

## *Using Comic Strip Stories to Teach Vocabulary in Intensive Reading Comprehension Courses*

Bahman Gorjian, Abadan Branch - Islamic Azad University, Iran

The IAFOR International Conference on Language Learning - Dubai 2016  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

The present study investigated the using of comic strip stories on vocabulary learning intensive reading comprehension courses among intermediate English learners. To this end, two groups including 66 students were assigned to an experimental and a control group. A vocabulary pre-test was given to the groups to assess learners' knowledge at the beginning of the course. Then the experimental group read the comic strip stories while the control group received reading comprehension passages including the same vocabularies in the comic strip stories. The same topics such as journeys, sports, and food were covered in 15 sessions, each lasted 90 minutes. Intensive reading courses were the same in terms of time, and level of difficulty in materials. Finally, both groups took the post-test of vocabulary which included the same vocabularies of the pre-test but different in formats of items. Independent and Paired Samples t-test was run to discover the differences between the groups in pre and post-tests. The results showed that the experimental group had a significant improvement after treatment on vocabulary learning. In addition, there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups. The implications of this study may suggest that the use of funny materials may promote the intermediate English learners' vocabulary in intensive reading courses.

Key words: vocabulary learning, comic strip reading books, vocabulary

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum

[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## **Introduction**

Vocabulary could be the backbone of reading comprehension in intensive reading courses since the learners should know the meaning, function and the use of the content and function words in studying the reading passages (Shoebottom, 2014). Having studied vocabulary learning instructions, many techniques are revealed. Pesce (2012) in her article describes five best ways to instruct new words to learners: show students illustrations, flashcards, posters, synonyms and antonyms, setting a scene or situation and the substitute it with a new word or phrase, miming and total physical response (*TPR*) which many teachers believe learners who learn best by moving their bodies, actions and imperative mood and the last one is the realia (real-life objects in the *ESL* classroom) which can help to present new words.

Many scholars (e.g., Hanies, 2012) in their studies divide the vocabulary learning into two instructional techniques: incidental learning and intentional learning. Several definitions about these techniques are given by many scholars although Yali (2010) points out the incidental learning is defined as the type of learning that is a by-product of doing or learning something else; whereas, intentional learning is defined as being designed, planned for, or intended by teacher or students. He describes that incidental learning defines the approach of learning vocabulary through texts, working on tasks or doing other activities that are not directly related to vocabulary, whereas the intentional learning always focuses on vocabulary itself, and combines with all kinds of conscious vocabulary learning strategies and means of memorizing words. As stated in Krashen (2013), a large portion of second language (L2) vocabulary knowledge is acquired incidentally in the sense that words are acquired as a natural by-product of children/learners performing everyday linguistics activities and tasks. Incidental learning is the process of learning something without the intention of doing so; It is also learning one thing while intending to learn another.

To acquire vocabulary in incidental mood, many kinds of methods are introduced. Reading comprehension is the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. Reading comprehension is important for effective communication because 50 percent or more of the time we spend communicating is spent reading comprehension. The optimal goal of L2 intensive reading comprehension development is to allow for the L2 to be acquired through reading comprehension. Vocabulary is precisely one of the language components that can be acquired through training in reading comprehension.

Nowadays, there is a tendency toward using media to aid and supplement educational objectives. At real life English, it is believed that language learning should be fun so the better way to enjoy learning the English language through comic strips. The most frequently mentioned asset of comics as an educational tool is its ability to motivate students. A comic strip is defined as a sequence of drawings arranged in interrelated panels to display brief humor or form a narrative, often serialized, and usually arranged horizontally, with text in balloons and captions ( Liu, 2004; Haines, 2012; Merc, 2013). Based on Liu (2004), a comic strip is described as a series of pictures inside boxes that tell a story. Among visual genres, comic strips catch many researchers' attention because they are communicative, popular, accessible, and readable; Comic strips communicate using two major media—words and images—a somewhat arbitrary separation because comic strips' expressive potential lies in skillfully employing words and images together.

Comics can teach children to infer meaning from the visual first. Comics must include pictures; you can even tell a story without words. The benefits of using comics in the classroom in agreement with Hanies (2012) are certainly great, both in increasing literacy and in addressing the educational needs of differentiated learners, so the teacher chooses and uses world with particular care to keep the students and the other space for growth in vocabulary and language development.

## **Literature Review**

### **Teaching English Vocabulary**

The use of graphic novels in language classrooms has a short history; therefore its literature is rather limited. Although there are not many comprehensive studies assessing their impact as teaching tools, the feedback from educators and scholars as to the use of graphic novels in language classrooms is a clear indication of their worth as a pedagogical tool (Yildirim, 2013) . Comic Book Classroom was founded in Denver, Colorado in 2010. Comic Book Classroom is a standard-based curriculum that examines and explores age-appropriate comic literature with the intent of furthering literacy and introducing students to book culture in the larger scope. As Baker (2011) defines graphic novels are a subset of the comic genre. Both terms will be used in this research. Comics and graphic novels both use graphics and text to tell a story. In addition, the goal is to teach students not just reading and art skills, but engage them in discussions about the texts that may help them tackle problems in their own lives and communities. The use of comics in education is based on the concept of creating engagement and motivation for students.

Wright (2001) claims the effectiveness of comics as medium for effective learning and development has been the subject of debate since the origin modern comic book in the 1930s. The use of comics in education would later attract the attention of Fredric Wertham who noted that the use of comics in education represented "an all-time low in American science. The use of cartoons in your teaching has several advantages: they give life to classrooms, they promote students engagement, they improve students' learning, they prolong student's attention span, and they also enhance student's communicative and linguistic competences.

Liu (2004) in his article talked about the role of comic strips on ESL learners' reading comprehension .He has two different students' levels of proficiency (low & high) with and without a comic strip. This study suggests that the reading comprehension of the low-level students was greatly facilitated when the comic strip repeated the information presented in the text. He noted that the effect of comic strips on reading comprehension largely depends on the quality of the repetition effect. The study's results also imply that the advantage of providing comic strips with reading text diminishes when the student has difficulty comprehending the text. After analyzing the results, it was said that low-level students receiving the high-level text with the comic strip scored significantly higher than their counterparts receiving the high-level text only.

Lang (2009) evaluates comic strip has very consequential role in the English classroom, he defines comics are the most widely read media throughout the world – especially in Japan. As he describes problem of language teachers: constantly searching for new innovative and motivating authentic material to enhance learning in the formal classroom. A textbook is made of material that has been altered and simplified for the learner. He notes some characteristics that make comics thus attractive as an educational tool: a built-in desire to

learn through comics, easy accessibility in daily newspapers, ingenious way in which this authentic medium depicts real-life language, people and society and eventually variety of visual and linguistic elements and codes that appeal to students with different learning styles. Furthermore, he suggests comics can be used: a) to practice describing characters using adjectives (e.g., Garfield is a very troublesome cat), b) to learn synonyms and antonyms to expand vocabulary, c) to practice writing direct speech (e.g., 'Hey, move your car!') and reported speech (The man told him to move his car.), d) to practice formation of different verb tenses(i.e., changing the present tense of the action in the strip to the past tense), e) to practice telling the story of a sequentially ordered comic strip that has been scrambled up and finally, f) to reinforce the use of time-sequence transition words to maintain the unity of a paragraph or story (e.g., First, the boy left for school. Next, he . . .).

Based on Bowkett's (2011) book, he uses children's interest in pictures, comics and graphic novels as a way of developing their creative writing abilities, reading skills. The book's strategy is the use of comic art images as a visual analogue to help children generate, organize and refine their ideas when writing and talking about text. In reading comic books children are engaging with highly complex and structured narrative forms. Whether they realize it or not, their emergent visual literacy promotes thinking skills and develops wider Meta-cognitive abilities. Baker (2011) tried to examine the benefits of using comics with English language learners (ELLs). With their bright colors and familiar characters, comics are more appealing than traditional text. The comic represents something different and exciting without sacrificing plot, vocabulary, and other important components of reading comprehension. For these reason and many more, comics might also play an important role in ELL acquisition of literacy. She expresses many graphic novels are high interest with low reading levels, cover diverse genres such as biographies, and cover current events and social issues. Baker (2011) concurs with comics can be used to teach parts of speech, social situations, historical events, and more. She admits that incorporating text and visuals causes readers to examine the relationship between the two and encourages deep thinking and critical thinking.

According to Bowen (2011), comic strips can be very motivating for learners as the story-line is reinforced by the visual element, which can make them easier to understand. He designed many activities for teaching vocabularies through using comic strips in class: for example he used the comic strip stories in one activity that is cutting up the strip into individual boxes and getting the students to rearrange them into an appropriate order. Another activity is to blank out alternate boxes, so

Khoiriyah (2011) in his thesis used comic stories to improve the students' level of vocabulary. He believes the students identify and study words from the context on the comic reading. Story from comic offers a whole imaginary world, created by language which students can learn and enjoy; this story is designed to entertain. Khoiriyah (2011) endeavors to find out whether there is a significant difference in vocabulary score of student taught using comic stories and those taught using non-comic stories or not. The instrument to collect the data were; observation and test. Observation was only used to support the data about students' imagination on reflected on their engagement in learning processes. The researcher gave two times teaching to both classes, after the treatment the researcher analyzed the obtained data and concluded that the performance of experimental group that used the comic stories for learning vocabulary is better than the control group.

Karakas and Sariçoban (2012) in their study, considered the impact of subtitled animated cartoons on incidental vocabulary learning, and found out that the target words were contextualized and it became easy for participants to elicit the meanings of the words. For the aim of this study the researchers selected 42 first grade teaching students in Turkey. To collect data from the subjects, a 5-point vocabulary knowledge scale was used and 18 target words were integrated into the scale. After subjects had been randomly assigned into two groups (one subtitle group and the other no-subtitle group), they were given the same pre- and post-tests. The general findings of this study supported the common assumption that subtitles and captions are powerful instructional tools in learning vocabulary and improving reading and reading comprehension skills of language learners.

Cimermanova (2014) believes the role of graphic novels in foreign language teaching, too. Using pictures, storytelling, and creative writing are the activities used more or less regularly in foreign language teaching. She admits that in language teaching picture books present an authentic material. Her article discussed the possibilities of using picture books in language teaching and presents the qualitative case study results focused on effectiveness of using wordless picture books. Cimermanova (2014) conveys reading graphic novels brings authentic material to the EFL class and encourages students' critical thinking. She agrees that 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.

To learn vocabulary incidentally, the learners may encounter many obstacles and restriction or problems, all researchers that studied these issues proposed to work out these problems. They used many techniques to learn vocabulary through four skills, this study tries to focus the reading comprehension techniques for learning vocabulary (the receptive learning) and as you read many articles, there are many ways for learning incidental vocabulary. As Mousavi and Gholami (2014) state new methods of English language teaching should use new materials to draw learners' attention for acquisition of English language. To put it another way, nowadays there is a tendency toward using media to aid and supplement educational objectives. This study focused on the research question of: Does using comic strip stories facilitate learning vocabulary in intensive reading courses?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were 66 intermediate level EFL learners in Islamic Abadan University majoring in English Language Translation. They are male and female and with the age ranging between 18 to 46 years old. They were selected based on non-random judgment sampling in two intact classes, each included 33 learners. One class was assigned to an experimental group (i.e., learning vocabulary in intensive reading courses through comic strip stories) and a control group (i.e., received traditional textbook of reading comprehension at the intermediate level. The participants were non-native English speakers and their mother tongue was Farsi.

### **Instrumentation**

The pre-test for both experimental and control groups included 40 items of vocabulary included in the comic strip stories and the textbook. The pre-test was a teacher-made test and its reliability was assessed through piloting on 10 learners other than the participants of the study with the same level of proficiency. The test final score was 40 and the time allocated to the responders was 40 minutes.

The reliability coefficient was calculated through KR-21 formula as ( $r=.825$ ). The pre-test was administered at the beginning of the intensive reading comprehension course.

### Procedure

The participants were selected in two intact classes and took a pre-test of vocabulary developed by the teacher and its reliability and validity were observed before conducting the pre-test. Then the classes were assigned to the experimental and control groups. The experimental group used the comic strip series while the control group dealt with the traditional text book included reading passages. The topics were used in both classes had the shared titles, level of difficulty (i.e., intermediate level), and the number of vocabularies. The participants in the experimental group read the series of comic strips and follow the story to arrive at the main ideas of the lesson. The teacher asked the learners to give definitions, synonyms, and antonyms to clarify the meaning of the texts. The control group received the same procedures but the difference was in the texts which were a whole passage without series of events. Thus the learners study the text and the teacher helped them to comprehend the passages. The treatment lasted for 15 sessions, each 90 minutes in Fall semester 2015. Finally, the post-test including 40 items was extracted from the classroom materials and administered to both groups. Data of the pre and post-tests were analyzed through Independent and Paired Samples t-test to find ant differences between the groups before and after the treatment.

### Results

Descriptive statistics was calculated to show the participants' performance of the pre-test of vocabulary at the beginning of the course. The analysis on the pre-test was conducted to find any significant differences between the two groups' vocabulary knowledge on the pre-test through the Independent Samples *t-test* in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics (Experimental and Control Groups' pre and post-tests)

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	Experimental	33	18.5455	12.60479	2.19421
	Control	33	18.0303	11.20124	1.94989
Post-test	Experimental	33	28.1515	9.50698	1.65495
	Control	33	20.3636	9.64306	1.67864

Table 1 presents both groups' descriptive statistics on the pre and post-tests. The means of both groups are somehow close in the pre-tests but both groups are different in the post-tests. Since the means cannot show the significant difference, the Independent Samples *t-test* can depict the significant difference between the two groups in Table 2.

Table 2: Independent Samples t- Test (Experimental and Control Groups' pre and post-tests)

Tests		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pre-test (Experimental vs. Control)	Equal variances assumed	.917	.342	.175	64	.861	.5151	2.935	-5.349	6.379
	Equal variances not assumed			.175	63.12	.861	.5151	2.935	-5.350	6.380
Post-test (Experimental vs. Control)	Equal variances assumed	.371	.545	3.304	64	.002	7.787	2.357	3.078	12.497
	Equal variances not assumed			3.304	63.98	.002	7.787	2.357	3.078	12.497

Table 2 shows the difference between pre-tests of the experimental and control groups is significant since the observed t (.175) is less than the critical t (2.000) with df=64. Thus the two groups' performance in the pre-test is homogeneous at the beginning of the course. The results of the both groups' post-tests show that the observed t (3.304) is greater than the critical t (2.000) with df=64. Thus the two groups' performance in the post-test is significantly different. Paired Samples t-test was run to find the difference between the pre and post-tests in each group. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Paired Samples t-test (Each Group's pre and post-tests)

Tests	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper					
Pair 1	Pre-test (Exp.)	-9.606	16.505	2.873	-15.458	-3.75	-	32	.00
	Post-test (Exp.)						3.34		2
Pair 2	Pre-test (Control)	-2.333	13.268	2.309	-7.037	2.37	-	32	.32
	Post-test (Control)						1.01		0

Table 3 indicates the descriptive statistics of each group's pre and post-test. Paired Samples *t*-test was run to find the significant difference between the pre and post-test of each group. Results show that the difference between the pre and post-test of the experimental group is significant since the observed *t* (-3.343) is greater than the critical *t* (2.042) with *df*=32. However, the pre and post-test in the control groups is not significant since the observed *t* (-1.010) is less than the critical *t* (2.042) with *df*=32.

### Discussion

Findings of the study suggest that the mean scores of pre-test of both groups were very close to each other. It is assumed from this finding that both groups had similar knowledge about the target words before they were exposed to the treatment. The development in each group was measured through *t*-test which demonstrated that there was an improvement in each group and also the scores of all participants in two groups on post-test had been progressed. It is clear that high differences in mean score of each group show that both groups after passing the treatment accompanied by using comic strip stories have promoted on post-test scores. Results indicated the differences in mean scores in both groups were significant, ( $p < 0.05$ ). To answer the research question and rejecting the null hypothesis, Independent Samples *t*-test was run among all participants' scores on post-test. Regarding the comparison of mean differences in groups A and B, it might be concluded that there were significant differences between two groups while progress in group A is slightly more than group B. Thus, it might be concluded that what facilitated the improvement in vocabulary knowledge was related to reading comic strip stories while using comic pictures can have more impact on acquiring incidental vocabulary in relation to only reading these stories. Therefore, the null hypothesis can be rejected and it is concluded that comic strip stories can affect on incidental vocabulary learning. However, by comparing the results of two groups by using independent *t*-test, the difference between two groups was significant, so the experimental group which used watching pictures of the stories could perform better than other group.

The present study confirms the findings of Lang's (2009) study, who evaluates comic strip has very consequential role in the English classroom, he defines comics are the most widely read media throughout the world. Lang (2009) describes problem of language teachers: constantly searching for new innovative and motivating authentic material to enhance learning in the formal classroom. A textbook is made of material that has been altered and simplified for the learner.



He agreed by using comic books, the learners can learn different kinds of topics in classroom. Like this current study, Liu (2004) in his article talked about the role of comic strips on ESL learners' reading comprehension. He has two different students' levels of proficiency (low & high) with and without a comic strip. The outcome of the present study is compatible with Bowkett's (2011) book, which in his book the author uses children's interest in pictures, comics and graphic novels as a way of developing their creative writing abilities, reading skills. The book's strategy is the use of comic art images as a visual analogue to help children generate, organize and refine their ideas when writing and talking about text. He agrees in reading comic books children are engaging with highly complex and structured narrative forms.

Bowen (2011) describes that comic strips can be very motivating for learners as the story-line is reinforced by the visual element, which can make them easier to understand. There are a number of different ways to use comic strips. He designed many activities for teaching vocabularies through using comic strips in class: for example he used the comic strip stories in one activity that is cutting up the strip into individual boxes and getting the students to rearrange them into an appropriate order. In another study, Khoiriyah (2011) uses comic stories to improve the students' level of vocabulary. He suggests the students identify and study words from the context on the comic reading. His findings infer that the performance of experimental group that used the comic stories for learning vocabulary is better than the control group.

Karakas and Sariçoban (2012) in their study, considered the impact of subtitled animated cartoons on incidental vocabulary learning, and found out that the target words were contextualized and it became easy for participants to elicit the meanings of the words. Their results were in related to the current study which the general findings of this study supported the common assumption that subtitles and captions are powerful instructional tools in learning vocabulary and improving reading comprehension skills of language learners. Moreover, Merc (2013) considered the effects of comic strips on reading comprehension of Turkish EFL learners. In his study students read the texts given and wrote what they remembered about the text on a separate answer sheet. The results of the quantitative analyses show that all students with a comic strip effect, regardless of proficiency and text level, performed better than the ones without the comic strips.

## **Conclusion**

The present study aimed at investigating the effect of comic strip stories on incidental vocabulary learning of intermediate Iranian EFL learners group. This study showed Iranian EFL learners picking up the meaning of unfamiliar words encountered incidentally in task materials as they read comic strip books. The results of the study showed that comic strip stories had statistically meaningful effect on the performance of language learners on acquiring incidental vocabulary. Findings from the study show that after treatment both experimental group and control group have improved in their results on post-test. In addition, independent sample *t-test* between two groups indicates that the results of experimental group in comparison of the results of control group were better and their performance was more excellent too. As a whole, it seems that reading comic strips affected the L2 learners' performance on the incidental vocabulary learning. It can be concluded from the findings of the current study that comic pictures of such strip books can influence on better vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, the low acquisition rate of word meaning found here, as well as in other incidental learning studies, emphasizes once more the importance of combining incidental learning with some sort of explicit focus. Subsequently, the findings of this study

reveal that incidental vocabulary acquisition in reading modes by using various methods can indeed occur and that comic strip story might be an effective tool to support vocabulary learning. The findings of this study also present that vocabulary development is a long lasting process that needs to be supported by contextual clues.

Finally, as the research interest of this study, comic strip use had a significant effect on students' recall of both intermediate EFL learner groups who used the reading for fun method to acquire the new words. This study found that comic strip use noticeably facilitated the reading comprehension of students at the intermediate level. Once again, it was proved that students be provided texts with a visual material, the comic strips in particular, in their intensive reading comprehension classrooms.

## References

- Alexander, F. (2014). *Understanding vocabulary*. Retrieved October 8<sup>th</sup> 2014 from [www.scholastic.com/teachers/article](http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article) .
- Baker, A. (2011). *Using comics to improve literacy in English language learners*. Retrieved April 16<sup>th</sup> 2016 from [https://centralspace.ucmo.edu:8443/.../ABaker\\_LibraryScience.pdf](https://centralspace.ucmo.edu:8443/.../ABaker_LibraryScience.pdf).
- Bang, B. (1957). The Brain comic strip series books. *Magazine Enterprises*. Retrieved October 14<sup>th</sup> 2015 from [www.comicbookplus.com](http://www.comicbookplus.com).
- Bowen, T. (2011). *Methodology: Using comic strips in class*. Retrieved July 13<sup>th</sup> 2014 from <http://www.onestopenglish.com>.
- Bowkett, S. (2011). *Using comic art to improve speaking, reading and writing*. Florence, KY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis.
- Cimermanova, I. (2014). Graphic novels in foreign language teaching. *Journal of Language and Cultural Education*, 2 (2), 85- 94.
- Finocchiaro, M. & Bonomo, M. (1973). *The foreign language learner: A guide for teachers*. New York: Regents Publishing Company, Inc.
- Haines, J. (2012). Why Teach With Comics? Retrieved July 10<sup>th</sup> 2015 from <http://www.diamondbookshelf.com/Home/1/1/20/182?articleID=109588>.
- Karakas, A., & Sariçoban, A. (2012). The impact of watching subtitled animated cartoons on incidental vocabulary learning of ELT students. *Teaching English with Technology*, 12(4), 3-15.
- Khoiriyah, N. (2011). *The use of comic stories to improve students' vocabulary*. Unpublished Ph.D thesis. Walisongo state institute for Islamic studies faculty.
- Krashen, S.D. (2013). *Second language acquisition: Theory, Applications, and Some Conjectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lang, A. (2009). *Comic strips in the English classroom*. Retrieved April 20<sup>th</sup> 2015 from <http://www.uni-saarland.de/fak4/teachersday/archive/2009/pdf//Workshop>.
- Lesley, T., Hansen, C., & Zukowski, J. (2005). *Interchange Passage Placement Testing Program*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Liu, J. (2004). Effects of comic strips on L2 learners' reading comprehension. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(2), 225-243.
- Merc, A. (2013). The effect of comic strips on EFL reading comprehension. *International Journal New Trends in Education and Their Implications*, 4 (1), 1-11.
- Mousavi, F., & Gholami, J. (2014). Effects of watching flash stories with or without subtitle And reading subtitles on incidental vocabulary acquisition. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 1273 – 1281.

Pesce, C. (2012). *5 best ways to introduce new vocabulary*. Retrieved February 10<sup>th</sup> 2015 from <http://busyteacher.org/4197-5-best-ways-to-introduce-new-vocabulary.html>.

Shoebottom, P. (2014). *How to learn vocabulary?* Retrieved October 10<sup>th</sup> 2014 from <http://esl.fis.edu/learners/advice/vocab.htm> .

Wright, B (2001). *Comic book nation: The transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Yali, G. (2010). L2 vocabulary acquisition through reading—incidental learning and intentional learning. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistic (Bimonthly)*, 33(1), 74-93.

Yildirim, A.H. (2013). Using graphic novels in the classroom. *Journal of Language and Literature Education*, 8,118-131.

Contact email: [bahgorji@yahoo.com](mailto:bahgorji@yahoo.com)