

It's Comical!

A mixed-method study of EFL teachers' experiences using comic books at the upper secondary level



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Ämneslärarprogrammet

Degree essay: 15hp
Course: LGEN2A
Level: Advanced level
Term/year: VT/2022
Supervisor: Zlatan Filipovic
Examiner: Chloé Avril

Keywords: Comic books, EFL classroom, Teacher usage, Reading comprehension, Reading motivation

Abstract

The reputation of comic books has not always been the best. The public view of comic books has long been that it is a lesser medium with no educational value. In contrast, previous research states that comic books can have positive effects when used in the EFL classroom with studies claiming that students are showing higher levels of reading comprehension and reading motivation. Despite this, few teachers seem to be using comic books. The reason for this is unclear but research states that teachers are generally unsure of how to use comic books.

The aim of this study was to fill this gap in knowledge by investigating EFL teachers' experiences of using comic books. To do this, quantitative data was collected through a self-developed questionnaire, where 53 Swedish upper secondary EFL teachers participated, and qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Four EFL teachers in Sweden were interviewed and the data from both the quantitative and qualitative data collection was analyzed.

The results imply that when using comic books in the classroom, students show higher levels of reading comprehension when reading with comic books. They also show higher levels of reading motivation and engagement with the material. Challenges that may arise when using comic books come from using it too similarly to a regular novel and ignoring the images which leads to unsatisfying discussions from the students. The results show that some participants face resistance from colleagues or the school management. The study concludes that comic books are an underutilized material in the EFL classroom in Sweden, but it is considered a valuable tool for the teachers who have used it in their EFL teaching.

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1 Introduction

A common occurrence for teachers is that many students are reluctant readers. Sighs and complaints are common when they are told that they will be reading a novel and a question that tends to follow is 'do we have to?' or 'can we watch a movie instead?'

Today, students spend more time than ever with their digital tools whether that be their smartphones or their laptops (Twenge, Martin and Spitzberg, 2019). According to several studies, students are having more difficulties focusing on reading. There are many possible factors affecting their reading. One such factor could be that they are more used to reading visual media with shorter texts. Another factor could be difficulties understanding the texts. Yet the simplest and the most common explanation is lack of motivation in reading.

The lack of motivation in reading has led to an interest in trying to find alternative methods or materials in order to motivate the students to read or to help their reading comprehension improve. Curiosity paired up with an interest in reading comic books has led up to writing this essay. A previous literature review regarding the effects of reading comic books for reading comprehension shows that there is potential in using comic books in the EFL classroom. Comic books show potential, especially with students that are not strong readers, and they can be seen as a bridge between easy casual reading and more advanced reading (Krashen, 2004). However, research also shows that teachers are not experienced in using the format and the different challenges they eventually face when using something that is not a traditional text only novel (Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher and Frey, 2012). While there is an interest, the lack of experience from their own schooling or their work experience makes them hesitant to try.

There has been a growing number of studies regarding the use of comic books in the classroom. Many of them focus on the effect on reading comprehension and what students feel about using comic books. There is, however, not much research on how teachers are using comic books where advice is provided, and an example is given for teachers that may be interested in using them. This is especially true in the Swedish context, which can be partly explained by the fact that comic books are only mentioned in the English syllabus commentary material as an alternative genre of material (Skolverket, 2011) as well as by a lack of sufficient lesson materials regarding comic books. Therefore, this study will investigate Swedish upper secondary EFL teachers' experiences of using comic books.

1.1 Aims

This essay attempts to investigate teachers' experiences of using comic books to explore the challenges and opportunities that arise when working with comic books. Furthermore, this essay also tries to provide teachers with examples of how to use comic books and advice regarding the use of them in the EFL classroom.

1.2 Research questions

- To what extent are comic books used by Swedish EFL teachers working at upper secondary schools?
- In what ways are comic books used by Swedish EFL teachers working at upper secondary schools?
- How does teaching with comics work in theory vs. practice?

2 Theoretical Background

This section will be divided into two parts. First, the term comic book will be discussed and defined in the context of this study. Second, the history of the comic book will be briefly explored to explain the status of comic books today and the current context.

2.1 What is a comic book?

One important definition of the medium of comic books comes from Will Eisner (1985) who was an influential comic book artist who defines it as sequential art and further describes it as a “literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea” (Eisner, 1985 p.5). Another pioneer in the comic book community was Scott McCloud (1993, p. 9) who defines comic books in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce aesthetic response in the viewer”. He further comments on Eisner's definition by implying that the definition of sequential art also includes the historical context of comic books and thus allows the term graphic novels to be included in the definition as well. Harvey as cited in Cimermanová (2014) disagrees with McCloud's definition by stating:

McCloud's definition relies too heavily upon the pictorial character of comics and not enough upon the verbal ingredient. Comics uniquely blend the two. No other form of static visual narrative does this. McCloud includes verbal content (which he allows is a kind of imagery), but it's the succession of images that is at the operative core of his definition. I hasten to note, however, that regardless of emphasis, neither sequence nor blending inherently excludes the other.

(Harvey as cited in Cimermanová, 2014, p. 2454)

While the definitions stated by both Eisner (1985) and McCloud (1993) differ slightly in what is stressed, it shows how comic books is a medium that deftly uses both visual and verbal elements to convey its story. For this study, both definitions of comic books by McCloud and Eisner will be taken into account as they are both important to understand what a comic book is and what it makes it different from other text-types.

The word comic book is not the only term used when dealing with the text type that is referred to as sequential art by Eisner (1985). Comic book, comic strip, graphic novel, manga are other phrases commonly used for sequential art. There are mostly the same but there are slight differences. Manga is the word used for comic books in Japan. The rising popularity of the word *manga* is due to the rising popularity of Japanese comic books during the 21st century (Lopes, 2006). An example of a manga would be *One Piece* by Eiichiro Oda. A comic book is different from a comic strip when it comes to the length. A comic strip is what you would see in a magazine where the strip is usually humorous such as *Garfield* by Jim Davies. A graphic novel differs from a comic book when it relates to publishing. Graphic novels are usually larger finished stories when released and comic books are usually published in volumes where one volume does not tell a full story. The word graphic novel was also used to separate itself from the word comic due to the largely negative reception comics were given in the 20th century. An example of what would be considered a graphic novel would be *Watchmen* by Alan Moore.

As this study only wants to investigate teachers' experiences of using this text type in general and not specifically a certain version of comics, the term comic book will be used as an umbrella term in this study for the sake of consistency. The word comic book is also a valid term in academia as it has been used in previous research (Ujjie and Krashen, 1996) (Roozafsai, 2012, Williams, 1995)

2.2 Comics: An historical overview

Comic books as we know them today had their start in the 1930s with Action comics with their release of Superman. During the same time, Disney released their first comic with Donald Duck. This birth of a new reading format had a boom in the 1940s and comic books would be released with a variety of genres meant to be read by both children and adults. Crime and horror comics were very popular at the time and were outselling the superhero comics (Lopes, 2006).

This boom, however, would not last long as comic books would come under criticism from many different organizations. Parent groups criticized the adult content that appeared in comic books directed toward adults that had sexual themes or violence. This occurred because of the common but incorrect belief that all comic books were meant for children. Thus, the comic books with adult themes were considered to be unsuitable and damaging for children. Nyberg as cited in Lopes (2006) states that “comic book reading was defined as a problem” with parental groups leading the charge. An article in the Chicago daily news published in 1940s criticized comics by saying:

The bulk of these lurid publications depend for their appeal upon mayhem, murder, torture and abduction. ...Superhuman heroics, voluptuous females in scanty attire, blazing machine guns, hooded ‘justice,’ and cheap political propaganda were to be found on almost every page...unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the ‘comic’ magazine
(Sterling North as cited in Wright, 2001, p 27)

Due to the negative reception, the comic book industry had to self-impose censorship on themselves in 1954. All comics released after the censorship would be marketed directly towards young children and crime and romance comics disappeared from the market. The comic industry would be able to pick itself up again with the rise of superhero comics due to that genre being able to adapt to the enforced changes. This would last until the 1970s where comic books could begin exploring more mature themes again but not to its fullest. The censorship lasted until 2011 (Deverell, 2021) but some companies stopped as early as 2001. The early 2000s was also a period where Japanese manga had its surge in popularity and is currently becoming a regular part of mainstream comic book culture (Lopes, 2006)

3 Previous research

This section will cover previous research regarding comic books in the EFL classroom and will present what the research says about the effectiveness of using comic books. Previous research will also cover the attitudes from both teachers and students.

Firstly, while comics have existed for quite some time, there has not been many studies in comparison to what is done for regular novels. The research does state there is great potential in using comic books for improving reading comprehension. The research by Cook (2014) and Basol (2011) shows that students who do use comic books show higher levels of reading comprehension than those who read regular novels. Basol's study also implies that those who lack reading comprehension strategies benefit even more from reading comic books. That students benefit from comic books is further supported by Liu (2004), Roozafsai (2012), Merc and Kempusu (2013), and Kennedy and Chinokul (2020). Liu's study is very important where the study shows that students who are weaker readers showed higher test results compared to the control group. The study also implies that stronger readers did not benefit as much as the weaker readers. It was speculated by Liu that it is possible that stronger readers are able to create a mental image of the story they are reading and thus are not helped by the visual component of the comic books. Weaker readers, on the other hand, show improved results when reading a story with the aid of the visual component that comic books provide. The study was replicated by Merc and Kempusu (2013) but it did not show that stronger readers benefit less from comic books and all levels of readers show improved test results.

The visual aspect of comic books allows those who create them to implement narrative choices that would be difficult or impossible to implement in a similar manner in a novel. A study by Hammond (2009) shows this by investigating the use of the comic book *American Born Chinese* with the participating students. The comic book uses Chinese stereotypes without being offensive due to the visuals making it clear to the reader that this is done on purpose. One student stated "I don't think he could have portrayed this stereotypical Chinese person as well with just description" (Hammond, 2009 p. 148). This implies that there are possibilities with using comic books that seemingly cannot be done in a similar way with a novel. The author also states: "It is important to remember that in a graphic novel,

words and images work together to create a new medium of communication that allows the affordances of both modes” (Hammond, 2009 p.146).

When asked, teachers are generally positive towards the idea of using comic books. However, comics are not used in any major amount by teachers. This could be due to lack of experience in using the format and thus a hesitance towards using it. It is also possible that teachers did not grow up reading comic books or were exposed to it during their own schooling which could lead to a lack of use in the classroom. One could also speculate that teachers are only able to use the materials that is already provided and there are budgetary reasons behind not using comic books in the classroom (Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher and Frey, 2012).

Cook (2014) also faced hesitant teachers. While the teachers generally agree that students show high levels of engagement when using comic books, some are skeptical towards using comic books stating that they do not challenge the students’ thoughts as much. Cook responds to this by stating that this is a common thought by those who lack experience in using comic books (Cook, 2014). Cook also shows that students display different emotions when having to read the different mediums. The students in the study who got to read the comic books version of a story were more engaged and motivated while the other group who read the original text showed higher signs of nervousness or anxiety.

Moreover, despite there being hesitance amongst teachers to use comic books, there is research supporting its benefits. One such study was conducted by Smetana, Odelson, Burns & Grisham in 2009 where the researchers were experimenting on how to engage deaf students in overall reading. The outcome of the study was that the deaf students were much more engaged in reading when working with a comic book. The students did not only read but also “formed their own impromptu literature circles [...] made reading recommendations [...] [and] read a complete series of books” (Smetana et.al. 2009). The study suggests that comic books have a positive impact on students’ reading engagement.

Another study displaying the positive outcomes of using graphical novels in EFL classrooms was conducted by Basol & Sarigul (2012). Their study focuses on how teachers can replace traditional text types with comic book versions of the same texts to see if that might engage more students to read. The researchers came to the conclusion that “when appropriate strategies [...] activities [...] [and] support [has been used] [...] students got better results in comprehension of the texts they read”.

A similar study was made by Richardson in 2017. It started with students questioning whether reading a comic book still counted as reading and ended up in a study implying that

comic books can enhance results if it is the book type that students want to read (Richardson 2017).

In terms of student motivation, almost all studies reviewed imply that motivation is a key aspect, and that students often are more motivated when they are allowed to read the text type or book type that they want. In their study, Öz and Efecioglu (2015) consider comic books to be successful academic tools and refer to Cary (2004) who claims that comic books might help students “find clues in the pictures that help demystify the text and increase comprehension” (Öz and Efecioglu 2015). In the same study, the researchers conclude that if comic books are given as an alternative to classical text types to read, the comic book “makes the reading tasks and understanding [...] easier and ultimately contributes [...] to a better language learning” (Öz and Efecioglu, 2015).

Choosing to read something of your own volition can have a strong positive effect. According to Krashen (2004), when students spend more time reading on their own time, they generally show higher progression in their reading. Krashen claims that light reading, such as comics, “is a bridge to heavier reading, that it supplies the competence necessary to understand challenging texts... Light reading is the missing link, a conduit to heavier reading” (Krashen, 2004, p 5). He further elaborates that people that do read a lot of comics generally do not stick to only reading comics and branch out to other genres and text types. Ujjie and Krashen’s (1996) study on comic books shows that reading comic books is not only not damaging to students’ learning but actually shows great benefits. Through a questionnaire, 292 students were asked about their reading habits, including whether they read comic books or not. The results show that comic book reading is generally popular among the participants. There was no difference between high- and low-scoring students in the amount of comic books that they read, showing that comic book reading is not harmful to students’ reading skills. Interestingly, the study shows a correlation between reading comic books and reading for pleasure and motivation. The more the students read comic books, the more they read for pleasure (Ujjie and Krashen, 1996).

At the moment of writing this review there are little to no studies showing anything else than positive outcomes of using comic books. Most studies refer this success to the comic books themselves and some refer it back to reason of motivation. Examples of such studies are Cook and Kirchoff (2017) that used 3 graphical novels as mentor texts instead of traditional texts. Although the results were positive in their studies as well, the researchers suggest “that more research could help towards a larger understanding of the role(s) of graphic novels” (Cook and Kirchoff 2017). Similarly, Luetkemeyer (2021) also found that

comic books “increased reading motivation” (Luetkemeyer 2021) but never illustrates why that is. The researcher simply goes on stating that a love for reading increases comprehension, and that motivation is the source. Nevertheless, the comics are the source, but it is never discussed how and why, which is what all current studies have in common.

4 Method

This section will be divided into four sub-sections. First, the overall method will be presented. Second, the data collection and analysis will be explained. Third, information regarding the participants will be given. Fourth, ethical considerations will be discussed. Lastly, the limitations of the study will be presented.

4.1 Overall method

To begin with, the study uses a mixed method approach combining a questionnaire and interviews in order to investigate Swedish EFL teachers’ experiences of using comic books in the classroom. The questionnaire consisted of 1 - 4 questions depending on the answers given. The first question regarded whether they had used comic books in their teaching. If their answer was ‘no’, that was the end of the questionnaire. If they answered ‘yes’, they were asked if they either wanted to participate in an interview or provide a summary of how comic books are used in their teaching.

The questionnaire was sent out to various teacher Facebook groups where group members were simply asked to participate if they had time and possibility, simply put, it was a convenience sampling.

The second step was interviewing those who had agreed to an interview. Four interviews were conducted. The interviews were semi-structured (McKay 2009: 51-52) and contained approximately 12 fixed questions and between 2-4 follow up questions depending on the answers from the interviewee. The interview questions can be seen in appendix 3.

The participants were sampled through convenience sampling. Due to the sampling process being done during the month of April and early May, there was difficulty in gathering participants. These months are generally difficult to get participants due to it being the end of the school year and many teachers expressing a lack of time.

4.2 Data collection and analysis

To present both side to the mixed method approach, this section will be divided into two separate sections, one detailing the quantitative data collection and analysis and one detailing the qualitative data collection and analysis

4.2.1 Quantitative data

The questionnaire in this study was aimed at EFL teachers working at Swedish upper secondary schools. According to Mckay (2006), questionnaires provide a fast and efficient way to gather large amounts of data regarding background, behaviors, and habits. A questionnaire was chosen as the best method to collect data that would answer one of the research questions and also allow further information to be gathered to contact teachers who wanted to participate in the interviews. It included an electronic consent (see appendix 1) which required that participants read the information provided and accept before participating. There were one to three questions that participants were able to answer depending on what they responded. If they responded no to the question whether they have used comic books, then the questionnaire would be submitted (See appendix 2). This questionnaire was uploaded to various Facebook groups aimed at Swedish EFL teachers such as *Network for teachers of English* or *Upper secondary school teachers of the Swedish and English language*. Due to the nature of this study, the questionnaire was not in depth and looked only at one thing which was the number of Swedish EFL teachers who use comic books in upper secondary schools. This made the analysis simple because there was only one question to look at.

4.2.2 Qualitative data

In this essay, the qualitative semi-structured interview method was used. Since this essay wants to explore ideas, emotions and behaviors rather than measurements, a qualitative method was also necessary. The semi-structured interview format allows for unprepared follow up questions as well as open ended questions and open ended answers. The cons of using this structure is that some interview questions are not treated in each interview and the length and quality of the interview is much dependent on the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee rather than the asked questions. The qualitative method also requests and allows for an interactive induction and to some part an analytical induction (McKay, 2006, Hartman, 2004).

Due to the nature of qualitative interviews with only four participants, generalizability is not possible and that is a critique against the interview method as mentioned by Kvale (1996). However, Kvale also mentions that generalisability is not always the goal of interview studies and the aim of this study was not to achieve generalisability but to investigate a few EFL teachers' experiences of using comic books. The limited time given for this study makes it difficult to gather the necessary number of participants to reach findings that can be generalized. The interview questions were based on Lewkowich's (2019) interview guide with some alterations to better fit the context of this study (see appendix 3). Some questions were removed because they were deemed not as relevant to this study. The interviews were conducted either digitally through Google Meet or in person if the option was available. The participants were asked in advance whether they would give consent for the interviews to be recorded. They were also informed before the interview about the purpose and aim of the study, they were told that they could opt out of the interview at any time and also could ask for their interview to be removed from the study if they wished. The participants were informed that their participation would be fully confidential and that the recording would be deleted after the transcripts were complete. The participants were asked whether it would be acceptable if the interviews were conducted in English. All participants accepted for the interviews to be conducted in English. The choice to conduct the interviews in English was due to it being easier to analyze when the terminology matched the language in which the essay was going to be written.

The interviews were then looked at separately to pick out key statements and areas of interest to the study. The different interviews were then compared to each other to find themes that are relevant to the aims of this study. According to McKay (2006) both methods of finding themes and highlighting the individual participants is a valid approach. In order to find themes, it was necessary to find common key ideas or topics that appeared in the interviews.

The questionnaire also included an open-ended question that asked the participants, who chose not to participate in the interviews, to provide a summary of their use. These summaries provided by the two participants were deemed not to have sufficient material to add any value to the result and were omitted from the results.

4.3 Participants

The participants in this study were sampled according to convenience- and availability sampling. In other words, a survey among teachers in various Facebook groups was conducted. 53 teachers participated in the questionnaire and out of those teachers who answered yes to the question of whether they have taught using comic books, six answered yes and four of them agreed to take part in an interview. The four participants are teachers from Sweden teaching English as a foreign language at the upper secondary level. They all have in common that they teach English. They all also teach a second subject which could range from history, religion and Italian. All the participants have worked as teachers between 6 and 20 years and at least one of the teachers has experience working at the elementary level which is the schooling before the secondary level. All participants work at different schools and come from different parts of the country. Because of various ages and experience levels, their education at university level might differ. Their ages range from 30 to 61 and participants are of both genders. None of the participants are native English speakers.

4.4 Ethical considerations

During the data collection, several ethical considerations were made to conduct the study in a proper manner that would protect its participants. According to The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017) four requirements need to be fulfilled to meet the ethical requirements of the study. First, participants needed to be informed of the nature of the study and its purpose. The participants needed to be informed that their information would be confidential and that the study will not connect back to them in any way. They were told that the participation of this study was fully voluntary and that they could drop out at any time, thus, they were required to consent before participating in the online questionnaire and in the interview (see Appendix 1). They could also withdraw their data from the study if they so wished. They were told that the information would only be used for the purpose of this study and nothing else. This information was given both in the questionnaire before participating but also orally for those who were interviewed.

4.5 Limitations of the study

There were various limitations that occurred during this study. Due to there being a very short period to conduct the interviews, only a handful of teachers were able to accept to take part in

the study. There was the factor of the interview taking place during the months of April and May, which is generally considered to be a stressful time for teachers, which probably made it more difficult to get teachers to take time from their busy schedules to conduct any interview. One of the teachers explicitly stated before the interview that they would only be available for a maximum of 15 minutes which might have led to the interview being rushed. Another limitation is the relatively small scale of the study. Only four teachers were interviewed and thus the results cannot be generalized. However, due to this being a qualitative study with a semi-structured interview format, generalizability was not the intended goal. The aim was to investigate some teachers' usage of comic books to see whether there were any similarities and/or differences in their experiences.

5 Results

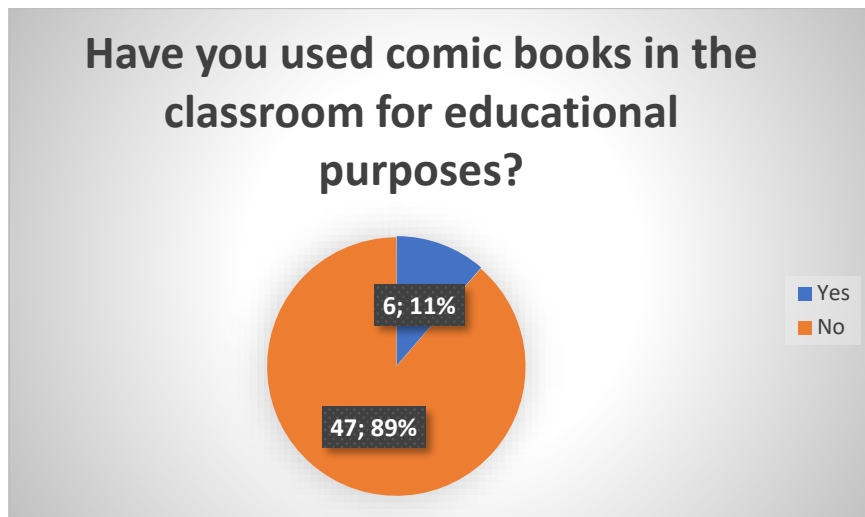
This section will introduce the results in three separate categories. First, the results from the questionnaire will be presented, Second, the four interviews will be presented separately, Third, common themes from the interviews will be presented.

5.1 Results from questionnaire

The questionnaire that was sent out to EFL teachers was meant to find out how many are using comic books and how many are not. When asked if they had used comic books in their classroom only 6 (11%) participants answered yes and 47 (89%) answered no. This shows that most of the participants have not used comic books in their classroom. Out of the six participants that answered yes to the question whether they have used comic books, only four of them were willing to be interviewed regarding their experiences using comic books in their classroom

Figure 1

Usage of comic books in the classroom



5.2 Interview 1

Interviewee 1 describes herself as a fan of comics. She grew up reading comic books such as Tintin and still reads different comic books to this day. She has worked as a teacher for approximately 15 years and has worked both at the elementary and the secondary level. As of this moment she is working in a secondary school. She has no recollection of having ever been taught to use comics in her education and has no experience of it ever being used during her own schooling. She describes her approach as always trying to focus on the interests of her students to engage them more.

When asked whether there is any difference in reading comic books, she mentions the speed of reading a comic book versus a novel. She also mentions the dual nature of comics where you must consider both the words and the visuals:

Sometimes you have to force yourself to slow down and really look at the pictures. Sometimes you just read the words. And then what happened here really have to force yourself to go back and look at the pictures again.

When asked how much comic books are used in her teaching, she mentions that she usually uses one comic book for her students in English 5 and another in English 6. She mentions two comic books. The first is a volume of *The Walking Dead* which she uses with her primarily with her English 5 group. She also uses a comic book version of *A Study in Scarlet* with her English 6 group. The way she would use them was primarily as reading material with discussion and analysis as part of the exercises they would do to complement the reading. In the end they would write a book review for the comic book that they have read. These

assignments including the reading of comic books would usually last approximately two weeks according to the interviewee. When describing her experiences with comic books, the first thing she notices is that students who usually are very reluctant when it comes to reading fiction are excited at the prospect of reading. She states “But when I presented the book, and they started reading, they could sit quiet for 20 minutes and just completely focus on loving the book and sort of, can we continue? Nagging me every lesson”.

One thing that is emphasized by interviewee 1 is that the students who struggle with reading can much more easily get into the format of comic books. The images seem to have a scaffolding effect since they can still understand the story to the fullest while still being exposed to challenging language albeit with a lesser word amount. She states “The picture sort of helped them through the story. They do not have to focus every single word on understanding, they can look, even if there are words, in the thought bubbles, that they do not understand” The interviewee further mentions that the most success she encounters when using comic books is the general engagement and motivation students have to read and work saying that they would nag at her to continue reading the comic book. The challenges she has faced was in the selection process of a comic book. Just like any novel, the complexity of the content in the story must match the students’ level. If the content is too challenging or not challenging enough to engage the students, then the comic book will not work as teaching material.

5.3 Interview 2

Interviewee 2 has been a teacher for approximately 20 years and teaches both English and Italian. She describes her approach to teaching as a dynamic process where you have to dig deep into students’ minds to understand what they already know and that during the teaching process you are continuously developing your own abilities and skills. She grew up with comics such as Bamse, Donald Duck and the Phantom which were popular in Sweden during her childhood. She does not currently read any comic books.

She has no experience with comic books in her own education and has never been taught how to use comic books during her university studies. When explaining the difference between reading a comic book and a novel she describes comic books as having “strong, vigorous language” and that the experience is “kind of abbreviated, but a vigorous way of learning about something without really getting into depth”

When describing her way of working with comics, she begins by saying that comic books are included in her teaching one time a year. She describes three different ways of using comic books. One is having a lesson on the topic of consent using a comic strip. One where they begin by reading a comic book version of the works of Shakespeare and lastly using the novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* which includes a series of comic illustrations. She also states that after reading the novel that her students would create their own comic strips.

When asked about the general possibilities and challenges of using comic books, She describes the use of comic books to be an enriching experience and that students usually enjoy the comic book version more than the original. She speculates that it might have to do with the playfulness of the visuals or perhaps the comic books give the students associations to their childhood when they might have been reading more comic books:

I think the picture kind of eases up. Even if the content is quite deep and serious and so on, I think the pictures could give us a kind of false impression that you know, this is something fun, or this just a kind of flashback to childhood might evoke certain interest in the weak readers. Because on the surface, it might seem like a not too hard book to read. It tricks them into reading, I guess.

It was also speculated that due to comic books not being used that much that the novelty of it also engages the students. One strategy that she would recommend to other teachers would be to slow down the reading and focus on the images because there is a lot of information that can be missed if you only focus on the words. The discussions will benefit from giving equal time to the images: “I would suggest that you really stop at the pictures, discuss those pictures and how a picture can say more than perhaps a few pages of text”.

5.4 Interview 3

Interviewee 3 has worked as a teacher for approximately eight years, four of them as a licensed teacher. She says she grew up reading a variety of comic books including superhero comic books such as Spider-man, He-man and some manga comics before it became popular in the West. She describes her approach as a teacher as holistic, taking into account the

interests of her students in order to bring them inside the classroom and expose them to authentic materials with topics that interest them. She has no experience with comic books during her own education and also comments that it is unfortunate that it was never included in any way.

When teaching with comic books, her students are introduced gradually to comic books. They would first be introduced to the format with a comic strip which would then develop into reading a chapter and then ultimately reading an entire comic book to discuss and analyze. Her own view of reading a comic book or a novel is stated as:

So for me, as a teacher, it does not really make a difference how many words they read, as long as they get the moral of the story. So, if they are able to read, let's say, regular Shakespeare or Shakespeare as a comic, and still get the same content out of it, it does not really matter to me, because they still get the same education.

When asked about the possibilities of using comics, she emphasizes the success she has had with students with some sort of attention disorder. Her experience is that they are very engaged and focus during the reading much more than they would normally. She states:

But when they have read comics, they remember the illustrations better, and therefore the conversations between the characters even better. So, in that way, I get those students to do the same amount of work using a different tool. So that is the greatest like, take away from it.

Her own speculation is that it has probably to do with the images making it easier to remember the text which facilitates the reading for the students. One other aspect that she indicates was successful was that she felt that when using comic books, she would reach out to more students in the class and not only those who were proficient readers.

When describing the challenges of using comic books, she states two different aspects that are difficult. First, overcoming the doubt and hesitation when using comic books coming from herself and her colleagues. The other was in the lack of available teaching materials connected to comic books. This would mean that for every time she wanted to use a comic book, she would have to create a large number of materials by herself instead of relying on previously created material which could be stressful.

5.5 Interview 4

Interviewee 4 has taught English for six years and describes his approach to teaching as wanting to expose students to new and interesting things that are connected to the language being taught. He states that he is a big fan of reading comic books and has read them from a young age and continues to read them to this day. He does not express any particular memory of ever having been taught with comic books as the teaching material; however, he does recall that there could have been a comic strip included in a textbook connected to one subject he was studying but that the lesson did not have anything directly to do with comics.

When describing the differences between reading a comic book and a novel, he emphasizes the visual experience being the important factor. With a regular novel, you create the world in your head with the help from descriptions while in a graphic novel you are experiencing the world through the artwork, and you are also guided visually through the different sections of a comic strip.

When describing his experiences with comic books he mentions the excitement coming from his weaker students: “But I do have also weaker students who made it very clear, they’re not fans of reading. And their response is much more. Wow, I really want to read this, this seems fun. Let’s do it”. There is also the skepticism coming from some of the students who are well versed in reading. The avid readers in the group may feel that the comic book is a lesser medium and he states it as “those who do enjoy reading, they were like, we are not going to read a real book?”. This led to a challenge where he must manage expectations from both groups. He explained that, in the end, the students are participating with high levels of engagement and a large desire to continue reading the material.

He describes his usage of comic books to have developed from using it as reading material to create discussion, similarly to how one would use a novel, to using the format of comics to promote language production like filling in empty speech bubbles to create a dialogue. He expresses difficulties in teaching with a comic book with his classes when he would use them too similarly to how he uses novels: “I did not, I did not put enough focus on, like, the images, what are the images saying? And how? How the visuals can impact the discussion of the students, I would say that focus on the images as well”. Too much focus on the reading made the experience less rewarding and he recommends slowing down in order to let the students analyze the images. Another challenge that he encountered when trying to use comic books occurred outside the classroom. He said that it could be difficult for him to convince the school to purchase a full set for the classroom. This could be due to the lower

status of a comic book but also an issue with pricing. A comic book with a complete story is usually more expensive than a regular novel.

5.6 Common themes

A variety of themes were identified after analyzing the interviews. First, the way the participants use comic books was similar. All interviewees implied using comic books as literature that students were supposed to read in different manners. Interviewee 1 uses *The Walking Dead* and a comic book version of *A Study in Scarlet* which is an adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle's original novel. Interviewee 2 uses different materials including a comic book about consent using the act of drinking tea as a metaphor. She also uses comic book versions of Shakespeare's plays and the comic strips included in a novel called *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Interviewee 3 states that she eventually uses a comic book version of *Romeo and Juliet* after slowly introducing her students to the text type. Interviewee 4 does not mention a specific comic book that is used but does mention using comic books for the students to read. He does mention that he uses comic books with empty speech bubbles to make the students practice dialogue.

Another theme illustrated by the participants is that none of them have any experience in comic books being used in their own education. They were never exposed to it in their own schooling, and they were never taught how to use comic books during their university studies. Interviewee 4 does state that perhaps there was a comic strip included in a textbook but that the teacher he had never actually worked directly with it.

In accordance with the lack of comic book use in their own schooling, there was a common theme among some of the participants that there was a hesitance in using comic books from their colleagues or themselves. The reason is not entirely clear because there were different reasons given. Interviewee 3 implies that she had to convince her colleagues and herself that comic books had a place in the EFL classroom while Interviewee 4 mentions that his school wouldn't let him purchase comic books for his students to use. This hesitation was not limited to teachers and staff. Some students also show hesitance toward using comic books. It was commented by both interviewee 1 and 4 that those who are experienced readers in the classroom expressed thoughts regarding comic books such as "we are not going to read a real book?"

In contrast, the participants seem to experience a heightened level of engagement from the students when working with comic books. All participants agree on this point, implying that students engage with the text more than they would a novel. They also show higher levels of reading comprehension and motivation to read. Both interviewee 1 and 4 comment that those who do not enjoy reading literature show much more motivation to participate in the classroom activities when working with comic books. Interviewee 3 mentions the benefits of using comic books when dealing with students who have attention disorders and stating that they have an easier time working with the material.

Lastly, the theme of how to use comic books properly was identified. All but interviewee 3 mention that it is very important to give the students time to analyze the images instead of only reading the dialogue. The discussion and analysis coming from the students were lacking when there was not enough emphasis on the images.

6 Discussion

The aim of this essay is to investigate how EFL teachers at upper secondary school in Sweden use comic books in their classroom practice. The goal of this was to highlight the possibilities and challenges of using this text type to gain a deeper understanding of how the usage of comic books works in the classroom.

In this section, results will be analyzed and compared to previous research in order to answer the following research questions. First, to what extent are comic books used by Swedish EFL teachers working at upper secondary schools? Second, in what ways are comic books being used by Swedish EFL teachers working at upper secondary schools? Third, how does teaching with comics work in theory vs. practice? After these research questions have been discussed, there will be a fourth section where pedagogical implications will be discussed. Lastly, a section dedicated to suggestions for future research will be included.

6.1 To what extent are comic books used by Swedish EFL teachers working at upper secondary schools?

From the findings in this study, it is evident that using comic books in the classroom is not something that happens regularly. Out of 53 teachers that responded to the questionnaire, only 6 teachers (11%) have said that they are using comics in their EFL classroom. This shows that many EFL teachers in Sweden working at upper secondary schools have not attempted using

comic books in the classroom and the qualities that may arise are unexplored and merits further investigation.

The reason for why teachers are not using comic books to a greater extent is unclear but previous research provides alternatives to why this could be. Lopes (2006) provides a historical perspective and explains that comic books have had a controversial past. Comic books were seen as potentially harmful to future generations and there could be a stigma connected to using comic books. Ujjie and Krashen's (1996) findings suggest that comic books are not harmful at all but can also be beneficial because it shows that students who read comic books spend more time reading literature than students who do not read comic books. Another reason that comic books are not used might be that teachers are not used to them or are only able to use the material that is already available to them at the school they work at as stated by Lapp et al. (2015). Considering that none of the participants had any experience with comics books during their education it could be speculated that many teachers do not use them because they have not been exposed to it in the context of education.

Due to the small scale of the study, the results cannot be generalized but the findings do imply that comic books are not commonly used by EFL teachers in Sweden working at the upper secondary school.

6.2 In what ways are comic books being used by Swedish EFL teachers working at upper secondary schools?

All participants have or are using comic books as reading material while two of the interviewees (interviewee 2 and 4) mention using comic books in any other way that is not reading. This shows that the teachers that were interviewed see comic books as a natural teaching material to develop reading skills and comprehension.

Research supports this where it states that reading using comic books can benefit a learner's reading comprehension (Cook, 2014, Basol, 2011, Liu, 2004, Merc and Kempusu, 2013, Roozafsai, 2012). Both interviewees 1 and 2 mention using comic books as a preliminary step before introducing them to more advanced text such as when teacher 2 states that comic book versions of Shakespeare were used to give the students an easier time to understand the gist of the story before diving deep into the original texts. This is further supported by research by Kennedy, U., & Chinokul, S. (2020) where comic books are shown to provide a positive scaffolding effect on students where students not only show higher levels

of reading comprehension but also appear more motivated to read due to the visual support provided by comic books

In summary, to answer the question *in what ways are comic books being used by Swedish EFL teachers working at upper secondary schools*, the interviewees have answered that they use it as an alternative to regular novels. One uses it as well for practicing dialogue.

6.3 How does teaching with comics work in theory vs. practice?

When asked about the students' reactions, the four interviewed teachers had similar experiences. One of them, specifically interviewee 4, stated that when the students were told that a comic book was the choice for reading material, there was one part of the classroom that was excited and one part that was skeptical. Interviewee 1 stated "but when I presented the book, and they started reading, they could sit quiet for 20 minutes and just completely focus on loving the book and sort of, can we continue? Nagging me every lesson? Can we continue?". The excited reactions usually came from the students who stated not enjoying the act of reading literature or were weaker readers. Interviewee 4 says "But I do have also weaker students who made it very clear, they are not fans of reading. And their response is much more. Wow, I really want to read this, this seems fun. Let us do it". The fact that weaker readers were more excited is also seen in studies where those who benefit most from reading comic books are the ones with low levels of reading comprehension (Basol, 2011, Liu, 2004).

The skeptical reaction usually came from students who already enjoy reading literature in school and in their free time. Interviewee 4 says "those who do enjoy reading, they were like, we are not going to read a real book". Again, this perspective from students about comic books not being real literature is a somewhat recurring theme. One can speculate that this has to do with many various factors such as parents, teachers and grandparents growing up in an era where comic books were seen as a potentially disruptive cultural instance (Lopes, 2006). Another factor could be the societal point of view on comic books, that reading texts which do not fall in the normalized conventions of a text or book does not count as beneficial and/or educational reading. This has been disputed by Ujjie and Krashen (1996) where they claim that both high and low achieving students who read comic books show no level of decrease in their overall performance. Students who read comic books were seen to benefit more than those that do not read them at all.

A shared statement by all four teachers was that they experienced a higher level of engagement with comic books as opposed to when they work with regular novels. This could mean that by using comic books, students might spend more time reading voluntarily. Krashen (2004) suggests that a student benefits greatly from spending time reading for pleasure. According to him, this is one of the most beneficial methods to improve in a language. Additionally, Ujjie and Krashen (1996) state that comic books are a form of light reading that can act as a bridge between spoken language and more academic language. This indicates that comic books could have great potential as a tool for encouraging students to spend more time reading. Furthermore, Ujjie and Krashen's study (1996) states that students who read comic books regularly usually also spend an equal amount of time reading other types of literature indicating that if students enjoy reading comic books that could be a way for them to branch out to other text types. This is also something that the teachers in this study seem to believe since they choose to work with comic books as an alternative to regular novels. For example, interviewee 2 underscores

I think the picture kind of eases up. Even if the content is quite deep and serious and so on, I think the pictures could give us a kind of false impression that you know, this is something fun, or this just a kind of flashback to childhood might evoke certain interest in the weak readers. Because on the surface, it might seem like a not too hard book to read. It tricks them into reading, I guess.

Simply put, if students consider reading easy and fun it might get them to branch out in their reading.

To summarize *how does teaching with comics work in theory vs. practice?* One can draw the conclusion that theory does not oppose practice. The research states that there are benefits to using comic books such as increased reading comprehension, reading motivation and general engagement. The interviewees' statements agree with what recent studies are illustrating in the findings of this study. The most difficult part of teaching with comic books seems to be the attitudes of both coworkers and students. Interviewee 3 for example mentions how she had to convey and explain to her coworkers why and how she worked with comic books. In practice there are many ways in which teachers can use comic books. An example would be as a substitute for traditional text only literature and include more visual analysis in their courses.

6.4 Pedagogical implications

From the findings of this study, one can claim that teachers can benefit from using comic books in the classroom. Not only will it bring variety to the types of texts students are exposed to but also allow students to interact with a reading format that engages them more as stated by all the four interviewed teachers. We can also speculate that students that are motivated to learn will perform better in the subject due to being more active and willing to engage with the materials presented to them.

Comic books are also an example of a multimodal media that students are highly exposed to today. This visual media can act as a bridge between the activities students do in their free time and academic style of activities done during the time in class as claimed by Krashen (2004). Due to comic books being a visual medium, one can speculate that students have an easier time adjusting to the content due to it being more similar to what students are exposed to today.

It was commented by two of the interviewees that it was challenging to use comic books when they read the comic book with their students and did not slow down to focus on the images. Interviewee 2 states “I would suggest that you really stop at the pictures, discuss those pictures and how a picture can say more than perhaps a few pages of text” and Interviewee 4 states “I did not, I did not put enough focus on, like, the images, what are the images saying? And how? How the visuals can impact the discussion of the students, I would say [...] focus on the images as well”. This suggests that comic books should not be used exactly in the same way that a regular novel would be used. It also implies that there is more potential for students to discuss the content more in depth due to there being both a textual and visual component. The text in a comic book is only half of what the medium offers in its content and ignoring the imagery in discussions and student analysis would be to not use the medium to its fullest potential.

Furthermore, comic books can also be used as a way to provide students with a structured way of producing dialogue as stated by Interviewee 4 “Okay, here we have a comic strip with empty speech bubbles, let us create a dialogue and try to be funny or try to be serious, so that they can practice [...] actual spoken dialogue in a way”. This could let students produce language in a way that differs from regular essay writing and allow them to practice creating writing.

Lastly, it is evident from the results that there is a lack of education on the use of comic books in teacher trainee programmes. None of the interviewees had any experience of comic

books in their education. This would expose teachers to other forms of literature that they may not have been expecting. In order for more teachers to be comfortable using comic books, it should be included in their education to give teachers the tools to be able to teach with them.

6.5 Suggestions for future research

Due to the limitations of the study, where only a few participants were able to be interviewed, further research could be made on a larger scale to gain a deeper understanding of how comic books are used by EFL teachers at the upper secondary level. The generalizability would also increase with a large-scale study. Furthermore, this same type of study can also be done for teachers working at the elementary school level where comic books might be applied in a similar way in EFL teaching. Moreover, more research comparing teachers' usage of both comic books and novels is suggested. The findings from this study indicate that a teacher cannot use a comic book in the same way as a novel but a study focusing on this is required to gain further understanding.

It was noticed that while comic books are shown to increase reading comprehension of students who read them, especially lower-level students, the actual reason why their reading comprehension improves is not explored, only that it does. This merits further investigation to see what exactly it is that comic books include and what exactly it does to improve reading comprehension. Theories (Kennedy and Chinokul, 2020) speculate that it has to do with the visual aspect of comic books and while that is the natural conclusion that can be drawn, a study investigating this would be useful to further understand the benefits that comic books provide.

Research on the effects of comic books have risen over the years but there seems to be a lack of research conducted in Sweden. Studies are being conducted in other countries such as in Turkey or other countries in Asia where there is an interest in improving students' reading comprehension with comic books, but this does not seem to be the case in Sweden.

Lastly, from the finding of this study, there seems to be a hesitation when it comes to using comic books from some of the participants. There was a feeling of having to convince colleagues and themselves that comic books were a worthy material to use in the EFL classroom. Research supports that there is a hesitation toward using comic books but the reason behind why this hesitation exists is not fully clear and further research is suggested.

7 Conclusions

The aims of this study were to investigate the extent to which EFL teachers in Sweden use comic books at the upper secondary level and to further investigate the experiences of using comic books from those who have used them in the classroom. According to previous research, comic books have shown to be a strong teaching tool when it comes to improving students' reading comprehension (Cook, 2014, Basol, 2011, Liu, 2004, Merc and Kempusu, 2013, Roozafsai, 2012) and reading motivation (Öz and Efecioglu, 2015, Kennedy and Chinokul, 2020). Furthermore, comic books are seen as a fun and engaging reading material that can act as a bridge between casual reading and more advanced reading (Krashen, 2004). Finally, it is implied that reading comic books also leads to students branching out to other genres of text, encouraging reading for pleasure, and fostering a climate for literature discussion (Ujji and Krashen, 1996, Smetana et.al. 2009).

A mixed method approach was used to gather the quantitative data and gain access to EFL teachers willing to participate further in the study through interviews. Out of the 53 participants who answered the questionnaire, six teachers said yes to the question whether they have used comic books and four out of those six accepted to take part in the interviews. The interviews conducted were of a semi-structured format. This approach was chosen because it allows for unprepared questions during the interview depending on the answers given by the interviewees. The semi-structured approach led to the four interviews being slightly different but most of the questions overlapped.

The findings from this study show that few teachers have used comic books in the classroom with 89 % stating that they have not used comic books in the classroom. The participants who have used comic books were interviewed about their experiences. In summary, all the interviewed teachers use comic books in similar ways such as using it as literature or creating their own comics. All teachers agree that they feel that their students are more motivated when using comic books and that the level of engagement and participation increases. The reason for this differs between the interviewees. One states that the students engage more because it is easier. One states that the visuals help the students focus and remember details easier. One teacher speculates that the students might have a fond association with comic books and thus engage more vigorously with the lesson material. There are some challenges to using comic books. Several participants mention the need for students to slow down and analyze the imagery and not focus solely on the speech bubbles.

Other challenges that can arise is convincing colleagues that they are a worthwhile medium to use in the EFL classroom.

In conclusion, while comic books as a medium is severely underutilized by EFL Teachers in upper secondary school in Sweden, the findings of this study imply that using comic books in the classroom can have positive effects. These positive effects could lead to students' improving at least in their reading competence if not also motivate them to read more. Based on the findings this study provides, it is comical that comic books are not used more by Swedish upper secondary EFL teachers in their classroom.

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Appendix 1: Electronic consent

Comic books usage in education

Hi,

My name is Paulo Maldonado and I am currently writing my final degree project at Gothenburg University. The study i'm writing is about the usage of comic books and the goal is to investigate (1) how many teachers are using comic books and, (2) through interviews, examine how teachers are using comic books and what possibilities and challenges they may face.

I would very much appreciate it you would like to participate in this study. The questionnaire takes a maximum of 5 minutes and depending on your answers, you may be contacted for participation in an interview that takes approximately 30 minutes. It is important for you to know that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are free to drop out at any time. If you wish, you may request for your data to be removed entirely from the results.

There will be a question in the questionnaire that asks you to provide contact information if you wish to participate in an interview. Due to this, your identity will not be anonymous for the one conducting the study. However, your identity will be confidential outside of the one conducting the study which is myself.

The information given in this questionnaire and eventual interview will only be used for the purpose of this study and nothing else

If you wish to contact me you can do so through my e-mail
Paulomm93@gmail.com

Thank you for participating!
Paulo Maldonado

 paulomm93@gmail.com (not shared) [Switch account](#)



Do you understand this information and wish to continue with the questionnaire?

Yes

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

1: Have you used comic books in the classroom for educational purposes?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

2: Would it be okay to contact you to conduct an interview

- Yes (gets sent to question 3)
- No (gets sent to question 4)

3: Please leave your contact information, for example name and e-mail or phone number

4: Can you describe how you have used comic books in the classroom?

Appendix 3: Interview questions

Introductory questions

- How long have you been teaching?
- What subjects do you teach?
- What is your overall approach as a teacher?

Questions regarding comic books

- Do you or have you read comic books?
- Have you had any experience of comic books being used in your own education as a child or when you studied university?
- How would you describe the difference between reading a comic book and a regular novel?

Open ended question regarding teaching with comic books

- How often do you use comics or graphic novels in the classroom, and how would you describe these experiences?
- When you teach with comics, where do you start?
- Where have you experienced the most success in your teaching with comics and graphic novels?
- Do you have any especially effective strategies that you can share?
- Was there anything you did that wasn't so successful?
- How have your students responded to such texts?
- Do you notice that the environment in the classroom changes when you work with comics? And if so, how?
- How does your teaching change when using graphic novels?
- Do you develop specific assignments when teaching with graphic novels?
- Have your students been encouraged to create their own comics? And if so, what have the results of such experiments looked like?
- And lastly, how would you describe the challenges of teaching with comics and graphic novels?