
Nobody Wants to Read Anymore!

Using a Multimodal Approach to Make Literature Engaging

Riki Thompson and Matthew McIlnay

Abstract

Reports about apparent declines in reading continue to gain attention, playing into social anxieties about literacy and the state of education. In this article, we examine concerns about changing reading habits, address the role of digital media in literacy practices, and the problem of adequate access to reading materials. To meet the rapidly changing literacy demands of today's students, addressing motivation, teaching visual literacy, and instilling a lifelong love of reading are increasingly important. We argue for integration of non-traditional texts and application of multimodal reading approaches to motivate students, reinvigorate curricula, and meet continually evolving education standards. Our approach calls for integrating a wide range of texts, including comics, graphic novels, and film, for language learning and into the literary curriculum. In English language teaching (ELT) contexts, the use of visual texts has been shown to have positive outcomes, including increasing student participation, improving reading comprehension, inspiring students' motivation and building confidence.

Keywords: reading strategies; multiple literacies; multimodality; multigenre; multiformat; comics; graphic novels; media

Riki Thompson is an Associate Professor of Writing Studies at University of Washington Tacoma. Her interdisciplinary work brings together composition and visual rhetoric studies, multimodal discourse analysis, comics studies, and pedagogy. She recently published on 'Writing through Comics' for the edited collection *Teaching Graphic Novels in the English Classroom*.

Matthew McIlnay graduated with a B.A. in Technical Communication from the University of Washington Tacoma. Since graduating, he has worked as a copywriter at Microsoft and as a language expert at Samsung Electronics America. He currently works as a technical writer at the video-game studio 343 Industries.

Introduction

In a recent article titled 'Is Literature Dead?', Ulin (2018) describes a debate with his teenage son about the value of literature, who informs him that 'None of my friends like it. Nobody wants to do it anymore'. Ulin's son describes 'the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools' that Gallagher (2009) refers to as *readicide* (p. 2). The question we should be asking isn't whether literature has value, but how we can help students engage with it.

Anxiety over declining rates in reading over the last decade in the United States abound, such as a comprehensive survey by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) that found less than a third of 13-year-olds read daily, and rarely for pleasure (Gioia, 2007). Initially, declines were associated with large amounts of mandatory readings, but later it was argued that students were spending less time on schoolwork in general, indicating a waning desire.

Fears about literacy are not new and reports that confirm widely held fears tend to get more coverage than those demonstrating improvements. Counter-arguments to the NEA *Reading at Risk* report (Krashen, 2008; 2011) and the follow up *Reading on the Rise* report published a year later did not garner as much media coverage as reports about declines. Similarly, research that disputes that nobody reads but rather that readers don't know how much others read because it is often a private activity (Lee, Lao, & Krashen, 2016; Schatz, Panko, & Krashen, 2010) fails to circulate as widely as reports that trigger deeply held social anxieties about literacy.

Scholars have questioned the notion of a decline in reading, arguing that teenagers today are even more involved in reading and that 'the true problem in literacy is not related to convincing reluctant teenagers to read: It is providing access to books for those living in poverty' (Krashen, 2011, p. 1). Lenters (2006) labels students who are not engaged as resistant readers and argues that they ignore assigned texts that don't resonate with their interests (pp, 137-138). Worthy and McKool (1996) have also pointed out that students labelled as reluctant readers tend to be those with limited access to books. Focusing on students as reluctant and resistant readers takes the attention off socioeconomic conditions that contribute to literacy inequalities and places blame (and stigma) on students who are

constructed as performing in inappropriate ways rather than making educators accountable for finding ways to engage learners.

Not surprisingly, digital media and the appeal of other visual entertainment have been blamed as a contributing cause for so-called declines in reading. Problematically, reported declines tend to look at traditional print-based formats, ignoring digitally-mediated literacy practices that comprise an increasing amount of teen reading. The *Reading at Risk* report blamed downturns on the rise of interactive media such as video-games and the allure of passive media, such as television and film, that require less intellectual exertion than reading (Gioia, 2004). Placing the blame on new media as a reason that people disengage from traditional formats is not new (Baron, 2009; Baym, 2015); similar arguments were made about radio and television in previous eras and such strategies have served to argue for protectionist measures and legislation in the service of a status quo.

Though there is no clear evidence that the impact of new media is related to declines in reading (Krashen, 2004), there is new research suggesting that digital media is influencing one's ability to focus. Neurobiology suggests possible links between brain structure and media multitasking (Loh & Kanai, 2014) and the likelihood that multitasking behaviour may affect brain development (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017). While researchers are not claiming causation with these results, findings suggest there is evidence that constantly switching between tasks may lead to a person losing the ability to focus on a single task and/or ignore distracters, and that intensive multitasking may impair performance and learning, possibly even concentration and thinking, which are required for deep reading. This may be damaging children's readiness for reading. In research on the effects of technology on learning, Prensky (2001) argues that digital natives (natives of the digital era) process information differently than their predecessors. He contextualizes these changes in terms of time spent on reading versus visual entertainment, stating that the average college graduate has spent less than 5,000 hours on reading but over 10,000 hours playing video-games and 20,000 hours watching television (p. 1). What is concerning is that a sizable chunk of the time students spend reading likely comes from mandatory readings and not necessarily from any genuine interest.

Declining interest also corresponds with the downward trend in reading abilities, with data from the Nation's Report Card showing only a third of students in the US

performing at or above the proficient achievement level (Sullivan et al., 2018, p. xv). A panel of experts concluded that the root of the problem is the *way* schools teach reading, with current instructional approaches relying upon outdated methods based on assumptions about learning (Wexler, 2018). Steps need to be taken to avoid alienating students who aren't interested in reading and help them connect. Motivation and reading achievement improve when students have access to a wide range of reading materials, including 'books from an array of genres and text types, magazines, the Internet, resource materials, and real-life documents' (Gambrell, 2011, p. 173).

The most recent educational reform movement in the US has attempted to deal with changing literacy demands. Common Core State Standards (CCSS), for example, call for an increase in text complexity and integration of a variety of text types, emphasizing informational texts and digital media to prepare students for the demands of college and the workplace. With the current ubiquity of digital technologies and visual media, educators need to respond to the corresponding shifts in literacy demands. We argue for integration of non-traditional texts and application of multimodal reading into both the L1 classroom and in ELT settings to reinvigorate curricula, engage readers, and support language learners while meeting continually evolving education standards.

Developing Literacy Beyond the Canon

The literary canon in the US varies across schools, but most draw from the same selection of titles, generally chosen by educators for literary value and status in the literary canon. Students in lower grades start off with whimsical reads like Richard and Florence Atwater's *Mr. Popper's Penguins* and progress to denser literary texts. Bushman (1997) found that sixth through seventh graders read a broad range of texts from literary classics to young adult fiction, with the latter making up the bulk of the books they read outside of class (p. 2). Once students reach eleventh and twelfth grade, the fiction reading list is comprised almost exclusively of literary classics such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. A study analysing text selections given to middle and high schoolers found the overwhelming permeation of literary classics caused interest in reading inside and outside the classroom to plummet. Consequently, Bushman (1997) argues that 'educators may need to look beyond the works of Shakespeare and Chaucer' (p. 7) if students

are to become capable readers and writers. Watkins and Ostenson (2015) address the debate about the value of merely using literary classics when viewed as less relevant and interesting to teen readers (Gallagher, 2009). This is especially pertinent when considering that engagement and motivation have been identified as primary modes of getting students to embrace lifelong reading practices (Alexander & Fox, 2011).

In a study of middle-schoolers' reading preferences, Worthy and McKool (1999) found that literary works were largely unpopular with students, who preferred materials such as teen magazines and scary stories. Pitcher et al. (2007) studied the reading habits and interests of adolescents, finding that although students did not always consider themselves to be readers in the traditional sense, they discussed reading and writing in a variety of contexts. Students displayed signs of multiple literacy and discussed reading magazines, online articles, and reading and writing texts and emails, and expressed a preference in having a choice in what they read.

Although the current approach from kindergarten up to grade 12 (K-12) may succeed in exposing students to traditional literary texts, it can come at a cost which has a negative impact on overall literacy. The required reading list and loss of choice in terms of reading material conflicts with developmental expectations of increasing autonomy for students in this age range; the education system disciplines students while the social structure encourages autonomy, independence and agency. Similarly, learner autonomy and student agency are considered very important for students in ELT settings. Lenter (2006) suggests that during the middle grades, choices are confined through the educational apparatus and are not surprisingly correlated with a loss of interest in reading. Taking into consideration the variety of media that students read and write in, as well as their desire for autonomy, may help engage adolescents who may otherwise lose interest in reading.

If educators wish to improve the quality of literacy skills, they need to find ways to get students reading at a young age and instil a lifelong love of reading. Unfortunately, schools have struggled, largely unsuccessfully, to carry out this responsibility:

It seems to me that throughout the school experience, teachers have as their goal to present a knowledge-based curriculum, and when they have finished presenting that curriculum, students stop reading. Teachers don't seem to care if students continue to

read or not. They have done what is expected of them (pass along a cultural/literary heritage), and making young people lifelong readers is not a part of that plan. (Bushman, 1997, p. 6)

Similarly, Alfie Kohn (2010) points to traditional education models as contributing to creating non-readers and argues for fostering an autonomy-supportive classroom culture to develop lifelong readers. Looking outside the traditional canon can provide avenues to bring in more relevant reading without sacrificing educational value.

The importance of reading goes beyond a mere love of books and traverses to written communication and literacy skills. Although reading is emphasized in North American schools, relatively few educators realize how crucial it is in the development of grammatical knowledge and other writing skills. To be more specific, reading is responsible for helping children build up a considerable store of subconscious grammar and stylistic knowledge that they can draw upon in their writing. This is also the case in L2 settings (Bland, 2015; Krashen, 2013; Mason, 2013). Krashen has found that ‘those who read more, write better’ (1988, p. 1) and the amount of reading is directly linked to how well students’ writing skills developed (2004, pp. 132–133). Fish (2005) has lamented the alarming number of students who reach university with only the most rudimentary knowledge of grammar due to the removal of most formal grammar education in K-12. The answer to solving the grammar issue is to get students of all ages to read more, but this is a challenging proposal to implement even if the benefits outweigh the costs.

As a remedy, Lenters suggests changes to grading practices and traditional reading lists in secondary schools, arguing for more independent, ungraded reading that makes reading important to the student (143). Krashen (2004) proposes a free voluntary reading (FVR) approach, which avoids mandatory readings and related assignments like book reports, reading questions, and vocabulary assignments. Similarly, Atwell (2007) and Miller (2009; 2013) advocate for self-selection models as the key to improving literacy. By allowing choice, children won’t view reading as a boring activity that is forced upon them.

Some educators are reluctant to take literary classics out of the curriculum for fear of losing rigour. Literary quality and entertainment value don’t have to be mutually exclusive. Books such as *Harry Potter* may not have the same literary cache as a classic like

A Tale of Two Cities, but these contemporary classics possess literary and discussion value, as evidenced by the myriad literary analyses and deconstructions surrounding any popular title with a modicum of depth. Graphic novels such as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* or Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *Batman: The Killing Joke* have been praised by critics for the quality of their storytelling. With constantly shifting standards and testing, teachers struggle to devote enough time to literary depth, making the task of helping students connect with a text even more critical. The goal is to increase motivation and use all texts as teaching moments to open discussion and teach critical thinking.

While it might be easier for elementary school teachers to adapt classrooms and curricula to allow for free voluntary reading, English classes in middle school and high school are often centred on discussion and deconstruction of literary texts. Relying on mandatory readings in the upper grades may be unavoidable at times. Allowing students to read whatever they want creates pedagogical challenges to facilitate deep-reading discussions when everyone is reading something different, and thus requires innovation and thinking outside of traditional teaching paradigms to facilitate learning. Employing theme-based units in which students have choice in text selection, when paired with affinity reading groups, peer teaching models, and low stakes writing and learning activities that help students engage with individual texts and articulate learning to others provide innovative ways to move beyond current practices.

Multimodal, Multiformat and Multigenre Reading Approach

To help students develop a fondness for reading, we argue that educators need to take an approach that liberally draws upon the works, formats and genres that students enjoy reading. Our approach supplements the literary canon, finding ways to help students connect with literature, and developing a curriculum that honours and teaches multimodal literacy skills. Instead of exclusively using literary classics, we advocate for an eclectic mix of genres, formats and media, and attention to multiple communicative modes. Science fiction, horror, and fantasy are extremely popular genres among teens but have been traditionally ignored or downplayed in K-12 education.

Although print-based texts have historically been the primary mode of education in K-12 English classrooms, there is now a call for an integration of formats and media to

enhance literacy. For example, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for seventh grade reading assert that students should be able to ‘compare and contrast a written story, drama, or poem to its audio, filmed, staged, or multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium’, marking a shift to include texts that span a wide variety of entertainment media. In a world increasingly dominated by visual media, teaching students to intelligently analyse the visual as well as the textual is vital. Our recommendation is a curricular approach that meets the new standards through a multigenre and multimodal reading approach; such an approach takes the skills usually involved in reading and analysing traditional print texts and applies them to other media to teach literacy. This can involve either exposing students to one central text across several formats, or it can involve using exemplary standalone texts from visual formats that have not traditionally been used in classrooms to better prepare students to examine a variety of texts.

Exploring newer forms of visual literacy is critical if schools are to successfully help students gain new avenues to more complex literacies that they encounter (Jacobs, 2007a, 2007b; Tiemensma, 2009). In a study on multimodal texts and student motivation, Cortash (2011) suggests that employing picturebooks and other multimodal texts are beneficial in any classroom setting, aiding students’ understanding and comprehension of various modes of information, regardless of their reading level. Maloch and Bomer (2013) argue:

If we expect our students to write for any number of purposes, to be able to shift their composing to match the needs of the moment, or effectively communicate according to real-world purposes, we must provide and teach around texts of varying kinds so that they have models and mentors for their own composing. (p. 206)

Exposing students to a variety of texts beyond literary works will give them the skills needed in a much broader array of contexts.

As the reading of complex high-school texts seems to have declined, college requirements have remained the same or increased, making the need to reverse the downward reading trend even more urgent. One way to think about curricular change is through Lexile scores. For instance, measures for the ever-popular *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (980L) and the literary classic *The Great Gatsby* (1070L) are not significantly different in terms of the score, although the latter is a far more sophisticated

text, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* has a similar score to the original *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Because Lexile scores do not account for content, it may be a better starting point than popular perceptions of a text's quality. We suggest that teachers consider substituting certain books in the literary canon with more popular texts that are equally demanding. For instance, *The Hobbit* has a Lexile score of 1000L, which would put it around or above many current texts in the high school literary canon and would be likely to interest students due to the far-reaching popularity of the film adaptations.

The actual complexity and literary or informational value of the texts may be less important regarding student motivation than the kind of texts. As Lenters (2006) has pointed out, students often have little interest in the material presented in English classes, as the selection differs significantly from their media interests outside of school. Gavigan (2013) makes a case for including graphic novels to develop lifelong readers while simultaneously supporting the curriculum and aligning with standards. Just as picturebooks have been shown to develop multiple literacies for early readers (Ellis, 2016), graphic novels allow avenues to teach multiple literacies (Carter, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2008; Templer, 2009a); improve cognition (Mallia, 2007); help students to view literature differently (Versaci, 2001); increase reading motivation to read (Botzakis, 2009; Hammond, 2009), and specifically increase motivation for boys (Brozo, 2002; Gavigan, 2011).

Comics and graphic novels have often been seen with scepticism in North America, and thought of as a simple version of their text-only counterpart, thus creating obstacles for teaching with them. Though critics fear that readers who enjoy comics and other forms of 'light reading' will not advance to deeper reading, research has shown a link between a greater quantity and enjoyment for reading (LaBrandt, 1958) and specifically for middle school boys who read comic books (Ujiie & Krashen, 1996). Carter (2007) lists a wide variety of graphic novels ranging from mainstream superhero fiction such as *Ultimate Spider-Man* to the much more serious *Maus*, that possesses significant literary or discussion value about the Holocaust (pp. 50-51).

In ELT contexts, comics have been shown to increase student participation, improve verbal and written communication skills, and improve retention, increased joy of learning, and a more congenial classroom atmosphere (Deb, 2016). Seizova-Nankova and Templer (2012) encourage English language teachers to incorporate comics and graphic novels as

part of Extensive Reading (ER) strategies to help students develop ‘broad reading skills and a love for independent reading’ (p. 128; Templer, 2012, p. 6). Versaci (2001) promotes the use of comics and graphic novels for dealing with contemporary global issues, claiming they allow for more lucrative classroom interaction, can lower the affective filter, and in talking about difficult and complex issues, can ‘humanize the conflict’ (p. 64). Research has also looked at comics as a tool for lowering anxiety, a factor that negatively impacts language learning. According to Ryu (2016): ‘Graphic elements can easily lower learners’ emotional and intellectual barriers because a “picture can say a thousand words”’ (p. 64). Templer (2009b) provides a range of ideas for utilizing graphic video-animated, ‘visualized’ lyric poetry with students of ELT, while Templer (2018) is an example of multimodal poetry pedagogy in ELT, looking at a classic short poem on the bombing of Hiroshima by the Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet.

Historically underutilized in classrooms, the graphic novel may be one of the most useful tools teachers can use to accommodate necessary shifts to integrate visual literacy into the curriculum, as shown in the recent collection *Teaching Graphic Novels in the English Classroom: Pedagogical Possibilities of Multimodal Literacy Engagement* (Burger, 2017). One of the greatest benefits of graphic novels is that their visual nature appeals to students and provides an additional mode of input. Specifically for ELT contexts, Radan (2017) argues that the combination of text and visual elements in comics can improve retention of information and demonstrates how ‘an educator can facilitate a better understanding of the way narratives are built and the way clauses function in language’ by using visuals (p. 148). Similarly, research by Ravichandran (2016) shows that the use of visuals and dialogue together can help to improve vocabulary for language learners and Radan (2017) argues that teachers need to be aware of and examine the cultural relevance of images and ‘be consciously aware of how visual communication works, not just from the functional perspective but also from the structural one too’ (p. 151).

Research investigating L2 learners’ reading comprehension has shown that supplementing high-level reading texts with a comic strip can provide a useful scaffold for students with low-levels of language proficiency (Liu, 2004). In another case study, the research found that while there was no improvement in the learner’s English-speaking skills, reading comics in the target language contributed to an improvement in reading

comprehension and vocabulary which consequently improved their writing (Roslidah, 2013).

In addition to comics and graphic novels, film and television also possess considerable pedagogical value. The skills required to break down a cinematic scene or analyse a literary scene are not mutually exclusive and can be taught side by side. For example, Kist (2015) began one of his English classes by encouraging students to break down the film-making techniques used in the first episode of *Lost* and then applied similar analysis techniques to print texts to teach many of the same skills and concepts we try to get across in printed texts through visuals. This approach is especially effective with literary classics that have been adapted, such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Great Gatsby*. By taking a multimodal reading approach, students can examine plot, perspective, voice through visual imagery by comparing the same story across different formats and media. In addition, this multimodal approach allows teachers to effectively attend to a variety of learning styles simultaneously. Similarly, comparing modern-day stories to the classics can provide a bridge that helps students connect with canonical texts that feel too far away from their life experiences; the widely popular *Twilight* books and films can be read alongside *Romeo and Juliet* for a lesson on the literary trope of star-crossed lovers and galvanizes student interest in employing multiple media to engage with literary texts.

Of course, the danger of using texts with film adaptations is that some students will opt to watch rather than read the story, defeating the purpose. This problem is not much different than when students read Spark Notes; some students use notes as a substitute for reading the entire text and some use it to amend their understanding of the original. Rather than expecting students to not use what they perceive as the easier text, we suggest that educators integrate them into lessons. For example, creating assignments that ask students to revise a Spark Notes summary demonstrates how to utilize a variety of text types to enhance learning.

Multimedia formats such as video games are significantly more foreign to English classrooms but create interesting possibilities for teaching and learning. For instance, Adams (2009) used the video game *Neverwinter Nights*, a fantasy game with an advanced vocabulary in which students were forced to look up words they didn't know to fully understand the game. Demonstrating the value of integrating non-traditional media in a

collaborative learning environment to teach vocabulary, she added a collaborative element to this approach by partnering up students of different grade levels so they could help each other work through the game and its script (pp. 56-57). For students of English, multimodal teaching has been shown to inspire students' motivation to read after class and build up their confidence in learning English (Bao, 2017), as well as promote autonomy and improve motivation to learn (Ganapathy & Seetharam, 2016).

Utilizing technology in the classroom may be helpful in attracting readers and preparing them for digital literacy, as students currently use digital spaces to read and write content to an unprecedented extent. Thompson (2009) notes that the rise of digital media has created new ideas of what it means to be literate, saying:

The brevity of texting and status updating teaches young people to deploy haiku-like concision. At the same time, the proliferation of new forms of online pop-cultural exegesis—from sprawling TV-show recaps to 15,000-word videogame walkthroughs—has given them a chance to write enormously long and complex pieces of prose, often while working collaboratively with others. (para. 8)

Thompson points to research that found 38 per cent of college students' writing takes place outside of the classroom, so preparing students for writing and engaging with content created outside of the classroom is crucial. Tapping into and building upon students' natural interest in these forms of digital literacy – and teaching them about topics such as the intricacies of digital publishing, remixing digital texts, and assessing their audience in digital spaces – will better prepare students for the kinds of literacy practices they will be doing in the real world, especially when the modes of delivery gain their interest and hold their attention.

Our approach calls for close reading of multiple genres, media and formats, integrating a wide range of texts into the curriculum. In research on navigating text selection, Watkins and Ostenson (2015) showed that teachers select texts based on student learning goals, curriculum alignment, literary merit, and appeal to students (p. 250). In their interviews with teachers, they heard many speak of choosing texts based on 'grade-level tradition'. However, studies suggest that while the traditional canon remains the dominant text (Hale & Crowe, 2001), increasing numbers of teachers more recently joining the profession are bringing various text types into the classroom (Watkins & Ostenson, 2015).

Although the freedom exists for teachers to choose texts for their classes, there are several obstacles to moving beyond the canon, such as budget constraints, teachers purchasing texts with their own money, and the challenge to find texts that appeal to students, provide enough challenge, and align to learning goals (p. 260).

Conclusion

New initiatives that aim to improve the reading and writing skills of students are well-intentioned, but they do not address a main problem: the loss of interest in reading as students progress through their education. Too often, students abandon reading for pleasure long before they graduate, and many abandon reading entirely as soon as they graduate and are no longer forced to read. To meet the changing standards and literacy demands of today's learners, addressing motivation is increasingly important. Schools must find innovative new ways to encourage reading among students of all grade levels.

We can learn from the successes of models that promote free voluntary reading and create time for and access to texts that engage readers and instil lifelong reading habits (Atwell, 2007; Miller, 2009; Miller & Sharp, 2018). Free voluntary reading in the lower grades can introduce students to reading and show them that it is a fun activity. In the upper grades, taking an approach to reading that first focuses on texts that students want to read, saving the literary classics for later, can help cement students' interest in reading instead of driving them away from it. For second or foreign language learners, 'developing and maintaining a long-term pleasure reading habit' has been shown to be the most important factor in reaching advanced levels of language and literacy development (Cho & Krashen, 2016, p. 1).

Embracing voluntary reading approaches serve a social justice agenda, dedicated to improving literacy and access, while also pushing back against what Robinson (2011) refers to as outdated education models rooted in an industrial economy. Taking such an approach requires teachers to resist traditional practices in which teachers control text selection, and push for greater access to reading materials, as well as time and spaces for pleasure reading. Students should come to enjoy reading, not see it as a boring activity that their teachers force them to do in service of passing a test. By stimulating children and teens to be lifelong

readers, educators can help students grow into talented readers that will develop their language and literacy skills throughout their life.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the reviewers whose thoughtful feedback inspired us to rethink the issues, reframe some of our points, and even revisit our own pedagogy as a result.

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