

CRITICAL READING AND USE OF COMICS IN TEACHING FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The ability to understand the information that is being transmitted both orally and in writing varies according to the abilities of individuals. If the ability to read is not developed from an early age (and if critical reading abilities are not promoted), serious communication failures can occur. Reading comprehension is a multidimensional process that includes several levels among which are the reader, the text and the factors associated with the reading activity. However, most of the research and theories on reading comprehension are based mainly on research conducted with monolingual speakers, leaving aside how students learn a foreign language. Recently, several investigations have emerged that highlight the potential of comics as an aid in pedagogical settings and as a tool to improve the reading comprehension of students (both monolingual and foreign language learners). The present paper investigates the cognitive and linguistic factors that influence reading comprehension in French as a Foreign Language (FFL). To do so, we present a pedagogical innovation proposal based on comic reading that will contribute to the critical reading comprehension processes of students of FFL. For this purpose, a method of sequencing activities for developing critical thinking skills through the use of a comic strip was designed. First, the students will look at all the information provided by the comic (both image and text), comparing the coherence and cohesion of the contents of other strips from the same comic. After that, students will organize and reconstruct the information analyzed in the previous steps through a series of activities proposed by the teacher. Then, students will be able to foster their creativity through the creation of their own activities and resources using the comic as the main tool. Next, students will implement their new knowledge to different contents. The final step is to reflect on the effectiveness of the comic in foreign language learning with a view to future interventions. This method of sequencing will allow students to move from a literal level where they only analyze the explicit elements of the story, to a level in which they will develop a critical and inferential thinking that will allow them to throw solid arguments to support and defend the hypotheses they can create in front of a text.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, critical reading, comic, French as a foreign language, bande dessinée, education

1 INTRODUCTION

In today's world we are surrounded by constant information, where technology is accessible thanks to the development of ICT. This situation makes people take the available information without questioning it, which distances individuals from reading it with deep comprehension and, even more, from critical thinking. Therefore, making sure that the information is correct and reliable becomes a necessity. Thus, it is crucial the development of critical reading skills that help distinguishing and analyzing this information. [1] posit that reading habits are important for the individual to acquire critical reading skills by treating reading as a natural habit. The acquisition of this reading habit and one's own critical reading skills becomes more important in higher education faculties. The importance of developing the ability to read—and to read critically—is emphasized by many language and literacy professionals in higher education, see for example [2-5].

However, many students do not have enough experience in critical reading and critical thinking [4]. This may be influenced by their educational environment based on memorization [6] or by cultural, social, political or religious environments that do not encourage critical thinking [7, 8].

Thanks to development of new technologies, we have moved from a book-oriented culture to a screen-oriented culture in which children and adolescents are among the main audiences exposed to various sources of information [9]. Computer, television, iPads and all the portable video game consoles that children are so fond of, are a high source of visual stimuli [10]. Thus, the texts that children and adolescents encounter today are often multimodal, that is, they incorporate a variety of modes, including visual images, hypertext, and graphic design elements along with written text [11] which changes the way of approaching information and, therefore, the way they use their critical reading skills.

The objective of this paper is to design a pedagogical innovation proposal based on the reading of various comics that contributes to the critical reading comprehension processes of students of French as a foreign language. For this purpose, we will identify and analyze the elements of the comics that contribute to the development of students' critical reading comprehension.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

“Critical reading” is to logically understand a text as a systematic structure composed of information, ideas, and the author's opinions while making a total interpretation and evaluation of a text. Authors like [12] define critical reading as the reading ability that involves a higher level of thinking in which the reader uses a questioning attitude, logical analysis and inference to judge the value of what is read, while [13] establishes that “examine” is the keyword of critical reading: it *examines* the arguments presented, whether they affect the author's ideas, it *examines* the strengths and weaknesses of the text and positive or negative interpretations. [14] in her research establishes that students are not sufficiently exposed to critical reading because of the limited time allotted at schools to the development of reading abilities, to the fact that the classes are too large (and, therefore, it is difficult to obtain an individualized assessment) or due to the lack of habit. The result of all of this: a superficial reading of texts.

The emergence of ICT complicated this issue. Nowadays, children and adolescents live immersed in a screen-oriented visual culture to which they interact through smartphones and tablets [15]. They must be able to comprehend in a critical way the visual information they encounter to understand and interpret the intended message and to show that they are not mere passive agents [16] [17-19]. In this regard, authors such as [20] suggest that memory and comprehension can be increased by combining two distinct pathways: one deals with language and the other with images.

As reading habits develop, the individual acquires critical reading skills and thinks more carefully by following closely what each sentence and word means, so they can evaluate the text they read from a broader perspective [1]. These abilities are indispensable for lifelong learning and personal development [21]. Figure 1 shows the skills needed to acquire these critical reading skills.

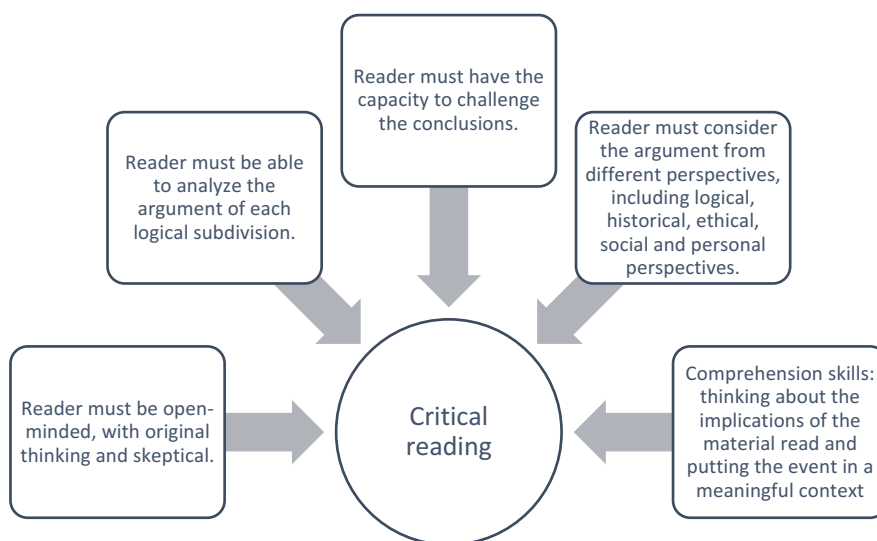


Figure 1. Skills needed for critical reading

Learning a foreign language is a very complex process involving numerous linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural skills that students have to master: knowledge of vocabulary, syntax and grammar (both formal and informal), oral and written communication and expression, reading comprehension, knowledge of the target culture, etc. Spain's failure in teaching English should lead us to reflect on the teaching methodology that is currently being used [22]. [23] states that foreign language classes generally focus on the daily use of the textbook, where certain topics that the student must study during the development of their school grade are followed and evaluated. However, sometimes the texts are not of interest to the student, thus generating a lack of motivation to read. This leads us to suggest that other resources can be explored to contribute to achieve critical reading comprehension levels.

Previous research highlights the importance of using different textual typologies in the classroom to improve the reading competence of foreign language students as well as the knowledge of the strategies specific to the textual genre of the written material they are reading [24-26]. Among these, recent studies have highlighted the potential of comics as an aid in pedagogical settings and as a tool to improve the reading comprehension of students.

The comic could be defined as an artistic genre consisting of "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" [27]. However, there is not a single definition that allows us to establish exactly what a comic is [28], in fact authors such as [29] call this genre a "Un objet culturel non identifié [a non-identified cultural object]". However, we can recognize some fundamental characteristics that differentiate this genre from others: the combination of drawings and verbal code that maintain an iconic-verbal relationship and the inclusion of a series of basic elements such as panels, balloons, texts, comic characters and their relations [30, 31].

According to [32] it is also noteworthy the role of graphic novels (together with comics) in enhancing ones reading abilities, which are "extended, self-contained comic books, [which] have evolved out of comics to offer the curriculum a new vehicle for teaching literacy and engaging reluctant readers". Therefore, both comics and graphic novels are texts that, because they are made up of two types of languages (written text and images), require students to make a cognitive effort that allows them to develop their analytical and comprehension skills, due to the type of relationships that these texts foster. In fact, "in its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language - a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of Sequential Art." [33].

Difficulties with reading and writing skills are said to be the one of the main causes of learning disabilities [34]. It has been argued that comics are useful aids for the acquisition of reading and writing skills [35-37]; and even as aids for memorizing information [38]. More recently, the potential for enhancing the transfer of multimodal literacy skills using comics has also been suggested [39]. Therefore, it seems that encouraging comic book reading could help improve the students' reading skills.

Different specialists [10, 38, 40-45], have already studied the educational possibilities of the verb-iconic narrative language of comics. [46] illustrates that comics help learners to understand the intended meaning of a text in an easier way, and at the same time it helps to develop reading strategies. The comic book has been used in the teaching of various subjects and its use has been shown to be clearly beneficial.

The text-image-sequence combination, if used and developed properly, can help the learner to understand, reflect and ultimately retain information better. However, the legitimacy of comics in school is still low compared to other media, as evidenced by the place it still occupies in curricula [47]. The importance of comics as a didactic tool in language teaching has also been studied, whether in English [48-51], Spanish [52-54] [31] or French [55] [56] [57, 58]. In fact, most of the content of foreign language classes is predominantly directed towards reading texts on paper [48], an activity that is not usually well received by students as it is perceived as dry and of little use [59, 60]. In recent years, new methodologies have been developed to improve reading skills in a foreign language using current resources. For example, "Internationale de la Bande Dessinée et de l'image" (<http://collections.citebd.org>) in France or archives such as *The Digital Comic Museum* (<http://digitalcomicmuseum.com>), the *Grand Comics Database* (<http://comics.org>) or *DC Comics* from Warner Bros (<http://www.dccomics.com>).

However, we have hardly found any papers that relate critical thinking skills and comic book reading. Therefore, this paper aims to fill this gap and to propose a pedagogical intervention based on comic reading that will contribute to the critical reading comprehension processes of students of French as a foreign language.

3 METHODOLOGY

This empirical work used the material developed in the *Women Entrepreneurs in Action (WE'RE IN!)* project of the Erasmus + program (European Commission) [61]. The methodology used to develop the comic was based on the literature on the key elements of visual narrative formats [62] as well as on the literature on the process of science dissemination through such formats [63]. Several of the vignettes have been adapted and used with university students (n = 16) who were in the fourth year of the degree of Primary Education and who had an intermediate level of French (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Extract of strips from the comic that will be used.

For this purpose, based on studies like the ones proposed by [64-66] a method of sequencing activities for developing critical thinking skills through the use of a comic was designed. This method followed the next steps:

- 1 Looking at the information.
- 2 Comparing and finding similarities and differences.
- 3 Organization and reconstruction of the information.
- 4 Creation of activities and resources.
- 5 Application to similar situations.
- 6 Self-reflection.

A questionnaire made up of 10 closed-ended questions that follow the Likert scale and an open question were implemented after the activities to know the students' opinion about the effectiveness of the experience (Table 1). We used a Likert scale as the main tool of our study since it is one of the most widely used measurement tools in Educational and Social Sciences to measure the level of agreement with a given statement through the use of an ordinal scale. After implementing the scale, the frequencies and percentages of the results obtained were calculated.

Table 1. Questionnaire and number of participants for each category

	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
1. The sequence proposed motivated me and improved my linguistic skills in French.	4	12			
2. I have learnt more about how to approach unknown information in a variety of ways.	3	10	3		
3. I have improved my ability to judge the value of new information presented to me.	4	9	2	1	
4. I have learnt more about how to analyze a written text.	3	12	1		
5. I have improved my ability to give sound reasons for my beliefs, opinions and ideas.	5	9	2		
6. I have improved my ability to listen to the opinions of others and contrast them with the information in the text.	4	10	1	1	
7. I have developed a more open-minded approach in interpreting, analysing and judging alternative points of view.	3	12	1		
8. I am more aware of my difficulties but I know how to alleviate them.	3	8	4	1	
9. The development of critical thinking skills is especially important in language teaching.	4	10	2		
10. I think this is an interesting experience that I will carry out with my students when I become a teacher.	6	9	1		

Open question: Give us your opinion about the activity.

4 RESULTS

In order to apply the steps of the sequence, we propose the following course of action:

First, we would proceed to a general reading of the comic, individually or in groups. The teacher should ask the students questions about what they see on the text, identifying all the content that the visual language (the strip, the framing, the planes, the angles, the formats and the color), the verbal language (the dialogues themselves) and the conventional signs (visual metaphors that are used, the figures or kinetic lines and the support signs that allow us to enrich the expression of the characters) show us. Special emphasis is placed on interpreting and understanding both the explicit factors of the image and the graphics and the implicit factors between the strips and the language of the comic itself.

Then, in the second step, the teacher asks students to compare the contents of other strips of the same comic: characters, themes, event sequences and so on. Students should be able to indicate the coherence and cohesion between the strips and reflect on how all the information is related.

In the third step, the students have to perform exercises about organization and reconstruction of the information analyzed in the previous step. Some examples of activities could be:

- Answering questions about the comic, for example, what visual metaphor is the main one in the cartoon? Answer: a scene in which they are toasting as a token of happiness that they are doing well and they will meet again.
- The strips are presented out of order, the students have to organize them.
- The students have to invent a plausible context prior to the situation: since the comic takes place after a work meeting, an example would be for each student to make a list of topics that could have been discussed in that meeting and exchange their impressions with the rest of the students.
- Recreation of the scenes that appear in the comic using different materials (two chairs around a table, glasses simulating a cafeteria, waiter, other diners, etc.).
- Presenting the comic without the dialogue and the students will have to create it (see Figure 3).

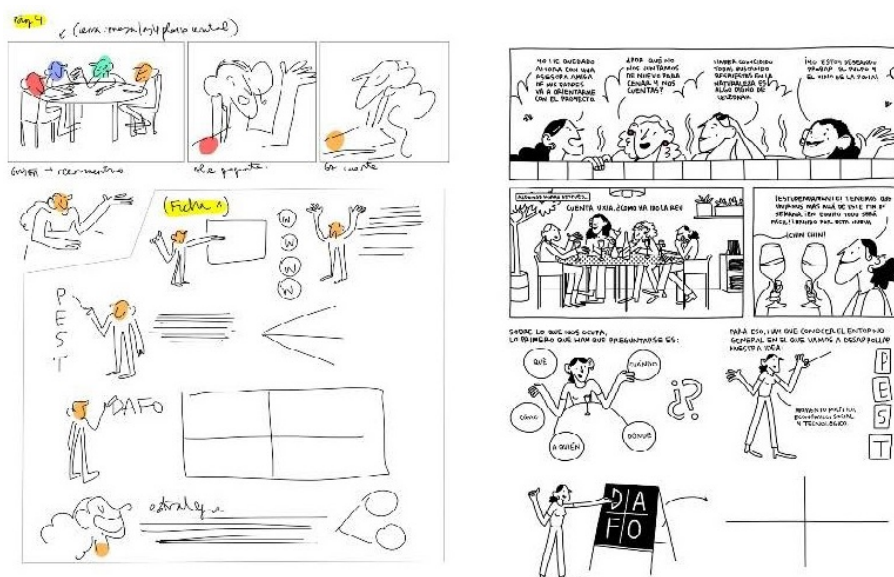


Figure 3. Example of blank strips to create a comic book in its French version.

In this step is very important the management of mistakes as opportunities of learning. If the students give a wrong answer, the teacher should ask them why they think their answer was right and the class as a whole should examine their reasoning. If some of the students propose a correct answer they should debate with their peers why it is correct and the steps to follow to achieve this conclusion.

In the fourth step, students will have to pose a series of questions, and create some activities and resources using the comic strip as a starting point so that the other students can carry out the activities. Students can foster their creativity in this free stage.

The step five is for students to implement the knowledge gained to new or different information through several activities. For example:

- Follow-up of the conversation that allows the story to continue.
- Designing their own comic using the themes, vocabulary and grammatical structures learned and then explain it to their classmates.
- Participation in debates and classroom discussions: a topic with cultural implications with two perspectives is presented and the students have to support their position in both oral and written exchanges.
- Free discussion about the intercultural component: how the comic helps them understand the vocabulary and unknown expressions, the cultural differences between their culture of origin and the culture they are studying, the conventions of the oral and written texts of the target culture, etc.

Finally, and to close the activity, the students will carry out a reflective individual work in which they can include their impressions on the use and effectiveness of the comic in foreign language learning with a view to future interventions.

Taking into account the results obtained on the Likert scale (see Table 1), we can establish that students were particularly engaged in this experience: all of them thought that the sequence motivated them and helped improve their linguistic skills in French. In addition, the majority of students thought that their ability to judge new and unknown written information has improved after the experience as well as their ability to give their opinion, to justify it correctly and to understand the opinion of others. It should be noted that question number 8 obtained the lowest percentage of agreement (68.75 %), this may be because some of the students continue having difficulty judging their own abilities (therefore, a more comprehensive intervention in this area is needed). Finally, 93.75 % of the sample claimed that they will carry out a similar experience with their students when they become teachers.

As for the open-ended question (Give us your opinion about the activity), the students offered very positive evaluations of the activity carried out and showed their satisfactions with the innovative methodology. The following are some of the most relevant comments made by the students:

- *I liked this activity because I gained new knowledge about the French language, vocabulary, lexicon and syntax, and it expanded my knowledge of reading by learning about comics.*
- *I believe that this is an activity in which, in addition to expanding my personal knowledge of the French language, helped me gain new knowledge to perform the role of a teacher in the future.*
- *I believe that using comics as a teaching tool in the classroom through a critical learning experience has a significant impact on the teaching-learning process of students. It encourages cooperative work, fosters the creation of positive interpersonal relationships and creates a group cohesion that fosters a pleasant work environment.*
- *It's an activity that brings a new perspective, something that hasn't been worked on in other subjects.*
- *I think it is a very interesting activity and in the future I will do it with my students. On the other hand, the activity promotes oral and written expression and has helped me improve my French skills.*
- *The only drawback I would put to this activity is its short duration, as one session is not enough to develop critical thinking.*

5 CONCLUSIONS

Reading comprehension is probably a skill that needs to be taught and implemented in the curriculum. Having adequate word reading skills is no guarantee of having good reading comprehension skills and, therefore, achieving critical reading. If we add to this the learning of a new language, this leads us to need the use of new methodologies such as the use of comics. This research provides a reflection on the pedagogical practices of Spanish and French as a foreign language, as well as a methodological proposal on the multiple possibilities of the comic as a tool in the field of foreign languages.

Although it is probably not possible to adapt teaching to all learning styles, what would be desirable is to diversify learning methods in order to take into account individual differences and improve the chances of success of as many learners as possible. As established by [22], at the beginning, students

feel a bit insecure about their ability to read a graphic novel or a comic, due to their lack of practice, especially if it is written in another language (French in this case). Therefore, it is crucial to establish a clear method of sequencing activities (such as the one presented in this research) to prevent students from just using the pictures to recreate the plot and to allow them to reach the full comprehension of the comic while using their critical thinking skills.

Because comics depict social, political, or cultural issues, young people will have increased motivation and interest in expressing their ideas and opinions that will emerge as they work through these stories. In this way, they will be able to move from a literal level where they only analyze the explicit elements of the story, to a level in which they will develop a critical and inferential thinking that will allow them to throw solid arguments to support and defend the hypotheses they can create in front of a text. With the implementation of a critical thinking sequence of activities, it seems that FLE students improved their motivation, their linguistic skills, their ability to judge new and unknown written information as well as their ability to give their opinion, to justify it correctly and to understand the opinion of others.

The main limitation of this study is that it lacks the comparison of different samples of students by applying the methodology proposed. Future research will implement the sequence proposed in a wider sample and will examine reading comprehension in relation to the specific linguistic background of each sample of students.

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