BRU ELT JOURNAL
Vol.1 No.3 (September-December) 2023
ISSN 2822-1311 (Online)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14456/bej.2023.19

The Formulaic Nature of Comics: Language Learning and Multimodal Texts

Alec Lapidus[1]
[1]School of Education and Human Development, University of Southern Maine, Gorham, USA
E-mail: TESOLexplorer@gmail.com

Received: November 21, 2023
Revised: December 21, 2023
Accepted: December 26, 2023

Abstract

Can comics be described as an excellent ESL/EFL teaching and learning tool? This paper explores the formulaic nature of multiliteracy materials, with a particular focus on comics and similar visual narratives, to describe their potential as language learning/teaching tools. Building on the New London Group's concept of multiliteracies (1996), it looks at the theoretical foundation for using multiliteracy materials such as comics in the classroom and offers specific examples of how recognizing the formulaic nature of such narratives can support the second/foreign language acquisition and cultural negotiation process. Notably, the paper looks at the formulaic from several perspectives, including the traditional definitions of formulaic language (such as common collocations, idioms, and so forth) and the formulaic structure of visual narratives as designed discourses and texts. The positive impact on learners' personal linguaculture and intercultural personhood is illuminated in this article.

Keywords: comics, formulaic language, multiliteracies, second language teaching

Comics and Second/Foreign Language Learners

Among the many challenges applied linguistics is facing today, the question of how to reach all learners and make second/foreign language learning possible for students stands out due to the rapidly changing environment in which second/foreign language acquisition is taking place. Over the past two decades or so, the notion of language learning as a multidimensional phenomenon has become recognized in our field. Augmented by current research that deals with linguacultural identity (e.g., Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko, 2003) and personhood (Kim, 2008; Risager, 2008), a new, more nuanced understanding of the language learning process is emerging. This nuanced understanding is made possible by the increasingly interdisciplinary dialogue taking place between and among applied linguistics specialists. Risager (2008), in particular, has introduced her own version of the concept "personal linguaculture" – the idea that every person possesses a combination of language and culture that is unique to him/her/them, formed by interactions with those around him/her/them. More than ever before, this rapidly changing environment is encouraging us to look at the issues and nuances from new angles. "Multiliteracies" (The New London Group, 1996, p. 60) can be one such angle and indeed an opportunity to add to the traditional definitions of literacy a vision for multicultural learning that may guide 21st-century pedagogy as it continues to evolve. "A pedagogy of multiliteracies," members of the New London

Group note, "focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone" (p. 64) to address "the limitations of traditional approaches by emphasizing how negotiating the multiple linguistic and cultural differences in our society is central to the pragmatics of the working, civic, and private lives of students" (p. 60).

Interestingly, second/foreign language learners tend to associate multiliteracy materials, such as comics, with fun (e.g., Cary, 2004, Kurosawa & Kaneko, 2006; Samantray, 2009). However, teachers (e.g., second language teachers) often disagree and do not necessarily see them as legitimate, genuine literacy learning materials (Burmark, 2002; Baddock, 1993; Cary, 2004; Eisner, 2006; Hamston, 2006; McAllister, Sewell, & Gordon, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2004, and others). While it would be an oversimplification of the issues to present this as a dichotomy (students "like" comics and teachers "do not"), it is important to point out that motivation is very obviously one of the driving forces behind successful second/foreign language (L2) acquisition. Therefore, it would be a disservice to ignore our students' affinity for multiliteracy materials.

This is particularly important in contexts where the second/foreign language learner population is rapidly growing. In the area of English language learner (ELL) education, the learner population is expanding; and internationally, English is now commonly viewed as the lingua franca (Crystal, 1997). Additionally, multimodality is increasingly becoming normal and natural to our students, especially to those who are digital natives. These changes are bound to bring with them concerns about how L2 literacy is taught and lead to experimentation with multimodality specifically in second language teaching. From my point of view, this has to lead to a conversation about language learning as a form of Vygotskian play (Lapidus, 2013).

On the other hand, multimodal texts have been a form of technology used by humans for centuries. The modern smartphone is philosophically and even conceptually a continuation of the prehistoric cave art. Texts' social function is to make it possible for humans to communicate with each other. Thus, "sequential art" (Eisner, 2006, p. 5; McCloud, 2000, p. 42) is more than merely words and images put together. Sequential art, such as comics, is an expression of the linguacultural capital, and ELLs reading visual narratives in their second/foreign language are choosing to immerse themselves in it. They choose to have a dialogue with the author and the context in which the specific text that they are reading was created, and as they engage in this conversation, they make the connection between language and what it is used to express, i.e., emotions, values, and thoughts, in order to acquire multicultural literacy. Thus, I argue, ELLs are often able to see in these visual narratives something they can understand and come to own, even when the texts come from a culture different from the learners' first language (L1) culture (Lapidus, 2008; McCloud, 2006; Schodt, 2005). The challenges contribute to the learning process.

A Confluence of Culture and Language

According to Wood (2010), "Formulaic sequences and their nature and functions are the subject of growing interest in applied linguistics" (p. 177), particularly because the "cultural factors in fluency development" complement the "affective factors, be they learner-internal or socially influenced," and these factors "can have an effect on speech fluency development and performance" (p. 82). Wood's own research suggests that cultural factors are reflected "in patterns of communication," thus having

a direct impact on output (p. 177). Naturally, since "social identity can play a heavy role in fluency in L2" (p. 79), "the act of communicating in L2 is influenced by a range of factors beyond the linguistic: first language, culture, identity, and issues of voice and attitudes, among others" (p. 72). In other words, one's personal linguaculture can be expressed subjectively and in context-specific ways. On the one hand, Wood writes, "If the first language is built on different abstractions and principles, it stands to reason that *cultural fluency* and therefore speech fluency in L2 are likely to be inhibited" (p. 80, emphasis added). On the other hand, he continues, "It could be conjectured that cultural issues or the nature of the L1 might influence fluency development in some ways, but again, the quantitative data analysis does not bear that out" (Wood, 2010, p. 172). This leads Wood to conclude that there is more to input and output than just the cultural factors. He writes that the "fear of public embarrassment is key to language anxiety" (p. 73) and "it appears that self-determined motivation is useful in explaining the ways in which social and cultural factors influence L2 learning and performance" (p. 75):

> Certainly, the immediate context plays a strong role, as social factors all may have varying effects depending on the nature of the interlocutors, the purpose of the speech produced, setting, and degree of self-investment required. The underlying psycholinguistic processes allow the emergence of voice, cultural fluency, and self-efficacy. Formulaic sequences, if internalized, allow for the expression of those aspects of the self in society (Wood, 2010, p. 83).

Therefore, he postulates, English language learners forming their own L2 personal linguaculture might benefit from exploring formulaic structures in their reading materials from both the cultural and linguistic point of view. For example, Wood (2010) believes that working with texts that students from many cultures can relate to (such as fairy tales, fables, and so forth) can create a window on the formulaic in building a personal linguaculture.

In turn, if students are "ethnomethodologists" exploring the formulaic in language and culture (Wood, 2010, pp. 88-89), then it can be argued that reading comics and other multiliteracy materials presents an opportunity to immerse oneself in the semiotics of the second language. In other words, what feels like fun and reading for pleasure to ELLs is in actuality a highly complex process of hypothesizing, theorizing, and fantasizing about the second/foreign language culture. Of course, this complicates the study of the second/foreign language culture in that the students are now encouraged to visualize participating in the inner workings of the second/foreign language culture, as opposed to merely accepting sets of rules and customs to memorize. Fundamentally, multiliteracy materials are a powerful tool that helps define a track along which the learner will move when he/she becomes truly autonomous, i.e., instead of continuing to seek out the superficial aspects of culture to read about, learners may choose to define themselves as participants and not mere observers. From this point of view, their exploration of the formulaic has a chance to go beyond the form itself.

Comics and Intercultural Personhood

Learning to function in a new culture is something that language learners around the world are trying to do on a daily basis. Whether they are Korean ELLs, international students studying in New Zealand, or children of asylees entering elementary school in the United States, one thing they all have in common is the need to survive and do well in the new environment. For many, learning is at first limited to learning the rules of the new culture or the basics of the second language, but truly understanding those who speak this second/foreign language as their first language and the values, beliefs, and the incredible amount of ethnic and cultural diversity out of which these values and beliefs have arisen takes effort and desire to learn. That is why this immersion in a new culture and language is also an introspective process that has a direct impact on one's linguacultural identity (Lapidus, Kaveh & Hirano, 2013). The "intercultural personhood" (Kim, 2008, p. 359) that grows in the process of living at the intersection of cultures has a strong autoethnographic side to it (Hanauer, 2010; Lapidus, Kaveh & Hirano, 2013). Coupled with imagination (Vygotsky, 2008), intercultural personhood creates for us a foundation to build on as we continue becoming interested in reading new texts in our second language. Indeed, students become able to see themselves as members of a variety of "imagined communities" (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241).

In turn, it can be argued that intercultural personhood helps us deal with the unpredictable as we continue learning our second language. As Makhlina (2010) points out, art is quintessentially polysemantic, i.e., learning about culture and/or language from sequential art materials and from interactions that take place over such materials means accepting the idea that there are various views on subjects and topics within any given culture. This is cross-cultural hermeneutics. I argue that the unpredictable helps learners become more autonomous, thereby making learner-centeredness more possible (Nunan, 1988). From the social semiotics point of view, Kress addresses this directly when writing on the need to understand how learners learn, manipulate, and create signs (2010). If "human semiosis" is "an inherently social phenomenon in its sources, functions, contexts and effects" (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 261), then the evolution of one's intercultural personhood has to be more than simply the acquisition of factual information. Voloshinov/Bakhtin identifies the social nature of word as conducive to dialogue (2010), where the meaning-making process is a form of interaction between the author, the reader, and the characters. Fundamentally, this moves us away from simplistic views on second/foreign language reading and offers an insight into how language learners interact with texts in their second/foreign language.

Recognizing the Formulaic Nature of Comics

The formulaic nature of comics and similar visual narratives is represented, first and foremost, by the gutter, i.e., the blank space between the panes. The gutter's function is to have the reader visualize the connection between the panels, where he/she participates in the action (McCloud, 1993). Fundamentally, the gutter makes it possible for readers to activate their schemata and use imagination to turn the visual narrative into one coherent piece. The formulaic nature of comics as a discourse is what allows the reader to face the unpredictable. When connections to schemata are made, the interaction between the reader, the author, and the hero takes place in the gutter. In a second/foreign language context, this means that reading comics is not simply a process

that involves recalling factual information. On the contrary, visual narratives embrace the notion of incompleteness. Much has been written about learner-centeredness (see Nunan, 1988, for an early example of this), but the implementation of the fundamental principles of learner-centered education, such as placing the learner's inner world at the core of the teaching process (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 2010), has to be supported with materials that are conducive to learner-driven meaning-making process.

Next, language used in comics is often formulaic, in the traditional sense. A good example of this we find in genre-specific language that varies from one genre to another. This applies not only to phrasal verbs and culturally bound expressions, but also to vocabulary (e.g., slang) and even grammar. For example, a growing trend in comics is English for Specific Purposes (ESP) manga, such as a book that focuses on calculus (see Kojima & Togami, 2009) and another one that deals with statistics (Takahashi, 2008). The statistics book includes numerous examples of formulaic language, ranging from "there is/there are" structures to a multitude of modal verbs used in context. The calculus book includes formulaic expressions such as "It was nice of you to call and let me know you might be running late" and "It's nice to live in Sanda-cho!" (p. 116). The latter set of examples comes from a section on "Using trigonometric functions" in the chapter "Let's learn integration techniques!" (Kojima & Togami, 2009, p. 116). All of these are presented to the reader in a visually stimulating environment and context, i.e., the formulaic language and visuals work in tandem to help the reader make meaning.

Similarly, the Korean manhwa is offering a growing variety of texts that are educational in design and orientation (Lim, 2011), particularly in the graphic novel form. Lim (2011) indicates that Korean second/foreign language educational manhwa offers a variety of educational content presented from the protagonist's point of view and that it allows learners to enjoy the content and acquire new information.

Comics in EAP and ESP Acquisition

From the English for Academic Purposes point of view, formulaic language in comics contains a combination of conversational and academic expressions, structures, and vocabulary. For example, a trait common to a variety of genres of comics is that characters express their thoughts through language, which typically also includes talking about fantasy, dreams, or the future (this is often indicated by a particular form of a speech balloon). In other words, characters use language to narrate and illustrate the process of theorizing and forming hypotheses. Similarly, characters in comics often talk about the affective and use formulaic language to express their likes and dislikes (see the example above, Kojima & Togami, 2009, p. 116). Cultural concepts are often fused with language, allowing the students to experience a moment of hesitation and then either make a connection to their schemata or mentally pose a question to themselves about what the character in question means or implies.

Furthermore, formulaic language used in comics broadly fits into the categories proposed by Yorio (1980). Broadly defined, it augments, illustrates, and makes possible a variety of scenarios. For example, interactions between characters often contain language that exemplifies contextualization, i.e., to understand what the characters are talking about, one has to look at the visual context in which the interaction is occurring (this is similar to Voloshinov's/Bakhtin's thoughts on word and social context, 2010). Furthermore, comics, such as the ESP manga mentioned above,

contain language that illustrates the concept of stylistics, e.g., formulaic language in this case can be indicative of a particular style. Building on this, formulaic language also varies depending on the character's social status and other extralinguistic factors (Yorio, 1980), teaching second language learners about formality. Additionally, a great deal of formulaic language in comics focuses on pragmatics and using language to obtain information. This, too, is helpful to second/foreign language learners, for obvious reasons.

From the pedagogical perspective, all of this can be turned into activities to be used in the second language classroom. A simple example that any second/foreign language teacher will recognize is working with picture dictionaries. For beginners, working with a picture dictionary may mean getting used to using a monolingual glossary; for advanced students, picture dictionaries represent a rich cultural resource that often includes ESP vocabulary and phraseology. Thus, in an academic context, Samantray (2009) has ESL students create their own comics with the language they are learning. Additionally, various ESL researchers have written and spoken on comics and completion tasks (e.g., Kurosawa & Kaneko, 2006; Yoon & Kellogg, 2002; and others), where tasks can range from working with cloze texts to actually drawing additional panels and speech balloons. A variety of methods currently used in second/foreign language teaching, including Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and even the Grammar Translation Method (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), can benefit from comics as a learning and teaching tool because they can be easily adapted to a variety of curricula. Sorting tasks, games, and collaborative learning activities can all be incorporated into the second/foreign language curriculum, as long as the teacher is open to the idea of using multiliteracy activities in the classroom.

Conclusion

Multiliteracy texts, and comics in particular, have much potential in terms of helping learners form an expressly multicultural, multidimensional personal linguaculture. The theoretical foundation for this is emergent at best, but therein lies an opportunity to improve our understanding of how learners acquire their second/foreign language and use the formulaic in the materials with which they prefer working to construct meaning.

References

Baddock, B. (1983). *Press ahead.* Pergamon Press.

Burmark, L. (2002). *Visual literacy.* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Cary, S. (2004). *Going graphic: Comics at work in the multilingual classroom.* Heinemann.

Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a global language.* Cambridge University Press.

Eisner, W. (2006). *Comics and sequential art: Principles and practice of the world's most popular art form.* Poorhouse Press.

Hamston, J. (2006). Pathways to multiliteracies: Student teachers' critical reflections on a multimodal text. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 29*(1), 38-51.

Hanauer, D. I. (2010). *Poetry as research: Exploring second language poetry writing.* John Benjamins.
Hodge, R., & Kress, G. (1988). *Social semiotics.* Cornell University Press.
Kanno, Y., & Norton, B. (2003). Imagined communities and educational possibilities: Introduction. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education, 2*(4), 241-249.
Kim, Y. Y. (2008). Intercultural personhood: Globalization and a way of being. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations. 32*, 359-368.
Kojima, H., & Togami, S. (2009). *Manga guide to calculus.* No Starch Press.
Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication.* Routledge.
Kurosawa, S., & Kaneko, Y. (2006, October). *Using comic books in EFL classrooms in Japan.* Paper presented the Three Rivers TESOL Annual Conference, Pittsburgh, PA.
Lapidus, A. (2008, November). *Exploring the pedagogy of multiliteracies in TESOL contexts.* Paper presented at the PennTESOL-East 2008 Conference, Philadelphia.
Lapidus, A. (2013). English in a non-place: Supermodernity and ESL pedagogy. *Journal of English as an International Language, 8*(2), 1-9. http://www.eilj.com/images/pdf/EILJ2013_Nov2013_Vol8No2.pdf
Lapidus, A., Kaveh, Y. M., & Hirano, M. (2013). ESL teachers/ESL students: Looking at autoethnography through the lens of personetics. S*econd Language Journal*, *5*(1), 19-42. http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7b733911
Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques and principles in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
Lim, Y. (2011). Educational graphic novels: Korean children's favorite now. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature, 49*(4), 40-48.
Makhlina, S. T. (2010). *Lektsii po semiotike kul'tury i lingvistike* [Semiotics of culture and linguistics lectures]. SPbKO.
McAllister, M. P., Sewell, E. H., & Gordon, I. (2001) (Eds.). *Comics and ideology.* Peter Lang Publishing.
McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics: The invisible art.* Kitchen Sink Press.
McCloud, S. (2000). *Reinventing comics: How imagination and technology are revolutionizing an art form?* Perennial/HarperCollins.
McCloud, S. (2006). *Making comics: Storytelling secrets of comics, manga and graphic novels.* HarperCollins.
Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2004). Introduction. In B. Norton & K. Toohey (Eds.), *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 1-17). Cambridge University Press.
Nunan, D. (1988). *The learner-centered curriculum.* Cambridge University Press.
Pavlenko, A. (2003). I never knew I was bilingual: Reimagining teacher identities in TESOL. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education, 2*(4), 251-268.
Risager, K. (2008, March). *Towards a transnational paradigm in language and culture pedagogy.* Paper presented the AAAL 2008 Annual Conference, Washington, DC.
Samantray, K. (April, 2009). *Comics as frames of references: From reading to writing*. Paper presented at the IATEFL 2009 conference, Cardiff, UK.

Schodt, F. L. (2005). Japanese manga invades America. In D. M. Haugen (Ed.), *Comic books: Examining pop culture* (pp. 145-152). Thomson Gale/Greenhaven Press.

Takahashi, S. (2008). *Manga guide to statistics.* No Starch Press.

The New London Group (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review, 66*(1), 60-92.

Voloshinov, V. N., & Bakhtin, M. M. (2010). *Antropolingvistika* [Anthropolinguistics]. Labirint.

Vygotsky, L. S. (2008). *Pedagogicheskaya psikhologiya* [Pedagogical psychology]. AST/Astrel'/Khranitel'.

Wood, D. (2010). *Formulaic language and second language speech fluency.* Continuum.

Yoon, Y. B., & Kellogg, D. (2002). "Ducks" and "parrots": Elaboration, duplication and duplicity in a cartoon discourse completion test. *Evaluation and Research in Education, 16*(4), 218-239.

Yorio, C. (1980). Conventionalized language forms and the development of communicative competence. *TESOL Quarterly, 14*, 433–442.

Author

Dr. Alec Lapidus is an Associate Professor in the Department of Literacy, Language, and Culture, School of Education and Human Development, University of Southern Maine. He teaches a variety of courses that focus on second language acquisition and cultural negotiation.