

## I See, Therefore I Understand:

### Using Graphic Novels to Increase ELL Students' Reading Comprehension

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The number of English language learners (ELL's) at U.S. schools is increasing rapidly. There were 4,851,527 ELL's at public schools and these comprised the 9.8% of the entire school population during the 2012-2013 school year (Migration Policy Institute [MPI], 2015). This rapid increase in the number of ELL's brings out some important issues related to teaching this student group. One of the most important challenges in ELL education is closing the academic achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL students. ELL's lag behind their non-ELL peers in reading and math (Fry, 2008), and ELL's have a higher dropout rate than other student groups (Echevarria, Short & Powers, 2006; Menken, 2010).

Reading can be a very difficult task to accomplish for ELL's. According to Farrell (2009),

“Many times, beginning ELL's plunge into a text when they start to read, but when they meet a difficult word or confusing sentence or paragraph, their reading grinds to a halt and becomes painful, boring, no fun, or too difficult for them to continue... and some give up trying to learn how to read in the second/subsequent language.” (p. 1)

Teachers need some methods to help their ELL students increase their reading comprehension. However, it is not as easy as it sounds, because most of the ELL's are not motivated to read in the second language. There might be several reasons for this, but the most common ones are the following:

1) Lack of reading proficiency: The students might be very fluent speakers of the second language. However, they might still have difficulty in understanding the reading texts. Even though it takes 3-5 years for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students to have oral proficiency, it takes 4-7 years to achieve academic proficiency (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000, p. 10). Therefore, even if ELL's speak English very fluently, they may struggle with comprehending the academic language in readings.

2) Difficulty in understanding the cultural concepts and some vocabulary items: Each language has a role in the world view of the person who speaks it. In other words, the linguistic form of a language domain is not independent from its conceptual or functional meaning in the brain (Slobin, 1999; Aksu-Koc, Ogel-Balaban-Alp, 2009). ELL's may interpret and answer some of the reading passages according to their previous knowledge, language background, and experiences, which can make understanding a reading text hard and confusing.

Teachers need to take these problems into consideration while assigning reading texts to the ELL students, and find some innovative ways to increase ELL students' reading comprehension, especially motivating them to read after school. This is very crucial not only for ELL students, but also for non-ELL students. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveyed 15 year-old students in 43 countries. Researchers found that students' levels of reading engagement were more important than their socio-economic

levels when it came to predicting their literacy abilities (Willms, 2003). In addition, Krashen (1996) highlighted that “the most affective bridge from low levels of reading ability and higher levels is free voluntary reading, or pleasure reading” (p. 5). It is very important for teachers to cultivate students’ interest in reading since it may eliminate some of the disadvantages that the students may have outside of the school. If students do not read outside of class, they miss some unique opportunities to be exposed to different texts, vocabulary, and diverse ideas drawn from reading (Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2006).

### **Why can graphic novels work?**

Although research on graphic novels does not have a long history, almost all of the research findings agree that graphic novels can help engaging students in reading (Cary, 2004; Stall, 2000; Schneider, 2005). The visuals in the graphic novels attract students’ attention and increase their motivation. Even though students cannot understand some of the words and cultural themes in written form, visuals in the graphic novels can lead to a better understanding of those. In addition, many graphic novels are moderately light reading. They can definitely serve as an introduction to reading chapter books in the second language. McKenna & Robinson (2009) describe three readability levels in reading. Some of the students can read and understand a novel without any assistance (independent level), but the same student can read and understand a history text with some help (instructional level). However, a text on biology can be so hard for students that even if they get some help, the text would be still hard to comprehend (frustration level). Graphic novels can be excellent material for students at the instructional level and motivate them to read.

It is still true, unfortunately, that some teachers and librarians do not consider graphic novels as literature, so they hesitate to include them on classroom reading lists

(Griffith, 2010). However, most research on graphic novels agree that graphic novels are a new form of literature which includes print and visuals together (Baetens, 2008). In order to understand the content of graphic novels, readers must be "actively engaged in the process of decoding and comprehending a range of literary devices, including narrative structures, metaphor and symbolism, point of view, and the use of puns and alliteration, intertextuality, and inference" (Crawford & Weiner, 2006, p. 5). Gorman (2003) states that different graphic novels can be used to teach different literacy devices.

### **This study**

This case study took place at a middle school in a midwestern state. I focused on teaching literacy through graphic novels and worked with one ELL student for one semester and analyzed the role of graphic novels in increasing this student's reading comprehension.

Ning<sup>1</sup> was an eighth-grade ELL student and had arrived in the US six months earlier from Cambodia. She had started to learn English after she arrived in the US. She spoke English well, but she still had some problems comprehending written text. To illustrate, she could not distinguish some of the words which have similar spellings, such as "some" and "same."

When I told her I wanted to work with her on reading, she looked down at the table, frowning. A bit surprised with her reaction, I bent down to our tote and took out the graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*. When she saw the book, her face brightened and she started to smile. "I can read that easily," she giggled. I made sure with her reading teacher that she did not read this book before, but because I was confused between her two responses, I wanted to double check. "Why do you like this book? Did you read it before"?

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms  
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“No” she said, “but I can read it. It’s got pictures.”

Like Ning, most of the ELL students find it very hard to understand the reading texts in the second language; however, visual aids help them understand the content of the readings better. Graphic novels not only help students understand the overall meaning of the text, but they also help students to comprehend the vocabulary and verb tenses (Kerr & Culhane, 2000), cognitive skills (Lavin, 1998), and the decoding of facial and body expressions (Simmons, 2003). Chun (2009) states that even though most of the students think that history is a “boring exercise,” graphic novels engage them in reading (p. 147). In fact, while talking about graphic novels, Ning stated that she wished they had science books in graphic form, so that she could understand them better. I told her that there were some science books written this way, and she was very excited to learn more about them.

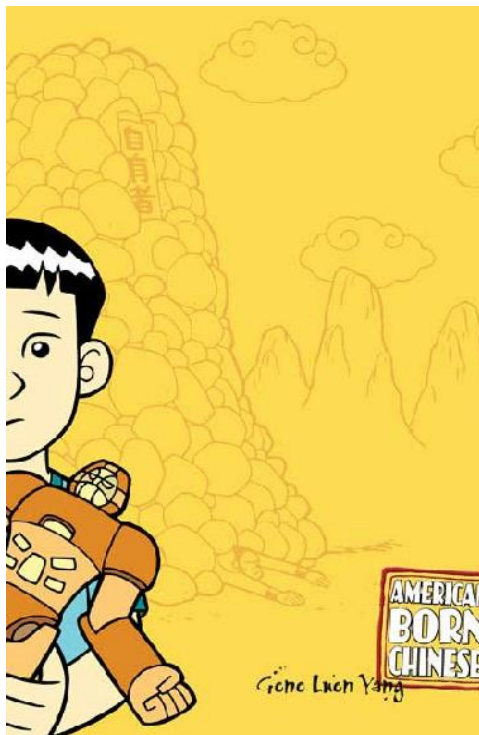
**Figure 1:** Graphic novels for different school subjects

Science	<p>A Journey Through the Digestive System with Max Axiom</p> <p>Graphic Forensic Science Set</p> <p>The Shocking World of Electricity with Max Axiom</p> <p>Isaac Newton and the Laws of Motion</p> <p>The Cartoon Guide to Physics</p>
Literature	<p>Romeo and Juliet</p> <p>Pride and Prejudice and Zombies</p> <p>Hamlet</p>

Social Sciences	Kings in Disguise  Persepolis  Maus
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### Teaching reading with *American Born Chinese*

Before starting to read the book, *American Born Chinese*, I wanted to learn more about Ning. I learned that she did not read any books outside of school. In fact, when I first borrowed a copy of *American Born Chinese* for her, she returned it to the school library after our meeting. When I asked her why she did not keep it, she said “I do not read at home.”



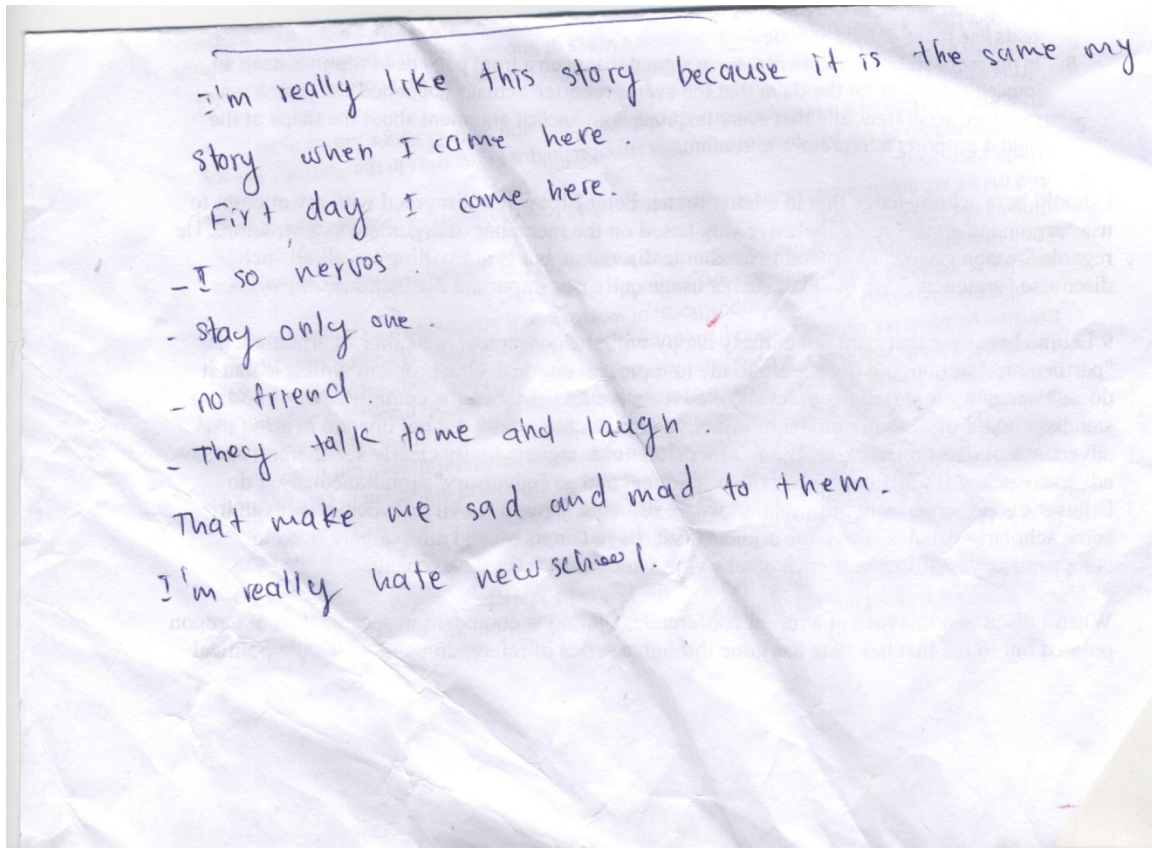
Before I started reading *American Born Chinese* with Ning, we talked about some of the basic terms about graphic novels, such as *panels*, *gutters*, and *speech balloons*. This was important because during our meetings, I asked Ning specific questions by using these terms, such as, “What is happening in this panel?”

In our first meeting, we read the first 23 pages together. During this session, Ning was really focused and did not pay attention to anything else. When she finished reading,

she said she really liked the story so far. I wanted her to write what she liked in the story.

Her response was interesting: she said she likened the main character to herself.

**Figure 2:** Ning's comment on the first part of the book



This response opened some doors for discussing her problems with the new culture and with her new school environment. She did not have any problems while writing. She wrote about her ideas without stopping for anything. While writing her response, she could not recall the word *awesome* and asked for help. In her first writing, she used 68 words to summarize the first part of the story.

After our second meeting, Ning again said she couldn't read the story at home. I was worried that there were some other reasons for her not reading at home. But there were not; she just did not want to. I knew that this activity was an extra task for her, so I talked with

her about how important her reading at home was for this project. Since she did not want to read at home, I decided to extend our reading time during our meetings. In our later reading sessions, Ning did not want to quit reading when the time was up. She was engaged in reading! This is an important, because it is very important for teachers to be aware that some students may be prejudiced against reading, and that teachers may need to use different strategies to engage students in reading.

Next, I read the assigned pages together with Ning and asked her some comprehension questions. She answered all of them. I tried to trace the role of the visuals for her comprehension by asking, “How do you know?” and “What are your clues?” Ning constantly referred to pictures while answering the comprehension questions.

As I read more of the book, Ning again likened the main character to herself. She also told me that she started to like the book because she knew the “Monkey King” story. To my surprise, she emailed the summary of the story before our meeting day. It was happening! Ning was reading outside of the classroom, and she was motivated to write her responses! I did not want her to lose her motivation for reading outside of school. Nor did I want her to lose her motivation for writing in English. Therefore, I asked her to write five-to-six sentence summaries. Her responses were longer than what I asked her. Her second response was 537 words and her third response was 131 words.

**Figure 3:** Part of Ning’s third response

The morning after the dinner party the monkey king issued all the monkey need to go to get flower -fruit at mountain and they must to were shoe too 🤪



The Monkey king he also ordered .He locked him into deep down he spend his day to training .

He spend his night to meditating he ate and drink nothing .

After forty days he make 4 Major disciplines of invulnerability .

- Disciplines one invulnerability to fire .

- Disciplines two invulnerability to cold .

-Disciplines three invulnerability to drowning .

-Disciplines four invulnerability to wounds.

after another day he achieved the four major disciplines of bodily form : (1) giant form

(2)Miniature form (3) hair into-clone (4)shape shift .

and than he finish he can get outside and all the monkey is happy they said they will once again frolic under his protection .

It is the letter from the winds carried this down from heaven this letter send by Ao-jun dragon king western sea.

### **Conclusion**

This study found results results similar to previous studies of ELL reading comprehension: ELL students do not want to read in the second language because they cannot understand the books. Lei, Berger, Allen, Plummer, & Rosenberg, (2010) suggest six practices to increase students' reading comprehension: *develop positive attitudes towards reading, increase vocabulary knowledge, use dictionaries, use signal devices, read*

*extensively, and read frequently.* Within this framework, graphic novels can be an effective way to increase reading comprehension. Graphic novels help develop positive attitudes towards reading, because students can use the visuals in the book for the comprehension of the story. The visuals in the story already serve as dictionaries (more like visual glossaries for the students). According to Smetana, et al., “Due to their visual nature, comics and graphic novels provide a context-rich, high-interest story environment for acquiring new vocabulary” (2009, p. 230). When students’ reading comprehension levels increase, they become more willing to read outside of the classroom as self-motivated readers. So the last two directions from Lei et al. (2010) can be the result of previous ones. Ning did not have very positive attitudes towards reading, and she did not want to be part of the reading comprehension study; however, when she learned that the study included graphic novels, she was eager to participate.

This study points out the importance of graphic novels in term of increasing reading comprehension and motivation of ELL students. Graphic novels increase ELL students’ motivation, reading comprehension, and even motivate them to write, and to write in the second language outside of the classroom. The students can study different literacy devices in graphic novels. As well, graphic novels can serve as a stepping stone towards reading chapter books.

It would be unrealistic to imagine graphic novels as the magic wand and expect them to turn all ELL students into fluent, motivated learners and good readers in L2. There is no sure-fire remedy to solve the reading comprehension problems in a day or so (Lei et al., 2010). However, graphic novels can be effective tools for these aims if chosen carefully and tap into students’ current experiences and interests.

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