

William Boerman-Cornell and Jung Kim

Using Graphic Novels in the English Language Arts Classroom

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Affordances of Graphic Novels for English Subject Pedagogy

As English language educators continue to adapt their pedagogies to an evolving subject, in which the integration of interdisciplinary themes such as life skills, interculturality, and global issues has become more urgent than ever, graphic novels are a powerful tool in our pedagogical repertoire. The inherent multimodality and attractivity of the format invites learners to engage with the English language in appealing ways, being as multimodality is part of everyday life and is a prime feature of today's entertainment, and it provides both learners and teachers with meaningful content for exploration and discovery. Hopefully, long gone are the days when teachers might have dismissed the format as 'comic books' not worthy of classroom attention. Instead, we are seeking ways of including more graphic novels as an exciting way of enriching and reinforcing English language learning as well as intercultural and interdisciplinary aspects of the subject. The graphic novel's potent combination of text and images deepens language and thematic comprehension and can accommodate much content in a small space, thus it can be readily incorporated into the English language classroom, as a supplement to or even a replacement for other learning material. Therefore, this timely book, *Using Graphic Novels in the English Language Arts Classroom* by William Boerman-Cornell and Jung Kim, provides careful and insightful guidance and commentary as teachers navigate the use of graphic novels to meet their various English curricular goals.

Main Contents and Organization of the Book

The book is systematically organized, with 11 chapters arranged in a logical order ranging from an analysis of the format's value as literature equally on par with its text-only counterparts, to a breakdown of the various formal and literary qualities of a graphic novel, such as point of view, tone, and irony, as well as visual composition and metaphor. From here, the book moves through

thematic and critical explorations of various types of graphic novels, including those written as fiction, nonfiction, memoir, and adaptations of other literature, from both basic and more nuanced perspectives. This leads to a presentation of pedagogical interpretative strategies, including practical ideas for how learners can create their own graphic stories. The authors place emphasis on the ability of the format to present diverse characters, storyworlds, and plots, and how the graphic novel can support lessons on diverse identities and significant global themes such as inclusion, wellbeing, and justice. It is written in an engaging and provocative style which has the distinct feeling of teacher-to-teacher dialogue, all well supported with credible academic references, thus retaining a high scholarly level.

Within the chapters, the authors use popular graphic novels, such as *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1991), *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2000), and *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) as teaching examples, which helps establish context for discussions of more recent publications such as *The Best We Could Do* (Tui Bui, 2017) and *Hey, Kiddo* (Krosoczka, 2018) among many others. A helpful key with various margin icons emphasizes critical points and adds to the personality of the book. One gets the sense that the authors, self-described as 'fledgling scholar-academics, former high school teachers, and always avowed nerds' (p. x) truly love the graphic novel format and wish for more teachers to engage with it as a meaning-making experience for their English language learners.

Usefulness for the Classroom and Teacher Education

Of particular value are the chapters on using graphic novels to address the complexities and traumas of war (Chapter 3) and on literary nonfiction such as memoirs in the graphic-novel format (Chapter 9). English teachers who might otherwise be comfortable working with graphic novels on purely fictional topics may find themselves wondering how the format can meet their language learning aims while simultaneously shining a light on challenging themes such as child abuse, PTSD, or addiction. Boerman-Cornell and Jung Kim provide sensitive advice and support for educators looking for a way into these topics using graphic novels in English classes, and by doing so also offer inspiration for teachers who otherwise might shy away from more challenging themes to give them a try and thereby better meet wider curriculum goals.

As a teacher educator, I am frequently asked for recommendations of graphic novels to use in the English classroom by student teachers and in-service teachers alike. The answer to this, I have discovered, lies in part at the end of the book, as the authors have provided an extensive

annotated appendix, spanning nearly 30 pages and organized thematically, of graphic novels found to be useful for the English classroom. These recommendations, which range in suitability for both reluctant and confident learners from middle grades and beyond, particularly from ages 14-15 upwards, are in addition to the many others focused on in depth throughout the book. This appendix alone is worth the retail price, and given its wide-ranging and contemporary thematic focus, teachers will discover suitable graphic novels for encouraging a diversity of narrative voices and to help foster a multicultural and inclusive learning environment. Mention should also be made here of the authors' earlier book co-authored with Michael Manderino (2017), *Graphic novels in high school and middle school classrooms: A disciplinary literacies approach*, which would potentially make a useful companion for teachers aiming to gain further background to the field. It adopts a cross-curricular approach to the use of graphic novels in middle and high schools, expanding beyond the confines of ELT.

A small criticism of the book, which does not diminish its practicality, is that the accompanying illustrations are not in colour, and are occasionally somewhat small, thus rendering the text boxes within harder to read. The reason I do not see this as a diminishing factor is that, by keeping the illustrations minimal, the authors remove a significant barrier to access. Similar books that do feature colour illustrations are rather expensive due to their high production costs, and so they ultimately are not read by practitioners who might otherwise benefit from them. Boerman-Cornell and Jung Kim's focus remains on providing clear and constructive guidance to English teachers, who are frequently navigating ways to remain up to date with several topics at the same time without the luxury of expense accounts. This detail alone shows that the authors have considered their audience carefully, and have made smart choices, even at the risk of not being so immediately visually striking.

Overall Recommendation

This book is an excellent resource for middle grades, lower-secondary and upper-secondary teachers, as well as teacher educators and student teachers of English. It gives clear, careful, and timely advice on how, and perhaps more importantly why, graphic novels should be used in English language classrooms to support language learning and interdisciplinary aims. Whether one is an experienced English teacher or just getting started, teaching with graphic novels is a compelling way to motivate readers to engage with challenging themes and develop their language skills.

Anyone who is interested in encouraging English learners to engage with multimodal texts or is even looking for a contemporary graphic novel they themselves might enjoy, would benefit from reading this book. The cover says, 'your students will thank you', and that is very likely true.

Bibliography

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Jessica Allen Hanssen is an Associate Professor and the Faculty Coordinator for the Bachelor of English degree at Nord University, Norway. Her areas of interest are American literature, especially nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction, short-story theory, narratology, young adult fiction, and middle grades English education. Dr Hanssen's education research focuses on the intersection of critical theory and middle grades English education and the early introduction of critical reading, especially reader-response and narratology-based teaching strategies, into the Norwegian national curriculum.