

How to use comics in the ESL classroom?

by Christophe Dony

Introduction

A personal fascination for comics on the one hand, and a strong interest in teaching and research activities on the other, have recently brought me to run a teaching-staff development workshop on 'how to use comics in the ESL classroom' for CECAFOC (Centre Catholique pour la Formation en Cours de Carrière du Personnel de l'Enseignement Secondaire) with Prof. Véronique Bragard (Université Catholique de Louvain). The objectives of this workshop were simple and straightforward: introduce teachers to recent stylistic and thematic comics' developments and have them imagine a couple of comics-related exercises and activities for their ESL classrooms. In this article, I offer an overview of this workshop and, while suggesting various exercises and activities, examine how comics can prove to be tremendously interesting and insightful pedagogical tools.

The scarcity of comics and the lack of information on how to use them in classrooms inevitably raised a ton of questions during the workshop I ran. But out of this massive demand, two interrogations persisted. First, "Why use comics in the ESL classroom?" and second "Are comics curriculum fit?" The answer to the first question would probably need more than a couple of lines, but here is a short list of relevant and significant reasons for using comics as a pedagogical tool in the classroom: they can help you explore a variety of topics, constitute the starting point of a debate or class discussion, engender useful grammar and vocabulary exercises, provide a humorous and familiar escape for pupils and help them improve their reading and writing skills, contribute to reflect on authentic language and culture-social commentary, human idiosyncrasies, stereotypes, life conflicts, etc.-, facilitate character and plot analysis, lead to easy and funny situation-simulation games, and stimulate story-writing exercises... The answer to the second question is somewhat trickier because it first depends on the type of comics that are used, and second, on the teacher's ability and will to adapt and rework the comics s/he uses so as to make them fit into the curriculum. Nothing comes without a little effort, but in the rest of this article, I hope you will find great starting points, illustrations, and ideas, to use comics in your ESL classrooms.

Getting started

For those who have never used comics in the classroom, a good starting point would be to use political cartoons to introduce a theme and /or reflection on a lesson plan that s/he already has imagined. The web is full of attractive resources for that kind of exercise and here are a couple of great websites from which to retrieve engaging and stimulating images: www.caglepost.com, www.politicalcartoons.com, and www.politicalhumor.about.com. Those websites allow you to search for a cartoon within categories or in typing in keywords. So whatever your lesson is dealing with, you might have a look at these sites and more than probably find an attractive cartoon to illustrate and/or expand your lesson.

Comics can also be used as great and noteworthy reading/writing exercises in a number of ways. There are a number of well-known exercises which you can easily adapt to your classes. These include the 'classics' 'add-a-panel', 'fill-it-up', and 'sort-it-out' in which students respectively can expand a strip's storyline with their own panels, script a wordless comic, or re-assemble idle panels in order to re-create an existing narrative.

Following the same logic, Scott Mc Cloud, an admirable comics' theoretician, offers an interesting comic series on his personal website (www.scottmccloud.com/comics/carl/3a/02.html) which can be used in a number of ways within the ESL classroom. In the so-called *Carl* series, Mc Cloud introduces the reader to the sequential characteristic of comics and shows how a narrative can be prolonged almost at will with the addition of sub-actions or sub-narratives within a simple story (see fig. 1).

This *Carl* narrative goes up to fifty two panels and can constitute a great basis for a writing exercise centered, for example, on tenses. As an image is said to be worth a thousand words, it would be interesting to have students describe/write one sentence for each panel in using a specific sequence of tenses (present simple/simple future or simple past/conditional for example), i.e. *Carl promised his mother he wouldn't drink. But Carl did and died./ Carl promised his mother he wouldn't drink .He drank a beer. As a result, he died*) Well, you get the idea... Of course, there are plenty of other possibilities to use this *Carl* narrative. You can combine a writing exercise with one of the aforementioned 'classic' activities and ask your students to sort the panels out, or have them create a series of additional panels to the story.

Going Further: A lesson plan with the comic rewriting of *The Ant or the Grasshopper*

During the workshop I ran, one of the bigger activities presented to teachers constituted a case-study of Toni and Slade Morrison's comic rewriting of the famous Aesop fable *The Ant or the Grasshopper*, illustrated by a Belgian artist, Pascal Lemaitre¹. This postmodern rewriting presents the fable in a very contemporary and urban setting, most likely New York, and re-imagines the happy-go-lucky grasshopper and the provident ant within a deep-rooted African-American cultural context. But most interestingly, it reinvents the end of the story in omitting to present the moral ending of the original fable.

First thing you might want to do of course is have your students read the story, and why not, combine reading and listening comprehension with the help of Toni Morrison's narration of the story available on NPR's website². After having read and listened to the story, have your students guess the title of the fable. Do they recognize Aesop's and Lafontaine's fable? Have your students discuss in small groups what is similar and different from the original fable and then start a plot analysis based on the list of changes and/or transformations that students can observe.

After this short plot-analysis, students analyze the personalities of the characters *Kid A* and *Foxy G*. These characters clearly present an opposition between two distinct personalities: the provident one and the carefree one. In other words, they introduce the human dilemma between deep-rooted anticipation and a passionate happy-go-lucky attitude. Have your students classify the following non-exhaustive list of adjectives in a table and ask them who they identify with (materialistic, pragmatic, weak, determined, creative, workaholic, self-centered, arrogant, disdainful, stubborn, sensitive, foolish, quarrelsome, easy-going, outgoing, mean, odd, generous...).

This comic rewriting of *The Ant or the Grasshopper* also offers a great opportunity to discuss American society and culture. The story indeed contains plenty of American elements (basketball court, New York, several tv-sets, remote control, Broadway, shopping, Starbucks, flag, rap music, doughnut, typical US mailbox ...). Ask your students to observe how American the story is and have them discover and list the American elements in it.

Besides presenting a wide array of visual American elements, *Who's got Game* also offers a great opportunity to study American language and slang. As mentioned earlier, the story re-inscribes itself within a deep-rooted African American cultural context. Among others things, rap music, dialogues' rhythmic patterns, and rhymes echo the hip-hop cultural trend. Have your students pinpoint words and sentences that illustrate a hip-hop style or inclination. What does it add to the story? Does it make the rewriting of the fable better, different, or simply more modern? Why? If you prefer, illustrate this hip-hop trend with a vocabulary exercise. Ask your students to underline the slang elements in the sentences below and have them replace these elements with more formal equivalents/synonyms.

¹ Toni and Slade Morrison, *Who's Got Game: The Ant or the Grasshopper*, Scribner, 2003.

² <http://www.npr.org/templates/dmg/dmg.php?prgCode=ATC&showDate=18-Jul-2003&segNum=16&NPRMediaPref=W/M>, (Toni Morrison starts reading the story at approximately five minutes in the audio file and only reads half of it, ask some of your students to then continue the reading the story).

Foxy G and his ace Kid A were hanging in the park. (skillful)
Time to dump this place. (get rid of, let fall)
He made music so def it drew a crowd. (cool)
I think it is best if you just blow. (leave)
Kid A munched a doughnut. (ate)
You wasted your time on these funky wings. (odd, lacking style)

Finally, end your lesson plan with a writing exercise based on the last panels of *Who's Got Game?* Ask your students to write five lines that describe *Kid A* and *Foxy G's* fates. What are they going to do? If you prefer, after having made sure they know that 'having game' refers to someone who is very skillful at doing something, have them write ten lines on the following topic: 'According to you: Who's got game? The ant or the Grasshopper?'

Towards Interdisciplinarity: Creating a digital Comic Book

As mentioned earlier, the web is full of wonderful resources. One of them is the 'comic life' program, downloadable for free at <http://plasq.com/comiclife-win>. Comic life is an application that allows you to create astounding and beautiful comics with your own pictures. It offers a wide variety of comics templates (page layouts) and design possibilities (lettering, speech balloons). And more importantly, it is a fairly intuitive application with an easy-to-use interface which uses the simple 'drag and drop' way of working.

After having explained to your students where and how to get the program, a great exercise is to first introduce them to comics' terminology (see fig.2) and then have them create a two-page comic book of their own with the following guidelines:

- a. Insert at least 5 visual or writing techniques that comics generally use, e.g.: shot, reverse-shot, close-up, voice-over ... (see comic's terminology page)
- b. Write a 150-word text that describes the process of your creation, e.g.: *I first downloaded a couple of images on the Internet. I then opened the Comic Life application and chose a template that would fit with my photos...*

Conclusion

It is difficult to be more accurate, to suggest more ideas, or to offer other views on how to use comics in the ESL classroom with the space constraints I am subject to. However, I sincerely hope that this article will help teachers to develop comics-related activities with their students and maybe inspire them for further lesson plans. Motivated ones could even think of reading, analyzing and examining a whole graphic novel during a semester. After all, why not? Comics and graphic novels constitute an excellent springboard to get students interested in reading. More complex works than the one I have discussed in this article that could be considered for such an endeavor include: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, or again Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, which has recently been adapted on the big screen. Please, visit www.teachingcomics.org and/or <http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/maus/teachmaus.htm> for more information on these works, study-guides, sample questions, lesson plans and much more. And don't forget comics also are about having fun...

Figure 1:

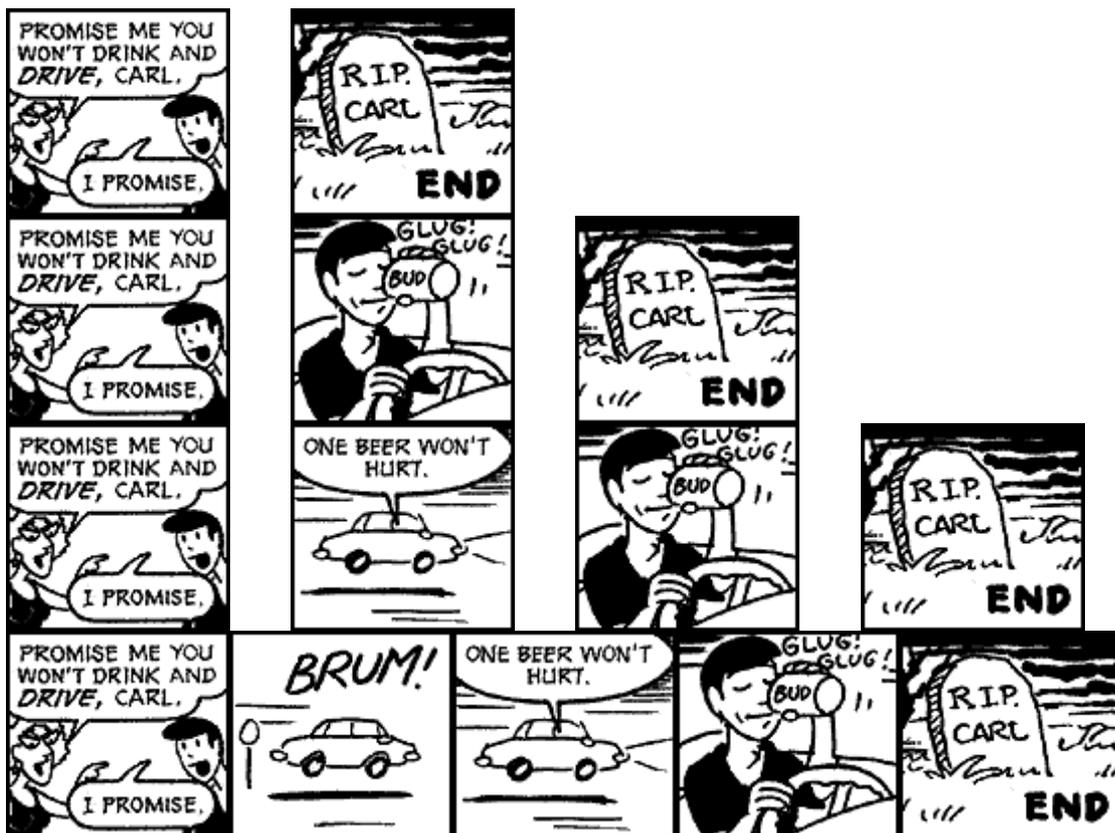
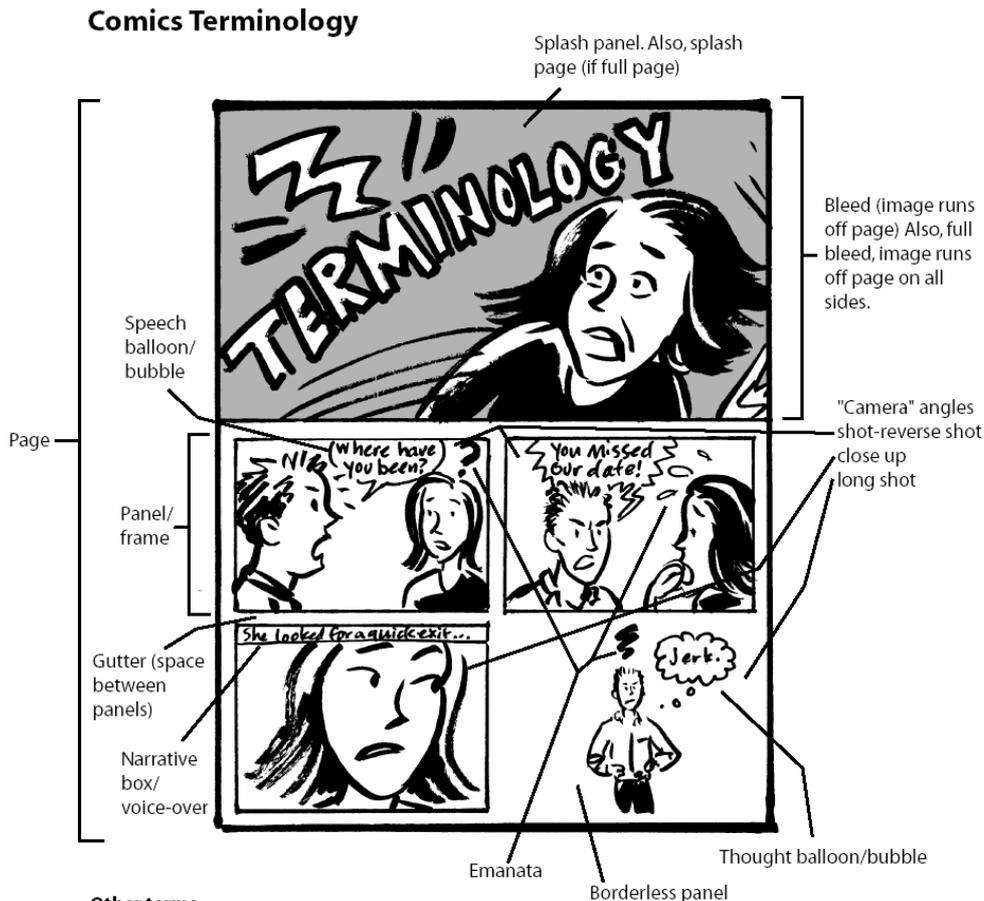


Figure 2:



Other terms

Spread: two facing pages in a printed book

Recto/verso: technical terms for pages in a spread. Recto = right page, verso = left page

Printer's spread: the layout of pages for printing. Not the same as a spread in a printed book.

Thumbnail: a rough sketch of a comic, delineating placement of figures, word balloons, and background elements, as well as content of word balloons.

Pencil: a relatively defined drawing preliminary to the final inked stage.

Inks: the final stage of a comics drawing (applying ink to the pencil guidelines)

Mockup: a rough layout of pages to plan a book

Paste-up: the final artwork pages ready for printing

Indicia: important copyright and other legal information printed in a book, usually at the beginning.

This document is free for non-commercial educational use.
See <http://www.teachingcomics.org/copy.php> for complete copyright information.

Christophe Dony obtained his MA in Germanic Languages (*cum laude*) at the Université Catholique de Louvain in 2007. His dissertation *May 9/11 Bless America: 'Trauma, Identity and Memory: The Representations of 9/11 in American Comic Books and the Ideologies behind Commemoration'* offers great interdisciplinary awareness and insightful comments on comics and popular culture. Since his graduation, he has continued to carry out research on sequential art, the graphic novel, and teaching activities while working odd-jobs in the private sector. Parts of his research have been published in *The International Journal of Comic Art*, (vol9:2, 2007, pp. 340-373) and in the forthcoming collection of essays entitled *Out of the Gutter: Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (Goggin, G., Hassler-Forest, D., eds., Mc Farland Press). He is currently working to edit his own multi-contributor book project with Mc Farland Press entitled *Memory in the Making: Mediations of 9/11 in Films, Fiction, and Comic Books*.