

Graphic Novels in Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract

Using pictures, storytelling, and creative writing are the activities used more or less regularly in foreign language teaching. Picture books are not a new phenomenon in our book market. Picture books for children are the types I believe everybody read in their lives. In language teaching picture books present an authentic material. The article discusses the possibilities of using picture books in language teaching and presents the qualitative case study results focussed on effectiveness of using wordless picture books. Shaun Tan's books were used as a source for descriptive and creative writing in foreign language teaching. Shaun Tan (n.d.) emphasises that his books are not for children. The themes he depicts cover also the mature themes, e.g. the social issues that might be discussed by teenagers and adults as well. The fact that the books rely on pictures makes it available to all language proficiency groups. Based on the results and experience the author highly recommends use of the wordless picture books to develop student writing.

Keywords

Picture books, graphic novels, writing, imagination

Introduction

Shaun Tan (1974) is an Australian author and illustrator. He has written and/or illustrated more than 15 books and in 2011 he received Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for his contribution to international children's literature. *The Lost Thing* (2000) book was named an Honour Book at the CBCA Awards; it won an Aurealis Award and a Spectrum Award for illustration in the United States. The book tells a story of a boy who collects the bottle tops and finds a bizarre, strange creature. The boy tries to help it but meets indifference everywhere. The book was adopted into a short animated film (2010) and won the Oscar for the Best Animated Short Film. A year later it was adopted into a live musical performance.

The wordless book *The Arrival* (written in 2006) is divided into 6 chapters. Tan himself (at shauntan.net website) speaks about the graphic novel rather than picture book and explains that panels of small-size, medium size, large-size pictures and multiple frames resemble rather film-making than book illustration. The book tells a story of immigration when a man leaves his family (a wife and a daughter) to find "better" life. The book depicts people struggling to settle in in an unknown city and building their new lives. (The title of the book was translated to Czech language as *Nový svět*, i.e. *New World*). Tan (n.d.) stated he

was influenced by Briggs' *Snowman*. The Briggs' book evokes the blueish feelings (he uses colours but the blue one prevails) whereas Tan works with grey and sepia shadows that evokes the feelings of old photographs that create a story.

Graphic novels

Reading literacy is „understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society" (PISA 2015, 2013, p.9). Picture books are often associated with the term visual literacy. People reading books often read the pictures, illustrations in the books superficially, not paying attention to them. Illustrations support the meaning of the text and help the reader to understand it. We understand that PISA tests indicate the problem with reading literacy in our classes and we should concentrate our attention to developing the strategies to build reading literacy, however, at the same time we believe that the ability to read the pictures help them to become more attentive reader and text percipient and what more it evokes their imagination and forces them to think more deeply about the ideas expressed in a text. Reading comprehension is an increasingly important area in teaching foreign language.

The use of visuals and Picture books with young learners is widely discussed in literature. That is not a truth about the use of visual narratives (picture books, graphic novels, etc.), however, the need of teacher development in the field of the effective use of visual narratives is discussed in several studies e.g. by Bačová, Billíková & Kiššová, 2013; Hughes, King, Perkins, & Fuke, 2011; Kelley, 2010; Carter, 2007; Gavigan, 2011; Monnin, 2010). Previous research has indicated that using picture books in foreign language teaching has a positive impact on the language development (see e.g. Templer, 2009; Oz & Efecioglu, 2013; Dallacqua, 2012). Still, Templer claims "ESL teachers should consider embarking down this road to alternative graphic multimodal textual worlds. Most students will welcome any experiments at "going graphic" in the English language classroom -- and, for that matter, other areas of the curriculum, such as history and current affairs" (2009).

Nikolajeva and Scott (2001, p. 7) bring a concise summary of different categorisations of interactions between words and pictures in the books. They quote Golden (1990) who identifies 5 types of interrelations:

- a) The text and pictures are symmetrical (creating redundancy),
- b) The text depends on pictures for clarification,
- c) Illustration enhances, elaborates text,
- d) The text carries primary narrative, illustration is selective,
- e) The illustration carries primary narrative, the text is selective.

Nikolajeva and Scott add two more (they call it) extremes, clear-cut categories – text without pictures and a wordless picture book.

Kelley (2010) points out that “Like a traditional piece of literature in which authors choose their words carefully, the graphic novelist thinks critically about the color, line, form, shape, and detail as well as the language he/she uses. The story conveyed by a graphic novelist, then, is as intricate as a story told by a traditional author, regardless of the age group of the target audience”. He stresses (quoting Vygotsky) that „Humans typically express thoughts in the form of language, and students’ responses to images, though perhaps cognitively silent, still help students utilize language“ (Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky, 1986 In: Kelly, 2011). He supports the idea of using graphic novels in education, including language teaching.

Methodology

This paper attempts to show some possibilities of using picture books in teaching foreign languages. The main objective of the study was to investigate the reactions of adult students, EFL teacher trainees to picture books and their ability to read and analyse it.

This work takes the form of illustrative case study. A small sample of 8 first-year teacher training single EFL major students was chosen. In more details, the case study focused on two males and six females aged 21 – 25 who were in their first year of magister degree programme. All students were advanced users of English and we expected they read not only compulsory literature in English but enjoy reading books in English generally. The students worked 5 weeks reading 2 graphic novels and playing DIXIT game. The case study was run in February – March 2014 within the course Language development.

To obtain more complete picture of the participants different methods of research were employed. The sources included participant observations, conversations with the students and, writing samples from each student.

The process of the study can be divided into three phases and it can be named according to the regular outline of reading lessons: pre-reading, while-reading and after-reading. There might be a discussion about the possibility to perceive the process as two separate units; the first one focused on *The Lost Thing* and the second one focused on *The Arrival* book. Knowing that students had no experience with reading and discussing graphic novels we decided that they needed to go through a process of reading this genre and certain navigation how to perceive it. The units (we rather use the term units rather than lesson, as the units consisted of a series of several lessons) involved various types of activities, interaction patterns etc., but they had the same aim – to present learners with the

visual art and to learn more about the possibilities to use it for the language teaching.

Pre-reading phase

The general discussion about reading led to surprising finding. Only one student mentioned she used to read books, the rest of the group mentioned reading shorter texts on internet or in the magazines. We expected that students - EFL teacher trainees read more and read passionately and are eager to read books in English. The discussion about the illustrators was surprising for them realising they generally do not look for the information about the translators and illustrators when (and if) they read books. To engage learners and to motivate them they were asked to read an interview without words with Shaun Tan published online in 2011 in Spiegel Online International (<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/an-interview-without-words-illustrator-shaun-tan-draws-conclusions-a-769089.html>). The interview is written in an interesting form, the illustrator answered the interviewer's questions by/in illustrations. The introductory phase comprised also the work with the pictures from the *Lost Thing*. Different interaction patterns were applied to help readers, students to read a book and to perceive details and to think how these contribute to overall perceptions.

The very first impressions were brainstormed in a shared document (using Google drive). Students thus could enrich and inspire each other. In the next stage they had to add one more word (mainly adjectives and adverbs) to the brainstormed ideas (usually nouns and verbs). They used The Corpus of Contemporary American English (<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>) to find the collocations. It was the first time they were introduced the corpora and they immediately started to evaluate it as an effective and useful tool for writing.

In leading whole group discussion we were inspired by Nancy Mortimer's Teacher's Guide (2009). Similarly, a useful tool was McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) which guides in the comic format how to read 'sequential art'. The questions led students to think about how to read and work with graphic novels

- types of contrast (*Look at the use of contrasts: small and large, hard and soft, light and dark. What was the aim of the author? How does the reader perceive it?)*
- colours (*Think about the colours. What was the aim of the author?)*
- background (*Why does the author use the complete space of a page?)*
- 3D effect (*How did the author achieve the 3D effect?)*
- text font (*How does the reader perceive the font?)*
- details (*Look at the details in a page. How do they support the main message?)*

- development of the mood in the story (*What does the use to show the development of the mood in the story?*)
- reader's perception (*What does attract reader's attention at the first sight?*)
- parallel to the real life (*Can you see the parallel to the real life?*)
- moral (*What is the message of the story?*)

The aim of the pre-reading phase was to introduce learners to the world of the wordless books. We also wanted to focus their attention on the need to analyse the pictures, to perceive the details and not to be satisfied with the general impression and superficial vision and understanding.

While-reading phase

While-reading phase was realised as an extensive home reading. Their task was to formulate the main idea of a story and to think about the tools and objects the author used to escalate the story. They were also challenged to annotate the graphics.

First they were given a week to read a book and they did it. They were given one more week to go through it what they appreciated. One of the students explained in her reflection:

I came prepared for the lesson but I read it very quickly not focussing my attention to the details. After the first reading I was able to express the main idea but no to say more. When I was reading a book for the second time my younger sister came and reading the book together I had to express it verbally. I realised that I was thinking about the book in pictures rather than in words.

After-reading phase

In the final stage we used the multi-award card game DIXIT (84 cards) that is based on reading pictures and associations and ability to express the ideas and feelings. Giving the reasons about the picture choice forced learners to express their associations; they had to use various adjectives and adverbs. Expressing how they achieved this perception helps to develop metacognitive awareness (see Kelley, 2010), what is an important part of helping learners become more effective. Verbalising the way of thinking helps them to become aware of the way we learn. The game was also a good way to realise how important it is to look for details and to express/describe it accurately and precisely.

Normally, I would use the words from the book to describe e.g. the plot or characters. Now, I had a need to find the word to describe as well as possible, to express how the characters feel, what they did. I

had to think carefully and I worked with dictionary more frequently than normally.

The discussion about the *The Arrival* book focused on literary elements and literary-graphic techniques - mainly on the characters, plot, structure, symbolism and means of tone and feelings expression.

In a discussion some of the ideas from the Tan's (2006) Teacher's book notes were used to challenge students to think again about the book and the devices the author used.

- Can you find the symbolism in author's decision to use wordless books? (*The city where most events are illustrated is imaginary, where fundamental things such as language, transportation, food, housing and work are all quite strange, and often surreal. One of the key reasons behind removing all text from the book is to underline this principle – the main character cannot read or understand everything, so neither should the reader.*)
- How does the author express the atmosphere of oppression, tense?
- How and why does the author use the image of hands?
- What does the “domesticated” animal present?
- How does the author portray the stories of other people/migrants (time)?
- What is the message of the story?

The data and discussion

Data were generated from the observation, classroom discussions, reflections and short compositions. The study (work with literary text – graphic novels) lasted for 5 weeks. We could see how students were gradually changing their perception and the ability to see the details and how they contributed the complexity of a message.

The initial objective of the project was to find how graphic novels can influence the development of foreign language learner vocabulary (assessed based on their compositions) and to find out how students learn to perceive and analyse the visual devices.

Interestingly, one of the comments dealt neither with the problem with pictures or English words.

It was not difficult to understand. But I had a problem to verbalise it. And I mean not in English. It was awful that I could not find the words in Slovak language to describe what was in a picture. I have a limited vocabulary...

We believe that this might be a real problem of the society, we read less (or different texts), we do not communicate as we used to and the vocabulary is limited. The virtual communication can seriously influence the way, what, and

how we communicate (see Crystal, 2001, 2008 on internet linguistics and mobile communication).

The strong dependence on the text in interpretations of literary works can be read between the following lines. Students are afraid to use their own words (or are not challenged enough to be creative), thus they rather describe or quote rather than analyse the literary works.

It was more demanding to write a plot and describe the characters, but on the other hand I had more freedom, I did not depend on the words the author used. I was afraid not to misunderstand the author, but somehow I felt more freedom in expressing my ideas.

The similar ideas were expressed by his colleague:

I have to say that reading the picture book was longer and more interesting than reading a classic book where you sometimes find the picture. It helps to imagine the plot of the story when you have somewhere pictures in the book but the book with only the pictures is totally different. I try to explain my feelings of reading the book from my point of view.

Several studies mentioned that students expressed the similarity with a movie. Identical situation happened in our class when one of the students mentioned that there were moments as if she was looking at the frames of her father's rolls of film and then the others (firstly laughing about the comment) developed the idea – *...something from the history..., almost forgotten but with the evidence kept..., ... an old movie...*

It was surprising that the group that was generally divided into two halves (shy and talkative ones) was contributing to the discussions almost equally. It might had been caused by a new activity, but it also might be caused by the fact they were (4 silent students) willing to contribute to the discussion that allowed them to be creative. Similarly, their writings were written at high level concerning the content and ideas presented.

Conclusion

Picture books, comics, graphic novels are challenging for students and we would like to highlight a need to pay more attention to picture books in pre-service teaching not only as a material for young learners but as a material for all age levels and a good source to develop imagination and vocabulary building. We would also like to stress that we do not talk about the alternative for reading the

classical books but about a genre that is not used in schools and its potential can be used in language classes.

The use of picture books contributed to a recognition that it is important to “read” the illustrations that may influence our perception, that details are important for understanding the complexity of the whole. The added value was that students experienced the use of graphic novel in an English language teaching and had an opportunity to think about its possible use in teaching vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking or writing.

Reading graphic novels brings authentic material to the EFL class and encourages students’ critical thinking. The production and the reactions proved that appropriate strategies may lead students to higher productivity and thus we would like to support findings of the studies mentioned above by citing Templer (2009) who suggests that it is necessary to „develop curricular strategies and research agendas for graphic materials in EFL at all levels“. He also suggests joint projects that would link different subjects – EFL, art, history, ethics, etc. Some ideas may be found in the works of Bačová, Billíková and Kiššová (2013), Petříková (2013) and others.

It has been several times mentioned that we read less and read different articles and this is why I would like to finish by a quote from student’s writing who summarised reading graphic novels as follows:

When you are turning the pages you always imagine your own story, you notice every detail on the pages. You notice the colour or the smell of the page and it causes totally different feelings as reading a classic book. You notice not only the pictures which are in the book but also the background. Every detail is important for you. Now you become a creator of your own story.

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