PICTURES SPEAK:

GRAPHIC NOVELS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Fatimah Daud

Comics and I were no strangers to each other. I grew up reading all the comic books of my time like Archie, Richie Rich, and Batman, with Wonder Woman being a particular favorite. Later on, when I was older, reading the more wildly satiric Mad Magazine topped the list of my favorite leisure activities. But when I encountered graphic novels as a teacher, I was not sure they had a place in my curriculum. Before gaining an understanding of what graphic novels had to offer students, and in particular English-language learners, I could not see how graphic novels provided an opportunity for authentic writing experiences that could produce revealing and interesting writing, while at the same time assisting students toward proficiency in reading and writing. Since then, I have studied several different perspectives regarding graphic novels and their role in augmenting writing instruction in classrooms. I have now come to believe that teaching students the fundamental methods for making graphic novels is like putting paintbrushes in the hands of aspiring young artists. Consequently, graphic novels have been added, with much success, to my ESL classroom instruction.

Though they lacked the verbal skills to speak their stories, the pictures they would create would bridge that gap, and allow readers to understand the worlds they came from.
I teach English-language learners at an urban high school. The students I teach have different obstacles to overcome: coming into this educational system at a late stage; needing to understand, speak, read, and write English in less than four years; and learning to adjust to a new culture. Keeping these obstacles in mind, and taking into consideration assessment results, my lessons are heavily focused on reading and writing. I have found that writing is a literacy skill that has been difficult to teach my English-language learners because most of them are Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE). Although State Assessments underscore the need for English-language learners to learn writing skills more thoroughly than they do presently, writing is one of the last modalities to be acquired by English-language learners, and many Students with Interrupted Formal Education do not acquire this skill well enough to be successful in post-secondary institutions. It is with this understanding of my students need to gain proficiency in both reading and writing, coupled with the desire to provide opportunities for my students to write on topics of intrinsic interest, that I incorporated graphic novel lessons into my curriculum. Knowing the necessity of encouraging transformative and expansive writing in literacy instruction, I decided that my students would use their own experiences to tell their stories. Though they lacked the verbal skills to speak their stories, the pictures they would create would bridge that gap, and allow readers to understand the worlds they came from.

How It Works

Graphic novels rely heavily on images to relay information, and this information can be used to initiate thinking, which can be turned into creative and detailed writing. After all, aren’t pictures worth a thousand words? After teaching my students some fundamentals of creating
graphic novels, I discovered that for my students, their pictures were worth far more than a thousand words. This amazing discovery of the power of understanding and manipulating imagery was a point of discussion in Rudolf Arnheim’s article, *A plea for visual thinking*. Images have the capacity to spark in the minds, the ability of perception. This perception then, gives rise to “productive thinking” (p.138). This productive thinking, according to Arnheim, “operates by means of the things to which language refers—referent that in themselves are not verbal, but perceptual” (Arnheim, 1986, p.138). Using images to stir productive thinking creates in students a desire to engage themselves in making all types of associations. This is particularly beneficial for English-language learners because it provides a pathway to communication that is limited by their lack of vocabulary. It is the “productive thinking” that will ignite the need to speak or write in order to communicate thoughts that are perceived (Arnheim, 1986, p.138).

As further support, an article by James A. Laspina, *The visual turn and the transformation of the textbook*, discusses how images and words might work together to form a “partnership” (Laspina, 1998, p. 36). This affiliation between images and words works as a platform, allowing students to create meaning. As students continue to construct meaning from images and words, they increase their need to further communicate their thoughts. This, in turn, serves as a means for departure toward higher forms of expression, thereby necessitating the usage of higher forms of literacy. This is exactly the structure that is created through using images in graphic novels with language learners. Teaching fundamentals
of graphic novels illustrated how images and words “work together to form successful visual/verbal presentations” (Laspina, 1998, p. 36). So it was with an understanding of how graphic novels could assist my language learners, that I began teaching my students the basics of creating graphic novels.

From Images to Words

This past school year, I began by developing an introductory lesson that would allow my students to understand graphic novel fundamentals. I introduced key vocabulary that would lay the groundwork for knowing the essential language of graphic novels such as graphic, novel, comics, storytelling, icon, panels, time frame, abstract, realistic, concept, senses, identify and sequential art. Keeping in mind that my students were language learners, I built upon their knowledge of these words with the aid of many different types of visuals to increase their understanding of each concept. For example, I used different shapes and containers to explain the concept of panels; utilized a wall clock, digital watch, pictures of night and day to explain different concepts of time; and discussed how our classroom could be viewed as “a moment in time”. Making cultural connections whenever possible to increase opportunities for their understanding increased my understanding of how they perceived...
each concept. An example of this came while I was explaining how vast and different time frames can be in a graphic novel. I taught my students that, in a graphic novel, time could be separated in different ways such as seconds, minutes, hours, days, or by action. One of my students explained how in her language, they do not have as many descriptions for time as English does. Becoming aware of this information not only reminded me that lexicons vary, it enabled me to further assist my student until a better understanding was developed for the time frame concept.

Next, I instructed students to use their memories to create images that would tell a personal story. During this part of the lesson students used descriptions in their minds from past or present memories to develop the pictures that would tell their story. For language learners, the use of images assists with tapping into memories and emotions, so that the images can eventually be turned into words. Permitting students to select the images that they will eventually write about has value beyond just engaging them in a lesson. Educator and author Michael T. Moore explains in *Issues and trends in literacy education*, that students who are allowed to select their own topics for writing not only become willing participants to the writing process, but become members of a “community of writers, they write to explore, they have something to say to us and each other, and they publish what they write” (Robinson & McKenna, 2008, p. 113). In addition to becoming writers who could explore, create
interesting stories, and want to publish what they wrote, it was my hope that my language learners would learn to love writing and use it to express their feelings and thoughts. This was exactly what I wanted for my students, and creating their own graphic novels was an excellent strategy for that purpose.

Equipped with the language and knowledge that they would need to create their own stories, my students started the process of creating their own graphic novels. What their minds would reveal permitted a glimpse into worlds that I could only imagine. Their images were graphic and poignant, inspiring such emotions that I am still at a loss of words to describe. Yet, their pictures conveyed what words could not, in turn, generating more and deeper language experiences.

**Beyond the Images**

Consequently, through employing graphic novels as a strategy with my English-language learners, I have come to understand that many of my ESL students have memories that reveal traumatic experiences. Using graphic novels as a form of expression for these emotionally traumatized students and allows them to engage in writing that inspires growth and healing brought about by the analysis of what was written, discussion of feelings about their painful experiences, and sharing thoughts and ideas of what has been written. Their
analyses have, according to Louise DeSalvo, “the potential to initiate a change in how students view their experiences, thereby allowing a healing process to begin” (1999). And noted educator James Moffett believes that images, such as those in the minds of my language learners, provide opportunities for “languaging.” Moffett explains that by struggling to communicate feelings and emotions through writing, those feelings, emotions and experiences can become “perceived, clarified, distanced, symbolized, ordered, understood, and even mastered in a new way” (Moffett, 1983, p.297).

**To Graphic Novels**

If comics are “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer,” as defined by Scott McCloud (McCloud, 1993, p. 8), then it would appear that graphic novels are an excellent tool to generate language in English-language learners.

They were very vivid, detailed experiences in refugee camps, violence in their countries, school and neighborhood violence, hopes for their future,
Just within the past year I have discovered the power graphic novels have in conveying information to students, and the ability that students have in manipulating images to tell their stories. My goal was to use non-fiction graphic novels to explore the writing process in developing student biographies (See Appendix 1). Students were introduced to several non-fiction graphic novels and were given the opportunity to examine them. Most of the students had never actually read a graphic novel, so this part of the lesson took approximately two class periods. After the introduction of graphic novels, my goal was to have students understand similarities and differences between non-fiction graphic novels and other types of non-fiction writing. Much of the initial lesson involved hands-on observation and study of graphic novel components like paneling, icons, and time frames. Students learned that graphic novels can be read from left to right, right to left, top to bottom, or bottom to top. They also learned that the layout was just one of the many unique characteristics of graphic novels.

After students became familiar with graphic novels, they were ready to explore how they could begin telling their stories using this art form. The graphic stories generated by my students were quite surprising. They were very vivid, detailed experiences in refugee camps, violence in their countries, school and neighborhood violence, hopes for their future, and much more. Clearly, the emotional benefits of narrating such traumatic events were seen during this graphic novel lesson. Students were able to discuss their stories and a few discovered that classmates had endured similar experiences.
Though many of the graphic novels that were produced by my students would have been excellent choices to share, I selected three examples of students’ graphic novels that were amazingly illustrated to enlighten readers about their lives. I chose the following three texts because of their ability to create vivid details that needed few words to tell their stories and for their use of graphic novel applications. I was particularly pleased to see their ability to create such detail in their images because this was also a concept that was discussed before commencing the graphic novels activity. This ability to present such vivid detail in imagery has a foundational benefit for developing better writing skills. According to McCloud, this lack of language allows for opportunities to use the pictures without words to elicit and evoke language; this is especially good for ELLs learning a new language. McCloud states, “When a scene shows you all you “NEED” to know…the latitude for scripting grows enormously.” This is where language learners can capitalize on the “pictures carrying the weight of clarity” (McCloud, 1993, p. 158) to produce important authentic language.

Below are three examples of graphic novels created by my English-language learners, which depict memories of life in their countries, and for one, her life here in the U.S. The first story is of a student’s memory of life in Somalia. She recalls memories of violence in her country during the Somalian Civil War. She explained during the class discussion, that after war broke
out, there were gangs of men who would rob people along roadsides. The gunmen were armed and would demand money and the possessions from unsuspecting travelers. She vividly narrated how those same armed gangs would sometimes kill whole families, if they did not have money to give. She explained that people were trapped not only by the war that was raging all around them, but they were also trapped by gang violence.

The graphic novel aspects of the ‘Life in Somalia’ picture were in the panels, time frame, and characters. She decided to use long panels during the robbery which creates a feeling of time being lengthened. This lengthening technique is enhanced by the thin lines that separate the action scenes into more than just a moment in time, but shorter than hours in length. Using thin, almost expressionless lines to separate each section, allows more emphasis to be on what is taking place in the story, rather than the time that has elapsed between each scene.

Examining the characters in the Somali story (Figure 1) permits a glimpse into feelings of the victims. The driver of the car was given a small stature during the initial confrontation with the gang member holding a gun. The victim remains small in the next scene, while outside of the car talking to the gunman. However, after the gang member asks for money and the victim gives
Figure 1: A Memory of Life in Somalia
it, the victim’s stature grows to nearly equal to that of the gunman. When the student was asked about this during our discussion, she replied, “He (the victim) feels good that he is going to live.” This graphic novel sparked many different discussions on violence experienced in my students’ homelands, as well as an informative discussion on the violence they still encounter in the United States.

This next graphic novel tells the story of a student’s desire to become a performer/stylist, through using humor (Figure 2). She is a first-generation student from Vietnam and has aspirations of becoming a performer and a stylist. In her graphic novel, she uses ‘a moment in time,’ and single panels within a frame, to display her thoughts.

In her first frame she uses a partially opened word balloon in a unique way to indicate clapping, with small sound waves to signify the sound of clapping. This innovative use of graphic novel application is recognized by McCloud as an “ongoing struggle to capture the essence of sound” (p.136). In the second frame of her graphic novel, the student creates a word balloon with dotted lines which indicates her speech. I believe the use of dotted lines helps to emphasis her excitement.

Again, we see how this student appears to create her own style of creating graphic novels. Finally, while her whole graphic novel is intricately done, she uses this same attention to detail to construct scenes of her costume shop and her open panel, which is the starting point of her graphic novel. Notice how this student uses personification to include the sun, bird and rabbit in her story.
Little Chynthia is sitting in the park and thinking about her design school. She doesn't know what to do... Too much talent is not always good. Tsk... Tsk...
The final graphic novel that was selected shows a detailed map of a student’s memories of his life in Kenya (Figure 3). He depicts the layout of specific places that he remembers, explaining the function and importance of each. Though this student spent all of his life in a refugee camp, he created a map of important places and things he remembers about his homeland.
Figure 3: My Country
Analyzing his graphic novel method, he uses an open frame technique that merges pictures with words. He explains in his word balloons specific places and commodities that contribute to the economy in Kenya, such as hotels and livestock. His novel appears to read more from top to bottom rather than from left to right. And, he also used personification to give voice to his animal figures in his story.

Uncovering the vivid emotional revelations of students was a valuable by-product of creating graphic novels that led to a better understanding of my students and their life experiences. However, as my English-language learners began the journey into using graphic novels to tell their stories, I discovered that there were far more benefits that could be discovered from these images.

**How Graphic Novels Work for ELLs**

As my English-language learners created their graphic novels, I began to see that the images they were making presented the perfect opportunity for questioning. I asked several thought provoking open-ended questions that encouraged verbal responses such as: What is this? Where did this take place? How did this make you feel? What more would you like to tell me about this picture? Asking questions moves students to go further, reaching beyond themselves to answer in more complex ways. Yes, my students certainly increased the quantity and quality of their language.
Due to the discussions that followed each story, students listened and engaged in talk that was relevant and inquiry-based in order to clarify their understanding of both their stories and the stories of their classmates. During our discussions, I was able to introduce and explain academic language such as describe, explain, compare and contrast, discuss, analyze, summarize, etc., which increased my students’ ability to be successful in academic settings. I discovered that for my students, creating graphic novels inspired them to think about multifaceted issues and seek answers to the complex questions that were presented. This desire to answer more complex questions sparked a desire to answer those questions in writing. After students created images and verbalized what they knew about their images, many of them wanted to write further, in more detail about their pictures.

Uncovering the vivid emotional revelations of students was a valuable by-product of creating graphic novels that led to a better understanding of my students and their life experiences.

In Retrospect

Thinking back over the graphic novel lesson that I taught, and how I might improve upon what was taught, I believe that it would be better to introduce graphic novels at the beginning of the school year because of the additional benefits it presented such as opportunities for more in depth discussions with students and learning how to go further in describing feelings and thoughts by increasing necessary vocabulary. Additionally, portfolios of students’ graphic novels could be created and kept for final presentations or turned into digital stories.
Teaching English-language learners has become my passion, so I earnestly seek fun and innovative ways to engage my students in the learning process. I welcome effective strategies like teaching language learners how to use graphic novel basics to further their communication skills, by generating authentic writing that inspires the desire to communicate on a higher level. I believe that as teachers, when we listen to the words that our students are telling us, we can genuinely get to know our students. And knowing our students, allows us to reach them by employing strategies like graphic novels, which can open a multitude of pathways to communication.

My understanding of graphic novels has come a long way since reading them as an adolescent. I use to think that their value was little more than a favorite pastime. However, after teaching some fundamentals of making graphic novels to my English-language learners, I am convinced that teaching graphic novels has a place in my curriculum. I will continue to use them throughout my teaching career, gaining more from them as my knowledge about the benefits of graphic novels increases. Having seen the power of using these books to inspire my students, I am now an advocate of teaching graphic novels to students. Teaching the fundamentals of graphic novels can motivate students to participate in reading, writing, and speaking activities. It assists students with developing their reading and writing skills due to the need to describe and read words associated with pictures they have created, and the essential desire to reach beyond their limited skills, to further communicate the meaning of the images. Finally, and most importantly to me, it creates pathways of communication for English-language learners. Through graphic novels, students are allowed an opportunity to express their feelings through
speaking and writing. Graphic novels are an excellent tool to make use of in the classroom due to their ability to support students’ language learning, to give students an opportunity to express their feelings, and the heavy use of imagery to generate words, both written and spoken.

**Works cited:**


**About the author:**

Fatimah Daud is currently a full-time teacher at a high school
in Kansas City, Missouri, USA. She is also working toward her Ph.D. degree in English education. Her research focuses on biography driven instruction, teaching ELL students, language and media.

Appendices

Appendix 1
Appendix 2
Appendix 3

My Country

Here is what Kenya looks like.

I am from Kenya.

Many people come to stay in my hotel.

Many people spend their money.

And many people spend their money in small houses.

We have many tall houses.

Masai house.

This place is for small family.

Hotel.

There is a big house.

Every month the government comes to cut some of our trees to make houses, homes, and firewood.

We are in the forest. Hhh.

We give people shelter.

Animals. When I am angry, I go and look for food anywhere.

I am the king of animals.

Hhhhh!

Goat. We are best for people and our children's future. Our best way is to give people milk and meat.

Cow.

Sheep.

Especially kids.

They are ones who all the time cry for milk. Our milk has been used all over the world.