth between eras, students compare and contrast the comics in terms of one or more key elements, including:

- the big ideas (themes/issues), featured and ignored
- gender roles and relationships
- representation and treatment of minorities

- stereotyping and scapegoating
- type and amount of violence
- type of justice (vigilante versus court)
- hero's personality traits
- hero's physical characteristics
- type and use of technology
- background (clothing, hair styles, furnishings, vehicles)
- use of idioms, slang, colloquialisms, collocations
- artistic style and storytelling craft

Depending on the type of discussion you're after—wide-ranging or narrowly focused—each group can tackle a different element, or all groups can investigate the same element, say hero/heroine body shape or the depiction of scientists, teachers, or business owners.

How far back in time students travel and how many stops they make along the way also varies. One group may want to tally and compare the amount of violence used by the Dark Knight (Batman) in only two time zones, now and in the stories from the 1950s. Another group may want to race alongside The Scarlet Speedster (The Flash) through each decade beginning in the 1940s, contrasting the ethnicity of “bad guys” and “good guys.” See Figure 3–26 for one of the contemporary comics used by an ESL adult class to probe thirty years of crime comics, zeroing in on “women's responses to attack.”

I recently recommended Gene Luen Yang's “American Born Chinese” (Figure 3–27) to a group of middle schoolers investigating racial stereotypes. The group used Yang's webcomic, which deals with a variety of Chinese American issues including stereotyping and racism, as a starting point, then looked at portrayals of Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans (when portrayed at all!) in several genres of comics back through the 1950s. A second group investigated gender roles and mother-daughter relationships using Robbins' and Timmons' current GoGirl! comics (Figure 3–28a & b) and several romance comics of the 1940s and 50s, with titles like *Young Romance*, *In Love*, *My Romance*, and *Hi-School Romance*.

Groups present their Time Traveler investigations orally or in writing. Oral reports generate lots of cross-talk—and vigorous debate. Be prepared to mediate, moderate, and just plain “keep the lid on” as students share findings and feelings related to sexism, racial discrimination, class warfare, crime and punishment, acculturation versus assimilation, and a host of superhero-mortal relationship issues. This is not a quiet activity; students talk up a storm, which is exactly what we want for language development. With little to no teacher encouragement, students typically broaden their investigations and discussions to include other non-comic material they're reading at school and at home.

Finally, a note on materials. Without a good selection of comics going back at least two decades (at a minimum), your time-traveling students may return to the present without the data they need to create strong, meaty reports. Two sets of Spider-Man comics a few years apart will differ only slightly on hero



FIG. 3–26 “Perfect Pitch” by Tim Goodyear and Adam Stone originally published in *Garish Zow Comics* (no.2). Copyright © 2002 by Tim Goodyear and Adam Stone. Reprinted by permission of Hidden Agenda Press, <www.hiddenagendapress.com/>.

traits, language, themes, and social issues. Increasing the time range between sets increases differences and gives students more material for comparing and contrasting key elements.

Fortunately, you can still buy lots of twenty- to thirty-year-old (non-collectible) comics for a song, usually twenty-five cents to a couple dollars a piece at your local comics shop. Older and collectible comics, though perfect for the Time Traveler activity, cost more. A lot more. Stick with the non-collectibles, or better yet, use reprints of the collectibles. Your local comics shop will have several volumes of reasonably priced vintage reprints. Also check your public library.

Here are some reprint winners: *The Secret Origins Replica Edition* (DC Comics, 1998) features late fifties–early sixties stories with some big-name superheroes, including Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, The Flash, and J’onn J’onzz, the Manhunter from Mars. The same heroes appear in DC’s current *Justice League of America* comics. Heroes from the Marvel Comics Universe, including Spider-Man (Figure 3–29), X-Men, and Daredevil (Figure 3–30), can be found in *Fantastic Firsts* (Marvel Comics, 2002), a reprint



FIG. 3-27 From American Born Chinese: Book One by Gene Yang. Copyright © 2002 by Gene Yang. Reprinted by permission of the author, <www.geocities.com/mysteryang/>.



FIG. 3-28a From *GoGirl!* by Trina Robbins and Anne Timmons. Copyright © 2002 by Trina Robbins and Anne Timmons. Reprinted by permission of the authors; Trina Robbins (www.popimage.com/gogirl/), Anne Timmons (homepage.mac.com/tafrin/), Dark Horse Comics (www.darkhorse.com/).



FIG. 3-29 Spider-Man (Stan Lee and Steve Ditko), *Fantastic Firsts* (Marvel, 2002). Spider-Man and other Marvel Characters TM & © 2004 Marvel Characters, Inc. Used with permission. <www.marvel.com/>.



FIG. 3-30 Daredevil (Stan Lee and Bill Everett), *Fantastic Firsts* (Marvel, 2002). Daredevil and other Marvel characters TM & © 2004 Marvel Characters, Inc. Used with permission. <www.marvel.com/>.



FIG. 3-31 *The Incredible Hulk* (Stan Lee and Jack Kirby), *The Incredible Hulk: Beauty and the Behemoth* (Marvel, 1998). Hulk and other Marvel characters TM & © 2004 Marvel Characters, Inc. Used with permission. <www.marvel.com/>.

anthology of stories from the 1960s. *The Incredible Hulk: Beauty and the Behemoth* (Marvel Comics, 1998) (Figure 3–31) offers readers a chance to chart the self-control issues of comics' very own Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, from his first appearance in 1962 through the late 1990s.

For a change of pace from the SLAM-BAM! of the action heroes, students can research five decades of teenage life in one of comics' favorite cities, Riverdale. The seven-volume *Archie Americana Series* (Archie Comic Publications, Inc.) offers reprints from the 1940s through the 1980s. Archie, Veronica, and Betty go from the jitterbug and sock hops to beatniks, surfing, miniskirts, sit-ins, and roller disco.

Expect some heated discussion and lots of passionate writing as students move beyond the Archie comics and compare and contrast the simple and generally danger-free life in Riverdale with the far more complicated and hazardous life of students living in Shanghai, Phnom Penh, Munich, Addis Ababa, Tehran, San Francisco, Atlanta, or Joplin, Missouri.