

## A Multiliteracies Approach to the Graphic Novel Adaptation of *Stormbreaker*: Facilitating Authentic Reading in a Swiss Lower Secondary ELT Classroom

Diego Sigrist & Michael Prusse

### Abstract

The reading blip, a drop-off of interest in reading, is a worldwide phenomenon, commonly affecting learners as teenagers when puberty stirs them initially to search for and later to assert their own identity. This is also the case in Switzerland, principally among students attending lower secondary school. In cooperation with a professor from a university of teacher education, a Swiss schoolteacher decided to launch an action research project in 2021 that was intended to counteract this effect to some extent. After questioning his learners about their reading habits, the teacher introduced an authentic text into the classroom, a graphic novel adaptation of Anthony Horowitz's *Stormbreaker*, and instructed the class in selected general reading strategies before focusing on how to read a graphic novel. The project proceeded by exposing the class to a short excerpt from the prose novel, which was used to implement the task for students of drawing this scene in a comic book format. The diversity of graphic adaptations drafted by the students demonstrates that a creative engagement with a text passage can result in deep reading to varying degrees. With hindsight, the teacher concludes that the outcomes are as heterogeneous as his group of learners but feels encouraged to continue using authentic narratives in his English language teaching.

**Keywords:** authentic narrative, adaptation, creative response, reading blip, reading strategies, *Stormbreaker*

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## Introduction

The project under focus in this article describes an intervention in an English language teaching (ELT) classroom in Switzerland grounded on action research (Altrichter et al., 2008; Koshy, 2010). This is a systematic and reflective process used by teachers keen to examine and improve their own teaching practices in the classroom. It involves collecting and analysing data, reflecting on the findings, and making changes to improve teaching and learning. In the ELT classroom, action research can for example be used to address specific challenges, such as improving students' reading skills or increasing their motivation. The project presented here attempted to cover both these aspects by introducing authentic and attractive reading materials into the English lessons and, by doing so, increase the teenagers' reading motivation. Many learners at lower secondary school suffer the infamous '*Leseknick*' (reading blip), the established loss of interest in reading at a certain point, usually at the outset of adolescence during the school career (Bland, 2013, p. 74; Delanoy 2017). Sustaining motivation to read and enabling learners to cope with authentic texts are the two central goals that distinguish this intervention from a classroom project designed by Brinkmann (2015) that also made use of the graphic novel adaptation of *Stormbreaker* but was primarily intended as an introduction to multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996; Ryan, 2016) and involved the class in several 'meaningful communicative activities' (Brinkmann, 2015, p. 61). After establishing the specific local context, the goal and purpose of the undertaking are described before focusing on the practical aspects and, most importantly, on selected examples of the comic-style drawings that were created by the English language learners as part of their classroom assignments.

## Background Information on the Context

Both the curriculum and the syllabus of English language teaching at lower secondary level in Switzerland largely rely on the use of official coursebooks that contain exhaustive materials on a wide range of topics, which are essentially delivered by employing a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach (see e.g., Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Willis, 1996). Some of these coursebooks include an occasional excerpt from children's and young adult literature, intended to function as a gateway to literary reading. However, most of the reading passages in these materials for students tend to focus on topics taken from other subject areas, such as science, history, or geography. The reason for this is twofold: on the one hand, the intention is to promote foreign language acquisition by means of Content and Language-Integrated Learning (CLIL)

and, on the other, such content is considered by coursebook authors and publishers as particularly motivating for learners of this age group (young teenagers). However, despite such prevailing good intentions, many young Swiss students experience a general decline in their motivation to learn and the results of this have been and still are evident (see OECD, 2023). Parents, teachers, researchers and even the media comment on the fact that many students lack impetus when it comes to reading (also in a foreign language) in their second and third years of lower secondary school (Aschwanden, 2023). This slackening of interest occurs at a juncture in these learners' schooling when many of them are absorbed with securing an apprenticeship that will propel them into vocational education at the post-compulsory school level. The search for a prospective field of employment does not only interfere with their academic ambitions, but also results in necessary temporary absence from school for several days when these young adults enter upon so-called 'trial apprenticeships'. These traineeships assist them in becoming acquainted with a company and potential professional training in a specific field of employment.

The following description of a classroom action research intervention is set against this background. It involves an attempt to counteract the familiar decrease in reading motivation and to engage the learners in a reading project that is distinct from what the coursebooks have to offer. The purpose is to sustain student interest by means of a narrative that they 'find intriguing and compelling' (Bland, 2022, p. 17). The action research project entailed cooperation between a professor at a Swiss university of teacher education and a teacher at a lower secondary school teaching in a rural environment, the authors of this contribution. Working with pre-service student teachers, the professor regularly focuses on multiliteracies and how they can be taught in the (lower) secondary classroom by utilizing a range of media formats created for young adults, in this case by means of the first *Alex Rider* novel by Anthony Horowitz, *Stormbreaker* (2000), and two of its distinctive adaptations into other media formats (graphic novel and movie, 2006). Selections of the suggested procedures and activities were published after trials in a university context (Prusse, 2018, 2020, 2022) and, occasionally, they have been applied by student teachers during teaching practice in various classrooms within the Canton of Zurich. All in all, these were usually small-scale implementations that basically used the materials supplied by the professor and were conducted within a temporal space of one or two 45-minute English lessons. The classroom project at the core of the present article, by contrast, is based on the same corpus of texts but was carried out independently by the

classroom teacher over a longer period in a planned effort to sustain motivation within a specific class and to open up new vistas in reading to engage and motivate teenage learners.

The project is based on some of the ideas originally conceived by the professor, but this is not an instance of design-based research, since the teacher, who read the publications and chose to act on them, was not involved in their original conception. Instead, by adapting and extending the materials while developing a suitable arrangement for a specific classroom, the teacher's undertaking is a good example of classroom action research (Altrichter et al., 2008; Koshy, 2010).

The teacher's personal rationale to engage with this project resulted from observing his students' lack of motivation in his English lessons on one hand and his own personal passion for reading on the other. In addition to the learners' reticent attitude towards reading, the fact that the official coursebooks *Voices 1-3* (LMVZ, 2009, 2010, 2011) are almost entirely devoid of literary texts served as the initial spark for the teacher to act. Most reading passages in these coursebooks are factual and lead on into language learning exercises, consequently largely failing to open 'the door to pleasure in reading' (Bland, 2022, p. 10).

### Description of the Project

The classroom project primarily involved a focus on the young adult novel *Stormbreaker* (2000) by Anthony Horowitz and its eponymous adaptation as a Manga-style graphic novel (2006). It was launched in 2021 in an English class of 21 students in their second of three years of secondary school in a rural community in the Canton of Zurich. Two of the original class members left the school during the school year and hence, these two did not reach the stage of presenting their results. On average, the students involved are about the age of 14 or 15 at this stage of their school career. According to the current curriculum (Bildungsdirektion, 2017), which uses the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) as a basis (Council of Europe, 2001), the aim for students is to acquire communicative English competences of at least level A2.2 (basic learners) while better achievers are expected to reach a level of B1.1 or B1.2 by the end of their studies in lower secondary school. The curriculum presumes that most students will tend to perform better in receptive skills as well as in spoken production; hence the goals for writing are less ambitious.

The class in which the project was implemented can be described as a rather heterogeneous group, since its members possess social and cognitive skills that are rather

diverse. The class comprised 10 female and 11 male students. Seven of the students had a migrant background (at a national level, 26% of the residents in Switzerland are immigrants): four of those had an Asian background (among them one Indian), one student was African American, and one student was African ('migrant status' as a classification category in German-speaking Switzerland avoids 'racial' terminology). Their interest in school and their will to learn were deemed low by the staff of the secondary school in general and by their class teacher. The pedagogical relationship between the English teacher and the class was not particularly strong, because the students had been regrouped after one school year; moreover, they came together in only three English lessons per week, joining from three different 'home' classes.

In other words, the students participating in the project did not belong to the group of the most successful learners (in Switzerland, learners at secondary school are streamed according to their general academic ability) and, furthermore, were in the challenging transition process from compulsory school into vocational education. Nevertheless, it is important for their intrinsic motivation and a stated goal of the curriculum (Bildungsdirektion, 2017) that these teenagers should also discover key aspects of the value of literary reading in addition to learning English as a foreign language in general. Their drive to distract each other during lessons was quite strong; consequently, the teacher decided that group work was a limited option and inputs or exchanges in the plenary were the rule but needed to be well organized and guided. These predispositions meant very diligent planning of every step in the project, and, on the other hand, it reduced the space to develop ideas together with the students and to expand the project more freely on an individual as well as on a communal level.

The continuous progress of the intervention was somewhat hampered by a longer absence of the teacher due to illness, as well as multiple absences among students due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the individual trainee apprenticeships. In consequence, additional time and effort had to be invested to keep the students' work up to date and the intervention on track. The teacher's key intention was to have the learners directly encounter authentic English fiction, since this was clearly missing in the locally used coursebook, *Voices* (see above), and in ELT an exposure to authentic material is essential for providing learners with genuine language input, promoting language acquisition, and enhancing overall language proficiency (Richards & Rogers, 2014) as well as sustaining engagement and motivation (Bland, 2022). The students were given a questionnaire both at the beginning and at the end of the project. Their answers in Figure 1 below (blue data bars) reveal that there is a great deal of heterogeneity

regarding the time spent on reading in an average school week among the learners in this class (however, seven of them – a third of the total – chose not to reply at all to this specific question in the initial questionnaire). Similarly, their replies indicate (orange data bars) that there are widely differing notions about the attractiveness of reading on a range from one to ten within this group of students (see Figure 1).

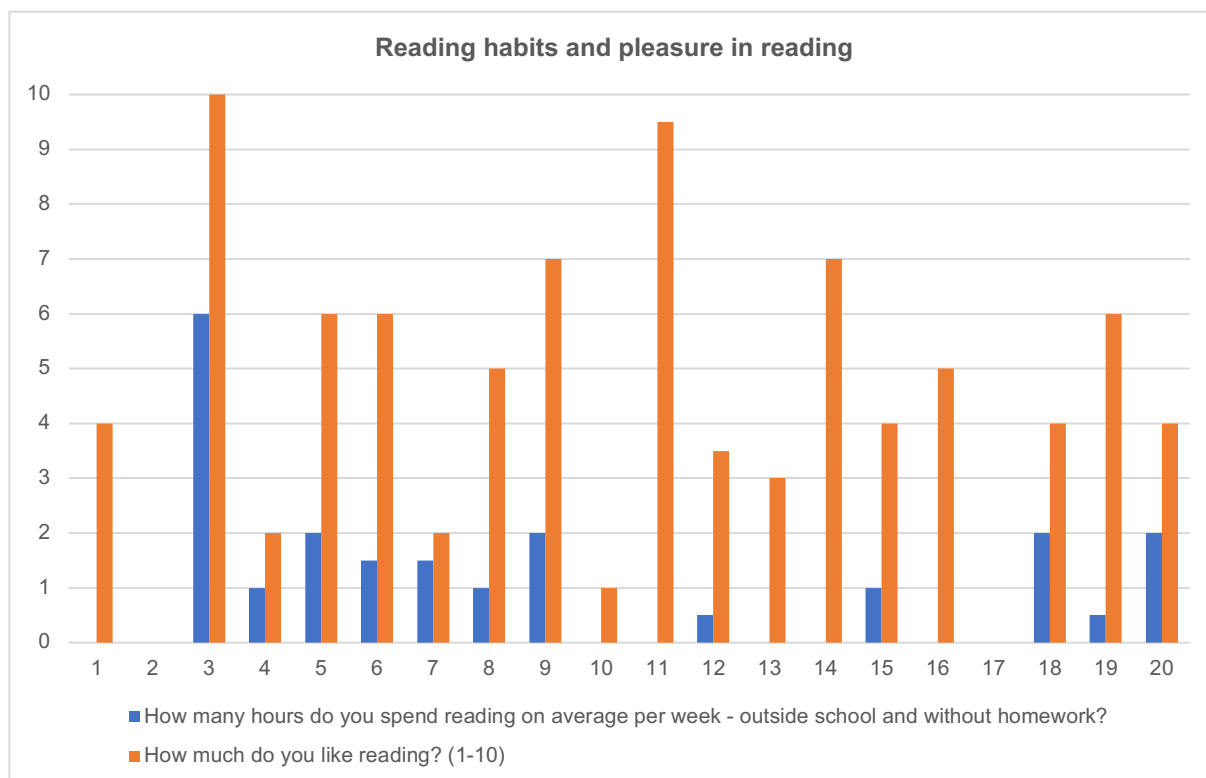


Figure 1. Student responses to the questionnaire regarding their reading habits

Additionally, the students' answers confirm that most of their reading now occurs in electronic format (68%) and only a third in traditional print format (32%). This data plus the fact that the students all had a personal iPad bolstered the teacher's decision to work with the graphic novel in a digital version. The project was initiated in November 2021. In December it was suspended for eight weeks due to the instructor's illness. After resumption the students and the teacher continued to work with the materials until April 2022, when the students were able to present the results of their endeavours. Initially comprising two lessons per week, the intensity was increased at a later stage so that project work intermittently included all three weekly English lessons.

### **The Structure of the Project**

When beginning with the intervention, the basic idea was to familiarize the students with several reading strategies (Grabe & Stoller, 2020) which would help them tackle challenging authentic texts that, depending on their individual ability, contained several items of unfamiliar vocabulary. The primary focus was on encouraging students to use ‘*wh*-questions’ (Who, what, when, where and why?)

- to determine the most significant aspects of the storyline,
- to instruct them in critically reading a graphic novel (which involved, inter alia, an insight into the medium’s various features such as gutters, panels or speech and thought bubbles), and finally,
- to make them aware of how they could read for gist or for detail.

Several activities aimed at making the students curious about the graphic novel as a whole and, in a next step, about the contents of selected episodes and chapters. Finally, the project focused on the scene at the wrecker’s yard in the original prose novel by Horowitz (2000, pp. 20–24; see also Prusse, 2018, 2020, 2022). The students were given the task to adapt this scene into a comic strip, which resulted in the products at the end of the intervention, and which are analysed in greater detail below. The professor from the Zurich University of Teacher Education was invited to the school by the teacher at a stage when these adaptations were nearing completion, and he was thus provided with first-hand insight into the comic strips created by the students. In the following, selected aspects of the various project phases are represented in tables. These should not be understood as detailed lesson plans but rather as structured and condensed overviews of progress as the project unfolded.

In a first step, the class was introduced to the genre of ‘thrillers involving secret agents’ and the students could demonstrate in pairs to what extent they were already familiar with such narratives by pooling their knowledge to describe typical features. Another introductory task required them to imagine individually what an agent narrative with a teenage protagonist could include. The graphic novel’s action-loaded cover of the 2016 edition served as a visual prompt to stimulate their imaginations. Next, the class generated ideas about a possible storyline and shared these spontaneously in the plenary. Table 1 outlines some further aspects of the project’s opening section and the activities initiated in the classroom.



Activities and contents	Format & media	Comment on methodology
<b>Introduction of the genre 'thrillers involving secret agents'</b>		
Teacher shows the questions on PowerPoint:	PowerPoint (PP)	Pupils show to what extent they are already familiar with such narratives by disclosing their previous knowledge of the subject and by answering the questions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What agent narratives do you know?</li> <li>What makes a good plot involving secret agents?</li> </ul>	Plenary (pl)	
Pupils are asked to discuss the questions in pairs.	Pair work (pw)	
Results and opinions are exchanged in the plenary.	pl	
<b>Introductory task: What could an agent narrative with a teenage protagonist be about?</b>		
Students are given a limited time to skim read the first few pages of the graphic novel on their iPad. They imagine and write a short possible story of 150-200 words based on their first impressions of the pages they looked through.	Text on iPad notebooks Individual (i)	Pupils become acquainted with the graphic novel, resulting in a general impression. Preparation of the reading process within a possibly new format of text.
<b>Check and exchange of stories in class</b>	pl	
The stories are shared in small groups, later on read aloud in class, compared and discussed.		Discover pre-existing skills for reading graphic novels.

Table 1. Beginning the project (overview)

The first contact with the graphic novel (Horowitz, 2006) aims at getting to know the protagonist, Alex. Readers initially encounter him when he gives a talk about his family, particularly his boring Uncle Ian (who, as far as Alex knows at this point, is a bank manager). This takes place at school in front of his class, but this storyline is intersected by the simultaneously occurring narrative showing his uncle in action in his true profession as a special agent, involving an exciting chase on motorbikes, and ending with the lethal assault by a helicopter, which results in Ian's demise in his BMW (Horowitz, 2006, n.p.). The ensuing task provides an opportunity to focus on writing skills, but improving these was not a central goal of the project.



## How to Read Graphic Novels – An Introduction to Reading Techniques and Visual Literacy

The twenty-first century with its flood of pictures across various media channels necessitates teaching visual literacy (Bakis, 2012, p. 7; Goldstein, 2016), which means that 'a words-only approach is no longer sufficient' (Delanoy, 2017, p. 13). Introducing graphic novels into the ELT classroom permits linking 'the wordy world of the past with the visual present' (Bland, 2022, p. 12). Although graphic novels are readily available and are an established narrative format, an introduction to reading techniques and visual literacy was provided to familiarize the pupils with the specifics of the medium. Japanese Manga are perceived as trendy by the present generation of teenagers and benefit from a widespread appreciation among young people. Hence, the teacher restricted himself to mentioning aspects such as different or opposed directions of reading. However, even though the graphic adaptation of *Stormbreaker* was designed by two Japanese artists, the direction of reading in this edition conforms to western standards (and not those of Japanese Manga). As it turned out, only a small group of students in the class were familiar with the format of the graphic novel in general or the Manga format. Even if, at a certain point in their reading biography, they had encountered this type of text, they still needed instructions as to how to orient themselves within the graphic novel. Thus, the teacher drew their attention towards different text elements, such as the various shapes of captions, speech bubbles, blocks or sound effects, and combined this with an introduction to perspectives, the arrangement of panels, the function and use of the space(s) between them (gutters), and the relevance of colours and shapes (Baetens & Frey, 2015; Edmunds, 2014, pp. 2-3; Mühlheim, 2020; wikiHow, 2023). These features were exemplified with excerpts from *Stormbreaker*, by means of which the layout and design of the pages were analysed and illustrated.

The students were then introduced to the practice of close reading, including familiarizing themselves with the framework of *wh*-questions and a rather detailed presentation of the key elements of a story, such as character, setting, plot, and key scenes. Most students in this specific class had little or no knowledge of these aspects of literary texts and were not aware of the fact that 'who' allows them to determine characters and protagonists, 'where' informs them about the temporal and local setting, and that 'what' and 'why' relate to the story and the plot. They were given several tasks and the results of their insights from the text and exemplary solutions were diligently discussed and displayed in the plenary and, moreover, transferred into

reading journals by means of example *wh*-tables. As a warm-up, key scenes and panels from the graphic novel were provided so that the pupils could practice the *wh*-question technique and practice working with them individually and in groups. The groups had to present their findings in the plenary and the teacher pointed out certain literary qualities of the text, such as the distinct dramatic irony of the parallelism between Alex's presentation and Ian's being chased and killed at the same time (cf. the prologue in Horowitz, 2006, n.p.).

The students applied the *wh*-question technique to all the chapters in the first part of the graphic novel. This encompassed sometimes intersecting scenes set in the English and philosophy lesson at Brookland School in London, on the beach and the roads near Port Tallon in Cornwall; or in Brookland School, Alex returning home on his bicycle, the helicopter attack on Ian's car, Alex at home in Chelsea, Ian's funeral, the encounter with ominous men in sunglasses at the graveyard; and ultimately, the discovery of the men who carry off Ian's files and hardware from his home, which results in Alex chasing the van to the wrecker's yard (Horowitz, 2006, n.p.).

### **Introduction to the Task: Comic Strip about the Text 'Heaven for Cars' – Wrecker Scene**

As a result of this detailed introduction, the students were familiar with the opening parts of the graphic novel and were next confronted with an excerpt from the prose text that describes the events at the wrecker's yard in the original novel (Horowitz, 2000, pp. 20–24). Despite pre-teaching some vocabulary and getting the learners to provide lists of vocabulary for their fellow students in group activities, the prose text turned out to be beyond the average reading level of the class. Hence, several students struggled with comprehending the short excerpt, but the brevity proved to be a blessing which allowed most of the learners to cope adequately with the task. They were then asked to adapt the prose text into a comic strip and incorporate all the salient details. The questions introducing the project's main task were: What makes a good comic strip? What should be included? To remind them of what they had already learned, the teacher presented a summary of the work they had done on perspectives, designs, and text in the graphic novel. The class had only been given the e-version of the opening chapter, and hence had to use their imagination as to how the artists adapted this part.

Activities and contents	Format & media	Comment on methodology
<b>Introduction to the task; create a comic strip 'Heaven for Cars' – Wrecker Scene</b> The task is introduced by the teacher. The questions are discussed in the plenary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What makes a good comic strip?</li> <li>- What should be included?</li> </ul>	pl	Include the pupils in the process of reflection and raise their awareness towards aspects of quality.
<b>Development / introduction of the task's quality indicators</b> The results of the previous discussion are integrated into the list of indicators.	List of quality indicators and the task description on a handout	
<b>Individual work on the drafts</b> The main preparatory steps include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Revision of text and designs in the graphic novel.</li> <li>- Draft text for the comic pictures/panels.</li> <li>- Draft of the comic strip /panels.</li> </ul>	Personal journals and iPad	
<b>Revision of and feedback on the draft texts and comic strips</b> Drafts of the texts and comic strips are exchanged and discussed in groups with the help of the indicators.		The quality indicators help to structure the feedback and, at the same time, deepen the comprehension of different aspects of quality within the task.
<b>Teacher feedback on the drafts</b>		Coaching on an individual level is necessary to make sure that everybody is on track and, at the same time, provides the teacher with an overview.

Table 2. Planning for the adaptation of 'Heaven for Cars' (procedures)

During the following weeks that were reserved for carrying out the comic projects, the learners drafted and drew their adaptations. Students were coached individually and regularly received feedback from their peers by means of feedback tables that contained relevant points that needed considering. These tables also helped the students with providing feedback to each other's products when they presented the comic strips to their peers and to the professor from the Zurich University of Teacher Education when he joined them for a final presentation.

After the presentation, students were shown the actual pages from the graphic novel (2016) and a discussion on differences and similarities between the prose text and the graphic novel adaptation ensued in the plenary. Unsurprisingly, there are certain details that distinguish the graphic novel from the prose text. The teacher added those that the learners did not discover themselves. The rationale behind this was to raise students' awareness of how stories are told in the different formats. Three examples in the graphic novel are the following:

- Alex escapes from the BMW by means of an ejector seat – in Horowitz's original he squeezes through a small window,
- Alex is being shot at – in the prose text, the man has his hand still halfway in his jacket (where he probably keeps a gun),
- and, finally, the fat man in the prose text, hardly fitting into the cabin of the crusher, is depicted as physically ordinary in the adaptation.

### **Product Analysis: What Kind of Comic Strips did the Students Create?**

Many of the students enjoyed the task of creating their own graphic depiction and the ensuing analysis of the sixteen completed comic strips (a few examples and excerpts are included below, Figures 2–8) concentrated on the following key elements of the prose text:

- The discovery of bullet holes in Ian's car (7 out of 16 comic strips contain bullet holes – in the remaining ones there are different signs of destruction on the car, or, in a small number, there is no reference to an attack at all),
- The way Alex escapes from the interior of the car in the shredder (8 out of 16 comic strips show the hero leaving the car through the back window; in one strip, he gets out by opening the car door),
- How Alex gets away from the wrecker's yard (11 out of the 16 comic strips either show Alex getting away on his bicycle or show the bicycle standing in the background).

These key aspects of the scene are tokens of what the students chose to represent in their adaptations. In hindsight, it is not clear whether some of them simply forgot or did not understand these features in the text or whether they consciously opted for an individual interpretation (in which, for instance, the manner of Alex's escape from the vehicle is irrelevant for the story they want to tell). In addition to these aspects of the prose excerpt, the comic strips were scrutinized for moments that make Alex's emotions and thoughts apparent for the readers. Furthermore, the various strips were rated according to specific criteria such as creativity,

quality of the execution, and individuality. The following adaptations are shown as examples that represent the different drawings that the students created during the project.

The comic strip below (Figure 2) is rather simple but effective by introducing most of the relevant information in the captions of the panels and by means of its linear narration. Even though the van was obviously not at the funeral (so Alex could not have gleaned the address of the wrecker's yard there), the remainder of the excerpt effectively mirrors the prose text and focuses on the exciting action at the junkyard. Furthermore, this student succeeds in providing three-dimensional perspectives in panels 1, 2, 4 and 5, which makes this adaptation stand out in comparison to others.

The first panel is very detailed and abstract in the sense that is different from the remaining panels, and yet it provides a kick-off for the narration of this strip. It refers to how Alex researches the name of the company that was written on the van used to remove Ian's belongings from his home office. The close perspective and particular aesthetics of putting a book that looks like the *Yellow Pages* centre stage is extremely apt and effective. This skilful mode of telling the story in graphic novel or in Manga terms demonstrates that its designer has an affinity for this medial format.

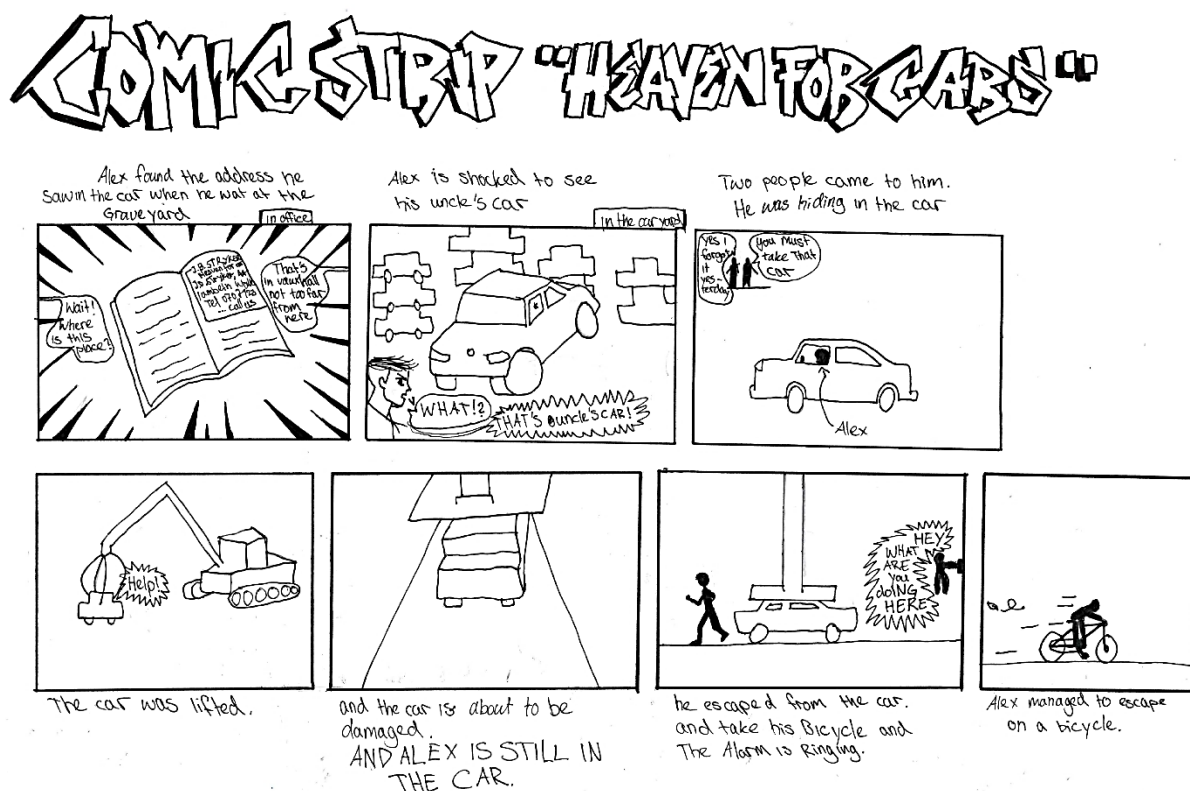


Figure 2. Comic strip adaptation of an excerpt from *Stormbreaker* ('Heaven for cars')

The following product (Figure 3) distinguishes itself by means of the many details and its singular aesthetic approach. Various modes of panel production are implied, and the combination of text and panels fits into a perfectly linear narration.

## Comic Strip Heaven for Cars - Wrecker Scene

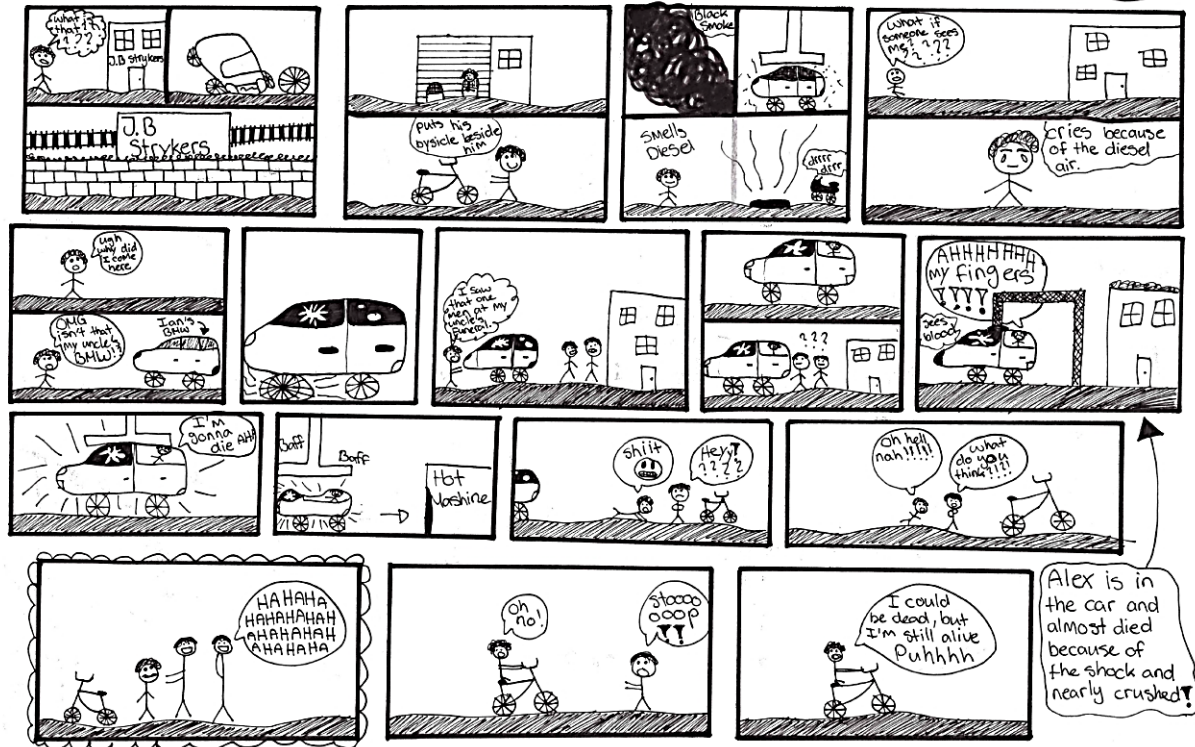


Figure 3. Another example of a comic strip adaptation of ‘Heaven for cars’

The adaptation below (Figure 4) is the product of an underachieving student with two noticeable features: the drawing and the layout of the panels is carried out in a simple fashion but, at the same time, the narrative is clearly structured. Every panel is equipped with a short, one-line caption that describes what is happening in this panel. There are only a few thought and speech bubbles, mostly expressing Alex's thoughts except for the scream ('Ahh!') he utters when the crane lifts the car into the crusher (see third panel). Finally, this adaptation makes effective use of the sound effects that are typical for the genre, particularly when describing the noise produced by the machinery ('BAHM!' and 'KRRK!').



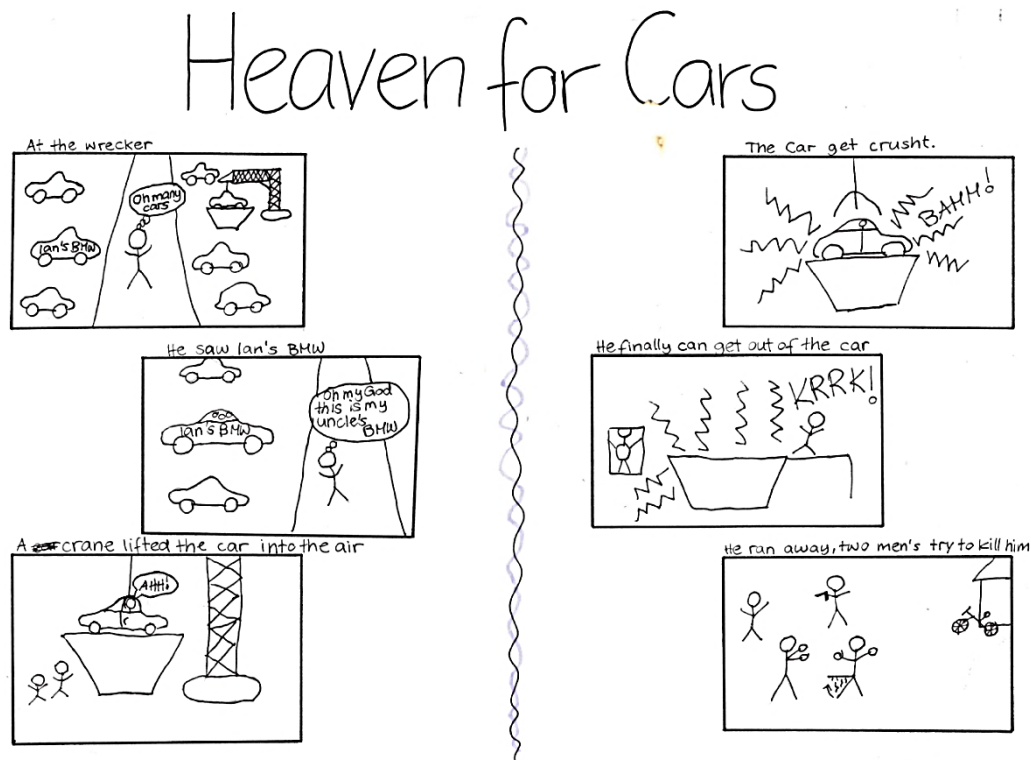


Figure 4. A rather simple but effective adaption using stick figures

While the above example (Figure 4) attempts to create perspective in a very simple fashion in panels 1, 2 and 6, only a few students succeeded in drawing convincing three-dimensional panels. One of the exceptions is shown below (Figure 5), a single panel displaying the perspective from inside Ian's car. Even though Alex is drawn in a very unadorned manner as a stick figure, the remaining aspects of the panel are shown in loving detail, and the student illustrator thus succeeds in conveying a sense of urgency to readers of his adaptation.



Figure 5. Three-dimensional interior of car Alex is trapped in (single panel from longer comic strip)



The ensuing adaptation is technically and aesthetically rather simple, but it is one of the few that reveals what is going on in Alex's mind while he is trapped in the BMW: when crying for help he realizes that 'The noise [of the crusher] is to[o] loud they can't hear me' and he visualizes his mode of escape, 'Throu[gh] the back window' (Figure 6). By doing so, the learner who designed this strip demonstrates a comprehension of point of view that is grounded in detailed information from the prose text.



Figure 6. Simple strip showing deep reading

After narrowly escaping from the shredder, the encounter between Alex and one of the two men at the wrecker's yard is marked with the caption 'he got unluck[i]ly caught' – a situation that is not fully consistent with what really happens in the prose text passage. Nevertheless, this adaptation (Figure 7) includes an accuracy of details that other comic strips lack. One example is the ragged state of Alex's clothes after squeezing through a broken window, another the fat man's massive belly.



Figure 7. Detailed drawing that illustrates deep reading from another student's strip

Compared with other adaptations, the following comic strip (Figure 8) provides more details than most. The variation of the panel sizes as well as the different designs and perspectives is also clearly above average. The perspectives range from close-up, half-total to almost completely total. The struggle before Alex can escape from the junkyard is interpreted in an individual manner, with one man having received a karate kick in the abdomen (the literal translation of the body part from informal Swiss German into English is of course not accurate). The other man is lying on the ground with a hole in his side and with what looks like a pool of blood around his head. Moreover, rather incongruously, the half-panel shows the car quite intact before the definitive crushing process while Alex – still inside the BMW – thinks: 'So, now I'm out' and 'But my shoe is in.'

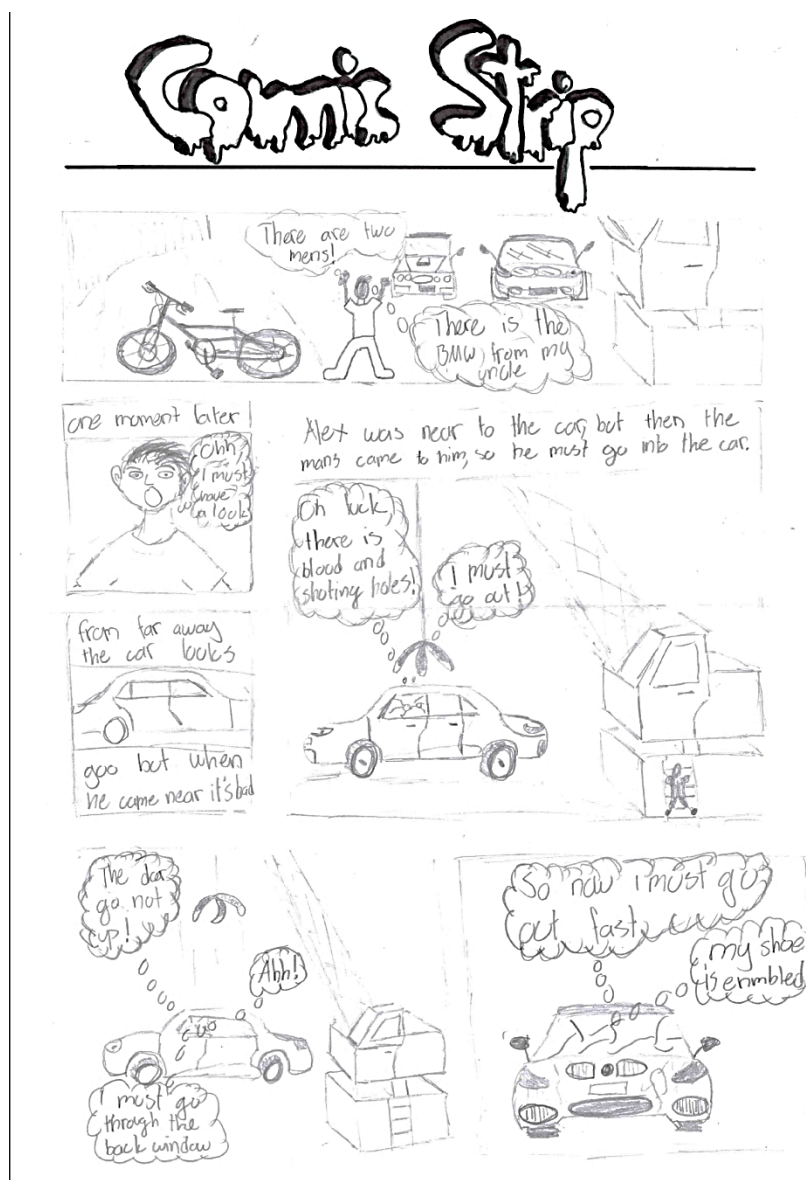




Figure 8. The result of a detailed adaptation

All in all, most comic strips show a low match with certain details of the prose text, while on the other hand they manage to represent the main dramaturgical logic, in other words, the plot. The excerpt from the novel could be considered suitable for tasks that aim at global text comprehension, but in hindsight the teacher concluded that it had proved to be too challenging for the students in his class. The prose text from *Stormbreaker*, written for native speakers, with its rich vocabulary overtaxed the learners' abilities in close and intensive reading. The teacher deems the 'elevated and complicated language' in the passage (approximately 30% of the text) as problematic because it was not directly accessible to the students in his class. They were used to dealing with coursebook lessons with many explanations. Faced with authentic text-based language input for the first time, some of the learners were frustrated with the reading process that had to be analytical and required a lot of patience and endurance to understand it sufficiently well to be able to create an adaptation – a prerequisite for deep reading (Bland, 2022, p. 10). The average student in this class did not possess these qualities. Considering this, in the teacher's opinion, a text closer to the students' level of English might help to make them read more fluently and, at the same time, support their motivation by making them feel more confident.

### Independent Reading of the Graphic Novel

The carefully planned steps that led to the adaptation task proved rather time-consuming, so the decision was taken to let the students read the remainder of the text in an independent manner rather than continuing with exercises and group discussions on certain aspects of the text. Thus, learners finished the book individually in their own time and at their own pace of reading. They all had to choose one scene which they elaborated with the example *wh*-table introduced in the steps before. Besides story content, the focus was on design and the language used in the graphic novel. The results of these personal findings were communicated in the plenary in brief oral presentations of approximately two to three minutes per student.

Despite the careful introduction of reading strategies at the beginning of the project, the English teacher was to some extent surprised by the attitudes of approximately one third of the students, who did not see the point in acquiring and practising systematic reading techniques because they were considered unnecessary or irrelevant. The individuals expressing such a mindset belong to the group of students who demonstrated a superficial attitude towards work and were disinclined overall to engage with the texts.

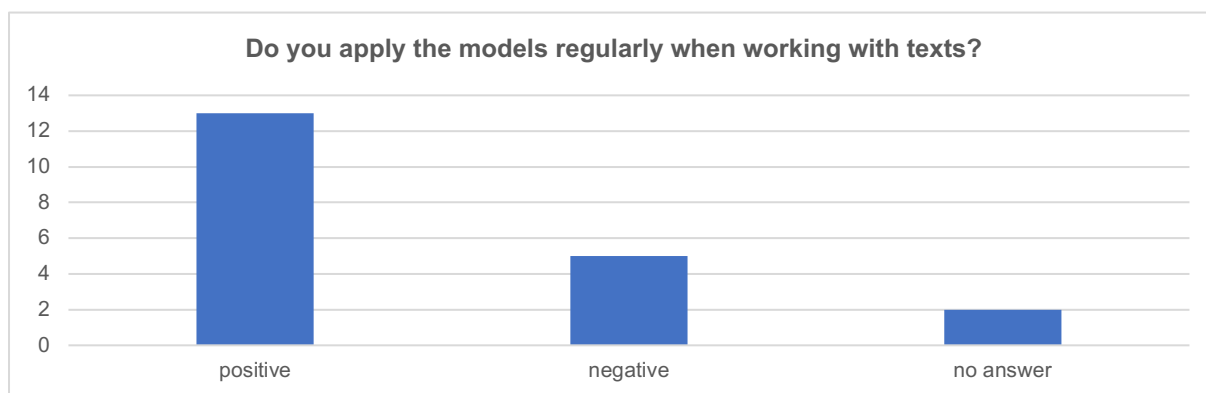


Figure 9. Application of reading strategies by the students

By contrast to these reluctant readers, other students willingly participated in the project and even volunteered the information that the methods they had acquired had helped them cope with texts in general and, especially, with challenging English texts. Four students belonging to this group are especially interesting because they can be identified as underachieving learners. They qualify in the local school system for additional support to enable them to progress successfully through school and to develop learning skills. In ordinary coursebook lessons – well-structured learning units that include different contents, contexts, and frequently

a focus on grammar structures – these students normally struggle to keep up both with the pace of the majority in the classroom and with the content of language learning. These four students clearly benefitted from the possibility of working independently, with the support of clear strategies, and the opportunity to work creatively with the materials from the book and the graphic novel.

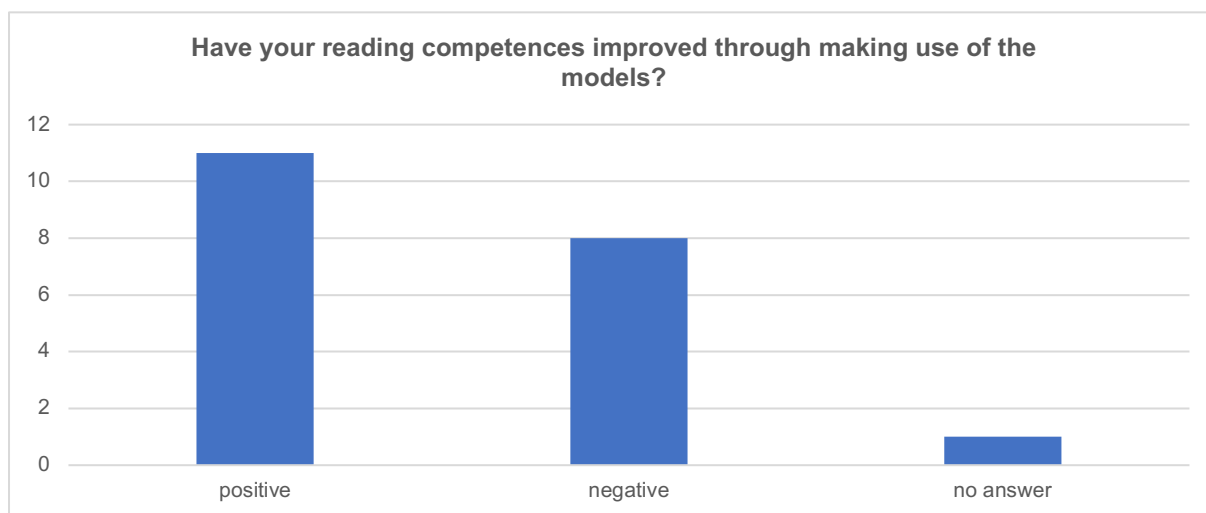


Figure 10. Student responses on the benefits of using reading strategies

Many students display set strong attitudes and preferences concerning reading habits. These observations are in line with the phenomenon of the well-known reading blip. Unsurprisingly, only those students who diligently engaged in the project observed an increase in their own reading competences as a consequence of engaging with *Stormbreaker*.

### Concluding Remarks

For the teacher the project has demonstrated yet again how individual students can react in manifold ways to different settings and tasks. Especially those who are considered underachieving learners in regular lessons have an opportunity to show their own potential, which in this case resulted in a number of very creative adaptations. Confirming what other practitioners have reported, the tasks helped learners to become aware of different ways of expression, of stories ‘beyond printed words on paper’, and of experiencing ‘success and personal satisfaction in experimenting’ (Bakis, 2012, p. 143) with graphic novels. The mother of one pupil reported how her son had responded positively to the overall structured and project-based nature of the entire task because it was in keeping with his felt need for continuity,

identification, action, and orientation. This comment confirms that individual students can profoundly profit from such a setting, specifically longer running projects with creative and action-oriented approaches. The distinctive potential of such a setting lies in the fact that weaker learners may resort to using their creative skills to express themselves and to learn across the curriculum. A particularly rewarding link can be established with the subject MI (media and information technology). When the learners register that what they do in an English literature class with reference to text-based novels, graphic novels, and film adaptations (two of the *Alex Rider* novels are now also available as television series), this is directly connected to the questions about how messages are transported in the media-driven twenty-first century. Hence, learners no longer remain enclosed in the silos of the various subjects that form the curriculum, but engage in cross-curricular learning.

Multimodal meaning making (Bland, 2013; Kramsch, 2006) and critical media literacy (Bakis, 2012; Wilson et al., 2011) can develop when learners encounter such texts. Transmedia narration offers a wide and creative field to work with a plethora of authentic English text formats. The use and combination of plain prose and graphic novel formats help language learners to build up their understanding by using not only the symbolic but also referring to the various iconic and visual levels. The latter is clearly beneficial for visual learners and those who normally would rather not open a book of their own free will because they either lack interest or struggle with the process of reading in general. Very importantly, transmedia narration offers a different access to literary aesthetics, a main pillar of literary learning (Bakis, 2012; Bland, 2022; Spinner, 2007). Seventeen students in the class attested to the positive impact of the illustration for the comprehension of the narrative (only one student rejected this; another did not reply to this question).

Unfortunately, reading in English, and particularly literature in the ELT classroom, has a rather marginal position within the current official teaching materials in the Canton of Zurich. This is due to an excessive reliance on methods such as Content and Language Integrated Language Learning (CLIL) to the neglect of authentic narrative materials. However, the rewards of reading and literature can be countless, as the results of the project demonstrate. Furthermore, it is certainly relevant to mention the increase in linguistic knowledge, the broadening of the learners' personal horizon, and a privileged access to worlds that otherwise would not be feasible.

Key assets of reading projects are manifold, such as individualization according to interests by choice of individual texts, differentiation according to individual strengths, and immersion in diverse areas of knowledge and contents. There is also the possibility to link the reading project with other school subjects such as design or further action-oriented subjects, including drama studies. Depending on the students' needs, the emphasis can be put on the relevant fields of engagement, i.e., personal, social, curriculum subject, and organizational. The scaffolding of longer projects, development of responsibility and organization of work is certainly a main component. Last but not least, in view of Switzerland's results in the PISA 2022 study, especially the outcome in reading – the 15-year-old Swiss participants scored 11 points lower than at the time of the infamous PISA shock in 2000 (OECD 2023) – the necessity to continue investing in reading practice at school in order to enable a larger proportion of the population to be fully literate ought to be self-evident.

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