

## Graphic Novels in Foreign Language Learning

### *INTRODUCTION: GRAPHIC NOVELS AND THE CHALLENGES OF MULTIMEDIA MATERIALS*

As language instructors we are familiar with juggling the benefits and challenges of multimedia resources, especially in the early semesters and stages of language instruction. These pedagogical challenges, as well as their benefits, are especially heightened when we bring into our classrooms material that goes beyond simply presenting the target language and instead introduces students to the language as authentically used by native speakers. Unlike the adapted material and exercises from language textbook, such multimedia material is typically produced by and consumed within the culture of the target language itself, material that most often includes clips of TV and film, or songs and radio conversations that emphasize aural skills of listening comprehension.

Such resources that emphasize listening skills by presenting authentic use of the target language no doubt have an important place in the language classroom. But their challenges are also striking. An experience also familiar for language instructors is having to guide students through a short audio or video clip, perhaps only a little over a minute long. Here even the most adept instructors must make sure that students do not become discouraged after various replays and pauses that gradually build meaning. Such pedagogical challenges serve as proof as to the how difficult it can truly be to implement multimedia material in the target language and from the target culture.

Having experienced these very challenges in the classroom, I began to consider what other forms of multimedia material could be utilized as a means of introducing students to authentic examples of the target language and culture. These challenges thus began a search that eventually led me to explore the potential for incorporating graphic novels in the foreign language classroom. But while the reading-based format of graphic novels as well as the potential for their imagery to serve as visual aids allows students and instructors to avoid the challenges of fast-paced dialogue presented by video and audio clips, graphic novels are certainly not without their own challenges.

My discussion here, more than an argument as to *why* graphic novels should be looked to as a resource for foreign language pedagogy, will be an exploration as to *how* we as instructors can most successfully utilize graphic novels and incorporate them into our classrooms. But in exploring this *how* we will also investigate another *why* – *why* the graphic novel is an especially unique pedagogical tool for incorporating analytical skills, both literary and visual (and more broadly cultural and historical), into even the earliest stages of language learning. The experiences I will draw on and conclusions I arrive at derive from implementing graphic novel material at Spanish 1 and 2 courses at UC Berkeley as well as a Spanish 2 course through Patten University at San Quentin's Prison University Project.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I first explored graphic novel pedagogy in my own Spanish 1 course in Fall Semester 2014. I had further opportunity to incorporate graphic novel material in the Spring Semester 2016 in a Spanish 2 course at San Quentin that I co-taught, and to pilot materials at UC Berkeley in the Spanish 2 courses of Brian Pihuleac and Ariel Wind, both of whom I thank for generously

### *GRAPHIC NOVELS IN THE FIRST YEAR FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM*

I would first like to address where I think my experiences and conclusions are transferable and can be more broadly applied to other pedagogical contexts and where I think they are particular to the circumstances in which I taught. The breakdown is actually quite simple. The pedagogical methodologies that I will explore in this discussion do, as will be seen, arise in part from the formal features of the graphic novels themselves. And though I lack the intimate familiarity with the generic conventions of graphic novels outside of Hispanic cultures (especially with regards to non-Western graphic novels) to definitely assert that the methodologies I propose can be applied to other language traditions, I also believe that these methodologies draw on characteristics that are, as much as can be possibly said, applicable to the very modes of literary and visual narrative at their most universal level.

With regards to the level of language learning, I focused on first year courses in either their first or second semester. This focus was motivated by the marked jump between first and second year Spanish, a jump in part produced by the move from adapted textbook readings in first year Spanish to the reading of authentic texts, frequently taken from literature, in second year Spanish. Though I certainly believe that the potential for graphic novel pedagogy can extend into the intermediate and advanced levels of language learning, my examination has also convinced me that one of the greatest pedagogical potentials of the graphic novel is in helping bridge this jump between beginning and intermediate language study by presenting students with relatively manageable portions of the target language in authentic, un-adapted form and because the images can often times serve as a visual aid for the reader.

### *FROM ENTHUSIASM TO LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY & LITERARY-CULTURAL ANALYSIS*

My interest in exploring the pedagogical potential for graphic novels in the foreign language classroom originated from office hours conversations with students who came to me eager to practice their Spanish outside of class and curious to explore culturally authentic multimedia resources. I suggested they explore our library's collection of Spanish language graphic novels,<sup>2</sup> and the reaction I saw in them was nothing short of spirited excitement and enthusiasm. Such enthusiasm heavily

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allowing me to periodically take over their classes in order to investigate and evaluate these materials. I also whole-heartedly thank Berkeley Language Center directors Professors Rick Kern and Mark Kaiser, BLC Visiting Scholar Rafael Vetromille De Castro, BLC participant Chika Shibahara, and my graduate student instructor colleagues in the Spring 2016 BLC fellowship Jennifer Mackenzie and Lily Scott, all of whom offered tremendous input and suggestions throughout the semester's workshops that contributed immensely to the development of my thinking and the conclusions of my pedagogical project.

<sup>2</sup> As a research and curatorial assistant in the Romance Language Collections of Berkeley Library I contributed to a recent expansion of our graphic novel collection. I thank my supervisor Librarian of Romance Language Collections Claude Potts for the opportunity to work on this project, and for his guidance throughout, an opportunity that provided me with numerous points of inspiration and reference when developing my pedagogical materials and methodological conclusions.

contributes to the potential of graphic novels to captivate students' attention, which in turn compels students to engage more actively in the language learning process.

I would attribute this ability for heightened student engagement to not only the striking imagery one finds in a graphic novel but also the sense a student has in knowing that the material in front of them is exactly what someone in their age group from the foreign culture might well be reading for fun. This sense of a shared cross-cultural activity is only heightened by the fact that a considerable number of undergraduates read graphic novels in their native language, be it English or otherwise. And though the graphic novel's use of authentic, un-adapted target language can be a challenge for students, because graphic novels allow students to read at their own pace, they are able- I would argue - to partake in the same cultural capital of a film or television clip, but minimize the frustration of fast-paced dialogue.

But having captivated students' attention with graphic novels, where do we as instructors go next? Surely having students read some pages from a graphic novel, either in class or as an assignment the night before, can serve as a valuable means of developing reading comprehension skills. The imagery of a graphic novel of course also presents the opportunity for another sort of discussion, one that frequently works in tandem with the language of the text yet which also asks students to bring in, and develop, their own vocabulary of visual analysis. This potential alone for activating multiple forms of learning and analysis, at once textual and visual, should not be dismissed, and is reason enough for me to encourage foreign language instructors to work graphic novel material into their teaching.

But over the course of introducing into the classroom various examples from several graphic novels that treat a variety of cultural topics, I also came to understand how graphic novels could be utilized in ways that go beyond reading comprehension and the discussion of visual imagery. This approach to graphic novel pedagogy will force us to consider how graphic novels construct their narratives not simply through the combination of image and text but through a spectrum of image-text relationships, where on the one end the textual and the visual can work in tandem to articulate the same narrative, or on the other end, parallel, even divergent, narratives can be split across textual and visual registers.

By emphasizing in our language pedagogy this spectrum of the image-text relationships we, as language instructors, can also harness the ways in which graphic novels encode into their narrative processes of interpretation and analysis. Through this encoding of interpretive and analytical processes graphic novels encourage students' own faculties of analysis and interpretation. And really this is one of - if not the - most important pedagogical benefits of the graphic novel: it's ability to foster analysis even at early stages of language learning.

As I mentioned, the graphic novels I excerpted for classroom instruction represent the broad diversity of cultural and historical topics that graphic novels offer. This range of cultural topics covering everything from events of historical magnitude to quotidian social experience - the Spanish Civil War, the conquest of the New World, the preparation of a Spanish meal for friends, and even the historical context of landmark works of art - speaks to how graphic novels can serve an important pedagogical

function for targeting the various cultural registers that students should be interacting with in the classroom.

As we turn to exploring some of these examples, I want to emphasize that even with the most straightforward use of graphic novels as reading material skills of comprehension and analysis are always occurring but that in order to fully activate these skills it is also always necessary for instructors to pair this reading with basic though meaningful discussion questions and activities. At the same time, I want to emphasize that instructors can, and should, also look for techniques for adapting graphic novel material so as to emphasize goals beyond reading comprehension, be they of a more specific nature – such as the targeting of vocabulary or grammatical constructions as a supplement to what is presented in the textbook – or of a more general cultural or historical nature, or to prompt a creative assignment. The examples I will explore propose such possibilities for extended strategies of graphic novel pedagogy and likewise, I hope, will serve as generative examples for what instructors might do for their own courses and their own graphic novel material.

#### ***FIRST EXAMPLE: HISTORICAL MATERIAL AND VOCABULARY COMPREHENSION***

The first example I will discuss is from the graphic novel 36-39, *malos tiempos* ([19]36-[19]39, *Bad Times*) by Carlos Giménez which deals with the experience of the Spanish Civil War through a series of interconnected comic-style vignettes from the perspectives of various characters. The excerpt I selected, however, focuses less on particular characters and protagonists instead narrating the broader experience of living through the aerial bombing, specifically told through the Nationalist (i.e. pro-Franco fascists) bombing of the Republican (i.e. left-leaning) city of Madrid.

Though spanning no more than a two-page spread, the excerpt (image 1) presents a significant amount of text that contains various difficult technical terms that narrate the violent and traumatic experience of war and the urban war experience of the Spanish Civil War. Though students could simply work their way through the text, marking vocabulary they do not understand that then could be defined and explained as a class, I would suggest more dynamic methods for approaching this text. First, the instructor could separate the text boxes from their particular frames, (as illustrated in image 2). The students would then be asked to match the paragraphs with the image they believe corresponds to what is described. This forces the students to focus not on each particular word but on the overall meaning of the passages, or to look for specific textual clues they do understand that correspond to the imagery. An instructor might then ask students to group words they don't understand into broader associative clusters, such as technical terms having to do with each opposing side of the war, terms having to do with the experience of bombing, or words having to do with the urban aftermath and wreckage of the bombing.

I would also emphasize the possibilities for discussion that this approach can generate. In the more standard reading comprehension approach, class-wide discussion would most likely begin with students volunteering specific words they didn't understand, taking an approach that is not only list-based but also which emphasizes what students did not understand. By contrast, when having students

match the text to the image, the instructor can then ask students to explain to the rest of the class their decisions, emphasizing connections they did understand and also pushing them to explain their thinking with complete sentences.

Without it being made explicit the students are also being asked to provide an account for both the visual and textual components of the graphic novel in a way that helps them arrive at a full (or at least fuller) sense of what is being narrated. Naturally, this can then lead to a broader discussion about how the graphic novel represents the experience of war and what conclusions (or questions) we can in particular draw about the historical experience of the Spanish Civil War.

### *SECOND EXAMPLE: HISTORICAL MATERIAL AND CREATIVE COMPOSITION*

My second example will also focus on an historical topic matter but take this lesson in a different direction, this time that of a creative assignment. We see in this excerpt (image 3) from *El otro mar (The Other Sea)* by Alonso Zapico (which narrates Vasco Núñez de Balboa's journey to the Pacific shoreline of Central America). I have selected this excerpt as an example of how graphic novels, even without the relatively more time-intensive editing that the earlier excerpt exemplified, can nonetheless lead to dynamic pedagogical exercises. This excerpt from Zapico's graphic novel presents a series of characters presenting autobiographical accounts of their lives and how they ended up as soldiers (i.e. conquistadors) in the New World. Unlike reading comprehension exercises instructors and students might typically encounter in a textbook, this graphic novel presents this historical moment not through a series of facts but through narrative thus cultivating an analytical disposition in the reader. Moreover by deploying the autobiographical accounts of various characters, the graphic novel generates a multivalent perspective of the conquest of the New World by presenting not only characters who conform to typical expectations and exhibit the cruelty and greed often associated with the conquistador figure, yet also characters whose New World fate is the product of misfortune and hardships that resulted in their becoming pawns within the machinery of empire. Reading these accounts students encounter a range of historical as well as emotional experiences ranging from greed to disillusionment to anxiety.

After reading the passages in class and collecting vocabulary as needed, the students were asked to describe the settings depicted and visual representation of the New World. After this I had the students to inhabit the personality of their own imagined New World figure and write a similar should autobiographical account. The results displayed a creative engagement that I cannot but attribute to the dynamism of the graphic novel and that I do not believe would have arisen from merely reading a textbook account of New World imperialism. One student, for example, wrote as a Moor who worked on the Spanish galleons, another as a conquistador who became so obsessed with gold that he tried to imbibe liquid gold, and another as priest who taught Spanish to the Indigenous (likely also inspired by the classroom surrounding itself), and finally another wrote as a captain of thieves that controlled the area that would become the state of California.

*CONCLUSION*

In each of these examples we see the potential for graphic novels to activate different aspects of the foreign language learning process through three formal aspects: (1) through text that presents authentic examples of the target language the graphic novels students' skills of reading comprehension and vocabulary (2) through their imagery graphic novels simultaneously offer both visual aids to such reading comprehension yet also material for discussion and visual analysis, and (3) through the representation of cultural and historical subject matter, graphic novels offer a dynamic window into topics that textbooks usually handle through more sterilized fact-based passages. In short graphic novels can target such a variety of language instruction goals that their place in the classroom is invaluable, especially when combined with pedagogical exercises that can further capitalize on and harness their learning potential.