

Reading, Speaking and Writing through Creative Resources: Comics in Second Language Teaching

M^a Victoria Guadamillas Gómez

Department of Modern Languages, University of Castilla-La Mancha
Toledo, Spain

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse the intercultural and commutative potential of creative and literary materials such as comics, as a tool for English language teaching with a particular focus on cultural aspects and from a communicative approach. Firstly, the paper defines intercultural communicative competence, including different revisions of the term (Chen and Starosta, 1996; Byram, 1997; McAllister & Irvine, 2000). Secondly, it examines comics' potential and their relationship with the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence from a theoretical point of view. Thirdly, it discusses about comics' potential in motivating teaching English as a Second Language, giving a well-detailed description of those materials. Apart from defining comics, it also makes reference to their components and characteristics that help to understand their importance in teaching English as a Second Language. Later, it makes some considerations for the methodological use of comics for reading, writing and speaking to correctly develop intercultural and communicative competence in intermediate English learners. Finally, it states some conclusions that show the value of these resources in the classroom.

Key words: Comics, Intercultural Competence, Reading, Speaking, Writing.

Introduction

Teaching English in a globalized context constantly needs changes and methodological innovations with the main objective of making language teaching not just the transmission of a group of expression that must be learnt and used, but a cultural vehicle, too. A good language command will give learners wider access to cultural or sociological contents; in that sense, we must consider the prominent role of materials and resources' selection with a cultural purpose.

Creative literary resources, such as poetry, drama or comics are more flexible and adaptable to real communicative contexts than other materials. These resources also allow teachers to improve learning and teaching second language because they are also more motivating and challenging for learners than grammar based materials. Comics, for instance, can prevent from language learning contexts where repetition or learning by heart becomes the only way to access the second language, since they make easier to bring creativity and communication into the classroom. Some recent studies (Cerezo, 2007; Criado and Sánchez, 2009) highlight that English Second Language lessons are not communicative yet, stating that "teacher's action in the classroom is not predominantly communicative in nature" (2009: 8). Besides, other current studies (Moirano, 2012; Lario de Oñate and Vázquez, 2013) make reference to the secondary role of culture in those lessons and suggest that teachers and institutions should "pay special attention to the issue of not leaving culture aside when teaching language." (Moirano, 2012: 73). Classroom resources, such as comics, create a new environment, allowing participation and giving teachers the possibility to develop intercultural and communicative competences in their students.

Comics are normally associated with fantastic stories that belong to fiction. However, there are lots of them with political or historical contents. White (1992) makes reference to the possibility of accessing historical or cultural facts in a particular country by using different materials.

Moreover, comics are also very powerful to foster communicative competence in our students. The main relationship between communicative competence acquisition and comics comes from comics' characteristics. Particularly, this relationship has to do with the association between image/drawings and text that establishes a connection between the meanings behind both. Comics are generally easy to read stories and their language is part of familiar or diary conversations. Besides, comics have an attractive context and offer the possibility to work with their different language extracts from a communicative approach. The written text is normally supported and implemented by the image, so that combination between text and image promotes further understanding. Furthermore, Starr points out that "comics provide authentic language learning opportunities [...] The dramatically reduced text of comics makes them manageable and language profitable" (Starr, 2004: 2).

In this article, I will explore the possibilities to work with comics from a communicative perspective that allows teachers to introduce cultural aspects in their lessons. I will focus on the different skills that can be developed by using comics: writing, speaking and reading. Therefore, the main aim is to present a valid didactic approach to design activities with a focus on these particular skills that can be applied to comics as essential creative materials in the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Intercultural communicative competence

Intercultural communicative competence is commonly considered as a synonym of communicative competence, but there is a particular ingredient in the former, that is the culture. Spitzberg (1989) states that the main difference between communicative competence and

intercultural communicative competence comes from the context in which both are developed. English language students are required to communicate effectively in English, but this ability to communicate must be shown at specific places, environments or in particular countries. That is the reason why the cultural component is needed and must be dominated by English language learners. Those places and countries possess particular cultural elements that influence the language and its use in terms of vocabulary, style or linguistics structures.

Collier (1989) adds that there are cultural elements that can be general to any cultural society, but there are also specific components that belong to particular societies, defining intercultural communicative competence as: “the mutual avowing or confirmation of the interactants’ cultural identities where both interactants engage in behaviour perceived to be appropriate and effective in advancing both cultural identities” (Collier, 1989: 25).

Some years later, Chen and Starosta (1996) carried out different research projects in the field of cultural elements and their influence on communication; they ended up in a model of intercultural communicative competence that involves most of the considerations made by previous authors. They divide this competence into three main abilities: affectivity (intercultural sensitivity), knowledge (intercultural conscience) and behaviour (intercultural ability).

Firstly, intercultural sensitivity, according to Chen and Starosta (1996), makes reference to the affective dimension, paying particular attention to the emotional nature of the competence. They focus on the ability to send and receive emotions using messages in the foreign language among speakers who do not belong to the same linguistic community. Some of the characteristics that are related to the affectivity and emotional competence are self-confidence, social behaviour or avoiding prejudging. All those characteristics can open the learner to the new culture and avoid the learners to look at the target culture and language as a strange or oblivious to them.

Secondly, the authors define intercultural conscience, considering that the English learner must have a previous knowledge of the communicative interactions that can take place among individuals in the target culture. Chen and Starosta (1996) point out two main characteristics: self-conscience and others’ cultural conscience. They consider important that the learner knows his roots and culture values, since the aforementioned allow him to look at similarities or differences with the target culture.

Finally, Chen and Starosta (1996) refer to intercultural ability, pointing out five characteristics in this ability: message coding, appropriate discourse, flexibility, interaction management and social abilities. Those are considered decisive to become competent from an intercultural perspective because they are related to non-verbal language and imply that the learner understands and shows ability to codify information in a particular context. Flexibility in intercultural contexts also has a prominent role, since speaking and interacting in a different cultural context with particular characteristics is often difficult for learners. As it will be discussed below in this article, creative materials such as comics can concede a previous knowledge of the target culture, since the language used is mostly oral and it can bring students closer to real conversational contexts through fictional stories and their oral expressions.

Intercultural communicative competence as an alternative to communicative competence has also been studied by Byram (1997) who states that it is “the ability to understand and establish a verbal relationship with people from other countries” (Byram, 1997: 5). Having this into account, this competence does not just look at the conversation with native speakers, but also to the learners’ ability to establish conversations in English with people from any country and understand their cultural behaviour as well as the linguistics aspects that might show cultural features.

In other words, Byram (1997) develops a framework to teach learners to communicate in a particular foreign context, not just with native speakers, but also with people from different origins and backgrounds. These studies are also the seed of other researcher such as McAllister and Irvine (2000) who consider the development of intercultural communicative competence fundamental to develop competent speakers in different cultural contexts.

The following figure shows the differences between communicative competence and intercultural communicative competence in terms of communication, objectives of language and teaching and appreciation of national /target culture:

Table 1. Intercultural communicative competence. Adapted from Byram (1997)

	Communicative Competence	Intercultural Communicative Competence
COMMUNICATION	Information exchange	Interaction to allow information exchange
ESL OBJECTIVE	Communication with a native speaker	Communication to provide intercultural relationships
TARGET CULTURE	Monolithic	In changing and evolving attitude, depending on different aesthetic and cultural sensitivities
CULTURAL CONTENTS	Contents and objectives	Attitudes, abilities and skills
LEARNING TO LEARN	Linguistically oriented. Self-learning	Linguistically and culturally oriented. Self-learning

It is important to highlight the concept of target culture that is shown in this model of intercultural communicative competence. It is not just perceived as a national culture, but the target culture is an evolving and changing culture that is constantly being developed by individuals. We must consider those factors when choosing or preparing materials, trying to choose those materials that offer a modern view of society and language.

Culture and Second Language

Some authors consider the differences between neutral English (Hill, 1986) and nuclear English (Quirk, 1981). Neutral English will make reference to a variety of English in which cultural references are not present: “which would serve as a universal medium of communication” (Saleemi, 1985: 16), that which Chew (1999) refers to as: “a worldview of English, which recognizes that it no longer belongs exclusively to its native speakers” (Chew, 1999: 43). Hasman states that “English is divesting itself of its political and cultural connotations as more

people realize that English is not the property of only a few countries. Instead, it is a vehicle that is used globally and will lead to more opportunities. It belongs to whoever uses it for whatever purpose or need” (Hasman, 2000: 28). Those authors consider that the international potential of English as a lingua franca has made cultural connotations disappear or decrease from its vocabulary and use.

However, we must consider if it is really possible for a language not to have reference to cultural elements or if it is possible for a language to show multitude of cultural aspects at the same time. Widdowson states that: “a language that stripped down to its bare essentials as a resource for impersonal reference is deprived at the same time of its potential for creativity and change, [such language] ceases to function a natural language” (Widdowson, 1982: 208). Such statement makes us think that it may not be possible to separate a language from its cultural roots and it is probably essential to work on cultural elements by inserting different materials in second language teaching.

Some documents recently developed by European education institutions such the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR) also refer the importance of culture in the second language teaching and sociocultural and intercultural aspects that should be included when teaching:

to cope with the social and cultural dimensions of communicative behaviour, for example, by adhering to social conventions and cultural norms. Working in harness with our sociolinguistic competences, our pragmatic competences underpin our ability to use language appropriately to fulfil particular functions, for example, greeting, leave-taking, requesting, thanking...
(Little, 2012: 3)

The *Common European Framework of Reference* also includes *The European Portfolio*) that alludes to different initiatives that aim to comprise linguistic experiences of students belonging to European countries. The document includes a part devoted to cultural experiences related to their language learning.

The ELP comprises:

- a language passport, which summarizes the owner’s linguistic identity and his/her experience of learning and using languages other than the mother tongue;
- a language biography, which supports the planning, monitoring and evaluation of language learning, and encourages reflection on the intercultural dimension of second/foreign language learning and use and on the language learning process;
- a dossier, in which the owner keeps work in progress, evidence of developed second/foreign language skills, and certificates and other documents that attest learning achievement
(Little, 2012: 13)

Then, culture teaching has a prominent role in language teaching from an European perspective and one of its main concerns is to search for new ways, tools and creative materials that allow teachers to bring cultural elements and communicative practices into the second language classroom.

The potential of comics

Comics are potential resources to introduce culture into the class and they are composed by different elements:

- a) Panels are the main part in comics and they are normally describing the main sequence. Panels can have different shapes depending on the story. Stafford (2010) makes reference to the relationship that is established between panels and speech acts, considering that every individual speech act with individual meaning (parole), it is accompanied by different instances of language (langue), so the meaning of the panel (parole) will depend on its position in a sequence where other instances of language (langue) are shown in the comic.
- b) Text balloons are bordered shape and contain a dialogue, usually with a tail that points to the speaker. As with panels, balloons appear in various shapes that characterize the mood of the characters.
- c) Thought balloons: They almost always have bumpy, cloudlike borders and tails that look like trails of bubbles. They emphasise the feelings and attitudes of the different characters and together with the text balloons help the reader to understand the story.
- d) Sound effects: Most sound effects are floating letters and sometimes they are an integral part of the imagery. They also include onomatopoeias such as: *Crash! Chug, chug, chung. Puff, puff, puff. Ding-dong, ding-dong!*
- e) Narrative boxes are usually rectangular shaped and they help in the construction of the story. Narrative boxes are commonly used to set the scene and concede a spatial and temporal setting into it.

Apart from the relationship that can be observed in the different elements that are involved in comics, there are other aspects that arise from the combination of images and texts. Van Leeuwen states that there is “a single, multi-layered, multimodal communicative act, whose illocutionary force comes about through the fusion of all the component, semiotic modalities: dress, grooming, facial expression, gaze or gesture” (Leeuwen, 2004: 7). Furthermore, Tserdanelis y Wong (2004) points out that, “many non-linguistic factors can affect the precise interpretation of meaning. Context, both linguistic and situational, can fill in the crucial details in sentences lacking explicitness” (Tserdanelis y Wong, 2004: 240).

Comics have the possibility to tell stories, past, present or future experiences or even fictional events, giving teachers the opportunity to work in different verbal tenses and using language in a real communicative context. Furthermore, comics can show daily habits, customs, ornaments and responses associated with an individual cultural reality. Hence, by an appropriate selection of comics that show cultural aspects, teachers can create their own materials to develop intercultural communicative aspects, particularly, through reading, writing or speaking activities. In the following part I will make some suggestions in the design of activities or sessions based on comics.

Reading from Comics

The value of comics as a tool in the classroom has been widely discussed in recent years. Their potential as a resource for reading is recognized by most educators as they promote literacy in the early years, but they are also appealing for young or adult readers. In the design of activities from comics, we must consider Grabe (2004) who points out that: “in academic contexts reading provides a major source of input for further students learning of both language and content information” (Grabe, 2004: 46). The following figure shows an example of reading from comics session template:

Table 2. Reading from comics. Adapted from Grabe y Stoller (2002)

I. Pre-reading	I. Introduce the main vocabulary using flashcards II. Predict the meaning in a particular strip III. Identify the main themes IV. Recycle previous knowledge that can be familiar to students
II. During reading	I. Explore the panels that might be difficult to understand II. Familiarize with new structures or vocabulary III. Help general understanding
III. Post-reading	I. Summarize II. Analyse and evaluate III. Classify IV. Confirm previous predictions

Nunan (1989) also proposes different steps to follow in the design of activities for reading that can be suitable and adapted to comics. The authors believe that activities should be designed following a progression and a controlled practice carried out by the teacher is essential. He states that: "comprehension based activities to controlled production activities and finally the ones which require the learner to engage in real communicative interaction" (1989: 118). So, the task design can be as follows: the learner to undertake activities which make progressively more demands upon them, moving from comprehension based activities to controlled production activities, and finally ones which require the learner to engage in real communicative interaction."

a) Comprehension and familiarization

In this first stage the teacher can show students images from the story and characters and ask the students general question, such as: *What topic might this story be about? What do we already know about this topic? Have we read any other books about this topic? Do we have any experience related to this topic? Where and when did we have the experience?* Other questions can be related to cultural aspects: *Where does the main character live? Is your home town similar to the one in this comic? Is there any character in the story you feel identify with? Why?* Besides, clothes or rooms that are shown in the comic can be also analysed in terms of cultural differences and similarities.

According to Nunan (1989), those general questions will serve the students to get closer to the story and understand it later in a proper way.

b) Production

This phase is useful to work on reading aloud, particularly, practising intonation, rhythm and pronunciation. The selection of the story is important in that phase, since we can choose a story with five to eight characters, so our students in group can practice it, reading in different roles. Drama will also be suitable in this phase. A first reading by the teacher or a previous listening will be adequate to avoid pronunciation mistakes.

c) Interaction

Interaction can be divided into three different short phases: simulation, discussion and problem solving. In the simulation phase, teachers can introduce unexpected events in the story and the student could contribute by saying how a particular character will behave after this unexpected event.

In the second part, discussion, students can talk in pairs or small groups, ask and answering questions, such as: *Where does the story take place? Who is the main character? Who is the villain? How do you know it? Who is the hero/heroine?* etc. Finally, in problem solving, teacher can ask the student about a new end for the story with new panels, narrative boxes and elements. Besides, new characterization of heroes or heroines in the story can promote creativity and adapt to the student cultural background and preferences.

Those didactic approaches to comics are based on the concept of *task continuity* (Nunan, 1989: 119) and they are mainly directed to work on reading, but they may introduce listening or speaking tasks, too in longer sessions. Drawing or painting from comics can be also considered at this point, but it will depend on the learners' pictorial abilities, material resources.

Writing from comics

As it has been described in reading, students need authentic materials to achieve a significant and valuable learning. Sometimes, intermediate level students find themselves unable to write or speak because of the lack of ideas or reason to carry out a conversation on the topics that teachers propose in the classroom. That lack of ideas can find comics as a source of motivation and ideas to write or speak about.

Comics are accessible to every student and they represent an intercultural dialogue source as Davis (1997) states. Their images are motivating and challenging as a theme for writing on characters, settings or to compare present events to the ones in the story. An example of a writing session from comics is described below:

Table 3. Writing from comics

1	Give some part of a well-known comic to your student: <i>Garfield</i> , <i>Peanut</i> , etc. You can also choose any comic with a focus on cultural aspects or draw your own comic. Historical events or cultural values may appear on it
2	Ask your students to describe personally and physically the characters in the story. Images can help in this description
3.	Ask your students to finish the story from the comic strips you gave them. If they know the end you can tell them to imagine a new ending or a better solution for the historical event depicted in the comic strip
4.	Share in groups the different versions of the story created by students
5.	Provide your students with a <i>feedback</i> of their descriptions and endings

Speaking from comics

Reading and writing are critical for learners' success, but speaking is the key to have access to everyday conversation and it is this skill that most students struggle with. Due to their oral component (conversation between characters), comics are a useful material to enhance students and foster their oral skills. Richards (2008) divides the teaching and practice of speaking in different phases: "talk as interaction, talk as transaction, talk as performance" (Richards, 2008: 159).

Talk as interaction makes reference to communicative contexts and situations that are created between students or between the teacher and the student and means that students are able to command themselves in an effective conversation: opening and closing a conversation, kidding, taking turns and make use of the appropriate style.

Talk as transaction is related to abilities that involve negotiation skills, such as describing, explaining, asking for information or reasoning your opinion. Finally, talk as performance mainly refers to monologues, where speaking is similar to writing and sequencing and choosing the right vocabulary is more important than communication in itself. Due to their orality and other characteristics, comics are essential to work on speaking in these three phases:

Table 4. Interacting and negotiating from comics

INTERACTION	I. Opening and closing conversation from a panel II. Choosing a theme for a comic strip III. Interacting in short conversations IV. Answering from a text balloon.
NEGOTIATION	I. Describing different setting in a comic II. Comparing different panels III. Showing agreement and disagreement with the characters IV. Making suggestions to the characters for future decisions

We can see in the figure above some of the techniques that can be used to prepare speaking activities from comics, paying particular attention to interaction and negotiation of meaning. Those themes can be adapted to different comics, such as *Garfield*, *Calvin and Hobbes* or *The Ultimates* by Marvel (2010). Furthermore, we can choose comics that focus on particular aspect that we want to work with our students or cultural themes.

Conclusions

This paper has studied the potential of comics, paying particular attention to their importance in teaching language and culture to develop reading, writing and speaking skills in intermediate learners. Firstly, it has presented and defined intercultural communicative competence. Then, it has alluded to the relationship between language and culture. Later, it has studied the potential of comics in language learning and teaching from a communicative perspective. It has also looked at some of their most important characteristics of comics that allow teachers to bring cultural elements and oral language into the classroom. Thirdly, it has made reference to reading, writing

and speaking from comics, so the use of those materials acquire a significant role in the ESL classroom. Finally, this article states some conclusion that lead the reader to consider the inclusion of comics as a resource in the English language classroom.

About the Author:

M^a Victoria Guadamillas Gómez (Department of Modern Languages_ University of Castilla La Mancha) obtained an MA Degree in English Studies (2009) and she's an Assistant English Professor (Profesora Ayudante) at the Faculty of Education in Toledo. She also teaches English for Specific Purposes and other intermediate English courses organized by the Modern Languages Centre in this university. Her main research areas are language teaching, didactics and assessment. Recently, she presented a paper Assessing criteria for oral skills at B2 level in the IATEFL International Conference.

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