COMIC BOOKS FOR LEARNING

AE TEACHER'S CORNER

Educators searching for interesting content for their classroom could benefit from exploring the world of comic books. Over the last decade, comic books have become a popular literary form, and comic book characters have become the focus of the biggest films in the world. For some people, comic books are pages full of superheroes and villains fighting for the fate of the world. Yet comic books are more than superheroes. They are a rich art form that can tell personal stories of everyday people as well. Comic books blend images and words to tell stories, making them a fantastic resource for students to learn vocabulary in context. In this month's Teacher's Corner, we will explore ways in which comic books can be used effectively in the classroom.

What is a comic book?

Simply, comic books are stories told through pictures, often combined with words. Comic books have a long history, with examples of comics being found as early as the 1400s (McCloud, 2009). They have a range of topics and stories that entertain, educate, and inspire. Research has shown that comics feature complex vocabulary and can assist students in developing their reading skills while preparing them to read more difficult books (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988).

How are comic books organized?

Each image in a comic book is called a panel. Panels are typically in a square frame and are organized in a sequence, or specific order. In English language comic books, readers read panels from the top left to the bottom right, just as any other book. In many comics, each panel is filled with speech balloons that show the speech of the comic book characters. Text appearing in squares or rectangles are narration, information the reader may need to follow the story. Other text may appear in cloud-shaped balloons. A cloud shape means the words inside

the balloon are the thoughts of the character in the panel. Finally, text not inside a square or balloon are words indicating sounds such as "beep" for a computer noise, or "thud" for the sound of a person falling down.
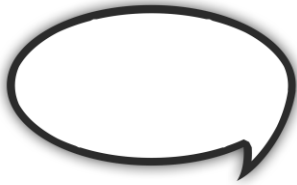

Figure 1: A speech balloon shows a character's speech

Figure 2: A thought balloon shows a character's thoughts

Figure 3: A sound in a comic book

Images from Pixabay.com

Figure 4: An example of the structure of a comic book. The Trace Effects comics can be found here.

Figure 5: A student-made comic from [Why English? Comics for the Classroom](#).

Ways to Use Comics in the Classroom

Jigsaw Activity

In a jigsaw activity, students are usually assigned to put sentences in the correct order. With comics, teachers can cut the comic book pages apart to make each panel separate then shuffle the panels and give students the panels to put into the correct order. This activity helps students with their vocabulary and also helps students discover and understand how comics are organized.

For some examples of jigsaw and comic book activities, check out:

[English Teaching FORUM Jigsaw Vocabulary](#)
[Multibriefs: Comic Strips and Language Learners](#)

Cloze Activities

In cloze activities, words are deleted from a paragraph, and students then fill in the blanks. Comics are perfect for cloze activities since teachers can delete words in the comic and students can use both the sentences and drawings to determine the correct words. Because of their rich visual art, comics are a fantastic resource to help students understand vocabulary and grammar in context.

For an example of a comic book cloze activity, check out:
Why English? Comics for the Classroom - Do You Speak English?

Prediction Activity

Comics tell a specific story through a series of panels. This design makes them well-suited for engaging students in prediction activities. Provide students a comic book one page at a time, and after they read each page have them write down their predictions about what will happen on the next page. In a speaking class, students can share their prediction with a partner or in small groups.

For more on using comics for prediction activities, check out:
Activity Three – What Happens Next?

For more on using comics in the classroom, check out the following webinar:
Using Comics in the English Language Classroom

Student-Created Comic Books

For more advanced English classes, comic books provide opportunities for students to create their own stories to share with the world. Many people new to comic books think artistic talent is important, but comics can range from rich visual works to simple drawings. These two examples were created by students for the Why English? Comics for the Classroom project, a tremendous collection of student-made comics.

Conclusion

Comic books provide rich stories full of art and vocabulary that can help students in understanding vocabulary and grammar in context. Even more, they can inspire students to tell their own stories when comic book creation is integrated into the classroom as in-class activities or homework.

References

Hayes, D. P. & Ahrens, M. (1988). Vocabulary simplification for children: A special case of 'motherese.' *Journal of Child Language*, 15, 395–410.

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. New York, N.Y.: William Morrow Paperbacks.

Next Steps

Please join us as we explore this topic in further depth on the American English for Educators Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/AmericanEnglishforEducators/). Each Monday we post something new for you to explore or do. Here is the schedule for this month:

1st week: Join our private Facebook group here:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/AETeachersCorner/

2nd week: Respond to the question prompt that will be posted Monday morning on the AE Teacher's Corner Facebook page.

3rd week: Discuss comic books with other group members, using the prompt that will be posted on Monday on the AE Teachers Corner Facebook page.

4th week: Browse the list of resources on this topic, which will be posted on the AE Teacher's Corner Facebook page.