Comics Aren’t Just For Fun Anymore:
The Practical Use of Comics by TESOL Professionals

by

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Comics, in the form of comic strips, comic books, and single panel cartoons are ubiquitous in classroom materials for teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). While comics material is widely accepted as a teaching aid in TESOL, there is relatively little research into why comics are popular as a teaching instrument and how the effectiveness of comics can be maximized in TESOL. This thesis is designed to bridge the gap between conventional wisdom on the use of comics in ESL/EFL instruction and research related to visual aids in learning and language acquisition. The hidden science behind comics use in TESOL is examined to reveal the nature of comics, the psychological impact of the medium on learners, the qualities that make some comics more educational than others, and the most empirically sound ways to use comics in education. The definition of the comics medium itself is explored; characterizations of comics created by TESOL professionals, comic scholars, and psychologists are indexed and analyzed. This definition is followed by a look at the current role of comics in society at large, the teaching community in general, and TESOL specifically. From there, this paper explores the psycholinguistic concepts of construction of meaning and the language faculty. Through an analysis of the evolution of language, art history, and the psychology of perception, comics are revealed to be an innate form of human communication that originated in pre-literate ancient times; this medium continues to be a powerful form of non-verbal communication to this day. Next, educational theories particularly relevant to comics use in TESOL are examined, with a focus Allan Pavio’s Dual Coding theory of learning and Stephen Krashen’s Input and Affective Filter Hypotheses. Each major section of this thesis contains a subsection of case studies from TESOL fieldwork, followed by an index of the things teachers should know and do to use the information in the section effectively.
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1. Introduction

1.1. The Prevalence of Cartoon Art as a Tool of the TESOL Profession

Cartoon art is quite common in Teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) settings and is used frequently by TESOL professionals. This is apparent in South Korea and China, two of the world’s largest markets for English as a second language/English as a foreign language (ESL/EFL) education (Beare). In South Korea, the national curriculum for the public school system includes numerous CD-roms featuring a recurring cast of animated characters (Em) (fig. 1.1.1). In China, animation use is on the rise in private cartoon themed chain schools. Disney English, which uses the popular Walt Disney Studios animated cartoon characters to teach English as a second language, opened its first school in Shanghai in 2008. Disney expanded quickly from there, setting up a total of 30 EFL academies in China over the next four years. Their rapid expansion inspired regional copycats, with other TESOL professionals in China setting up unauthorized “counterfeit” Disney English services that use the Disney characters (Yiwen). Many other schools worldwide have used Disney’s cartoon art more legitimately, purchasing Disney English’s globally marketed teaching materials (“Disney Publishing”).

While cartoon art that moves on the screen and features recurring characters has obvious appeal for educators, it is just one of several forms of cartoon art available to teachers. Cartoon-style clip art, stand-alone images that do not feature recurring characters and are not accompanied by words or sounds, also abounds in ESL/EFL learning situations. Major publishers of ESL/EFL materials such as Pearson, Oxford, and Cambridge all use simple drawings that could be described as “cartoony” in their textbooks. In addition, comic books and strips often appear in ESL/EFL classrooms. Comics may be included in the official curriculum. They may also come from external sources, procured by educators seeking additional material for their lessons.
Comic strips have always appeared as a visual supplement to text from time to time alongside their clip art brethren in commercially marketed ESL/EFL textbooks. For example, Oxford University Press includes at least one original vocabulary or grammar-focused comic strip in each unit of its popular *Let's Go* series for child learners of ESL/EFL (Nakata et al.). In university and vocational education resources, one can also find an abundance of comic strips and cartoon images. Cartoon art is common in practical adult ESL/EFL instructional materials published by Cambridge, McGraw Hill, Hyundai, and many other prominent publishers of adult ESL/EFL resources. Similar uses of comic strips and cartoon drawings to illustrate points appear in government-sponsored educational materials as well. The California Department of Education and the U.S. Department of State issue a number of textbooks that use comics for the benefit of ESL/EFL learners and native speakers alike (fig. 1.1.2).
11. ? + one = a windsorm; tornado
12. ? + one = an instrument for talking to someone far away.
13. ? + one = nobody
14. ? + one = not any
15. ? + one = two

Protons are another type of subatomic particle found in atoms. Protons have a positive charge. As a result they are attracted to negative objects, and repelled from positive objects. Again, this means that protons repel each other. Unlike electrons, however, which manage to stake out a 'territory' and 'defend' it from other electrons, protons are bound together by what are termed strong nuclear forces. Therefore, even though they repel each other, protons are forced to group together into one big clump. This clump of protons helps to form the nucleus of the atom. Remember, the nucleus of the atom is the mass of positive charge at the atom's center.

**Figure 2:** Protons repel each other because they are both positively charged. Despite this repulsion, protons are bound together in the atomic nucleus as a result of the strong nuclear force.

(Source by: Sharon Bewick, License: CC-BY-SA)

Electrons were the first subatomic particles discovered and protons were the second. There's a third kind of subatomic particle, though, known as a neutron, which wasn't discovered until much later. As you might have already guessed from its name, the neutron is neutral. In other words, it has no charge whatsoever, and is therefore neither attracted to nor repelled from other objects. That's part of the reason why the neutron wasn't discovered until long after people knew about electrons and protons — because it has no charge, it's really hard to detect. Neutrons are in every atom (with one exception), and they're bound together with other neutrons and protons in the atomic nucleus. Again, the binding forces that help to keep neutrons fastened into the nucleus are known as strong nuclear forces.

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While the books mentioned above use comics as a partial component, some ESL/EFL student books treat comics as their primary component, with comic strips and cartoon art dominating page space (fig. 1.1.3). A look at Internet-based teachers’ resources reveals many teacher testimonials on the value of comics, along with lesson plans and suggested activities. Noticing the demand for its product in the ESL/EFL classroom, the comics industry has stepped up, offering English language materials for learners and instructors through print and electronic venues. Various comics-based resources for TESOL will be discussed in greater depth in the third section of this thesis.

Fig. 1.1.3. Left: Sample from the Korean National Curriculum (Park “Book 2” 25; “Teach and Learn”).
Right: Sample from Superhero ABC, drawn by Bob McLeod (McLeod 25). Image on left is public domain. Image on right is © Bob McLeod. Used with permission.
1.2. Some Apparent Advantages of Comics over Other Forms of Cartoon Art

Comics have certain unique advantages over animation. Comics content is easier to manage and use than animated content, because comics content is not absolutely reliant on technology. Not every classroom is as technologically advanced as the average South Korean public school classroom, and not every society is as technology hungry as China. In many classrooms in developed and undeveloped nations alike, it may be unwise to rely on visual aids that require working television screens or computer monitors, digital menus, remote control units, and other electronic and computerized devices. Comics can be displayed digitally like animation, but they can also be delivered via overhead projector or in print form. This allows comics to be functional even in a classroom that is not set up for the use of modern technology. Finally, comics, with their simple artwork, can easily be custom-made and hand drawn by individual teachers (fig. 1.2.1). Conversely, very few teachers have the technical knowledge and resources to create their own animation.

Fig. 1.2.1. Left: Cartoon worksheet I created for Seoun Middle School, featuring the licensed animation characters Dooly and HeeDongEe. Right: Artwork created by Emily Timblin to teach Business English. Characters on the left © DoolyNara. Used with permission. Image on right © Emily Timblin. Used with permission.
In addition, comics are more conducive to language learning than clip art or stand-alone images. Because comics integrate images with words to tell a story, they are more engaging for students than the isolated images that so many ESL/EFL textbooks are riddled with. Moreover, clip art drawings, often minimally connected to meaningful language, give ESL/EFL instructors little to work with as they create lessons and materials. In contrast, the cohesion of story, theme, and character found in comics gives instructors a strong foundation to create interesting, meaningful lessons in the English language. To enhance this effect, comics are often connected to famous, globally appealing stories and characters rooted in popular culture. For this reason, many teachers, myself included, have used the comic book adventures of famous characters in their classrooms (fig. 1.2.2).

Fig. 1.2.2. From left to right: Donald Duck, Korgi artwork by Christian Slade, Batman artwork by Bob Kane, Owly artwork by Andy Runton (“Cartoon”; Slade 20; “Batman”; Runton *Long Way Home* 155). © Disney, Christian Slade, DC Comics, Andy Runton. Donald Duck and Batman images are public domain. Korgi and Owly images are used in accordance with Top Shelf Productions’ terms of use.

1.3. Overview of this Paper’s Content and Aims

It is apparent that cartoon art of all stripes has a close relationship to ESL/EFL pedagogy, and that comics are well established as a learning aid in the ESL/EFL classroom. In light of that fact, the research presented in this thesis will not investigate whether or not comics should be used in ESL/EFL
instruction. Clearly, comics are already being used in the field, and will continue to be used. Instead, this paper will address the following big question: *How can TESOL professionals maximize the effectiveness of comics?*

Drawing both from external research and my own field research, the content that follows will reveal the hidden science behind the effective use of comics in the classroom. Much of the current TESOL research and literature on comics focuses on the pleasurable nature of comics reading and the joy that popular comics bring to ESL/EFL learners. In TESOL research and literature, comics are also often lauded for the fact that they are visual, with little examination of their exact visual qualities and the educational value these visual qualities might have. While observations on comics as a means to make learning fun and visual are not without merit, this paper will take a much needed deeper look at comics as a multifaceted teaching aid. Comics are not useful simply because they are fun or simply because they are visual. A more rigorous look at pertinent research and evidence reveals that not all fun comics actually aid student learning, and that not all visuals hold equal cognitive value. The literature review and fieldwork analysis that follows reveals a set of metrics that can allow ESL/EFL teachers to choose the right comics for their students and use comics in ways that promote language learning effectively.

In order to reveal the proper metrics for comics selection and answer “big question” with regards to best use of comics in ESL/EFL, this essay will address the following research questions:

1) *How should TESOL professionals define comics for teaching purposes?* This question will be addressed in section 2, through an examination of existing scholarly definitions of comics and a comparison of these characterizations to the actual nature of comics in ESL/EFL contexts. Addressing the inadequacies of the current definitions, a new, more helpful definition of this visual medium as it relates to TESOL pedagogy will be assembled from existing observations on the nature of comics.
2) *How are comics currently used in TESOL?* This question will be answered in section 3, through an analysis of the current role of comics in TESOL. The network of teachers’ resources that support the use of comics as an aid to ESL/EFL teaching will be revealed along with descriptions of well established, proven approaches to comics-based instruction.

3) *How can comics be used more effectively by TESOL professionals?* As will be demonstrated, comics have a relatively limited role in most TESOL settings. There are many ways that current TESOL comics pedagogy can be expanded upon and improved, so this question will be addressed in both sections 4 and 5 of this paper. Section 4 will focus on cognitive and linguistic theory that is relevant to the role of comics in ESL/EFL classrooms. Section 5 will look at various theories about the acquisition of knowledge and language, analyzing their implications for TESOL comics pedagogy.

These questions will be addressed both by research analysis and by pedagogical example; sections 2, 3, 4, and 5 will include case studies from TESOL practice, drawn primarily from my own career. These case studies will demonstrate the real-life applications of the research discussed in this thesis. The studies will be followed by a list of things that teachers should know and do in order to use comics effectively in ESL/EFL instruction, based both on pertinent theory and my own field work.

Finally, in section 6, this essay’s findings will be summarized into a concise guide that allows ESL/EFL teachers to choose the right kinds of comics material for their learners and use the material effectively. This metric for effective comics usage will directly answer the “big question” regarding the best ways to use comics in TESOL. The metric will also explore what not to do, highlighting ways that comics can potentially be misused in TESOL settings and indexing visuals and content found in some comics that may not be conducive to language learning.

The aim of this paper is to create a complete, comprehensive profile of comics as an aid to ESL/EFL instruction. In recent years, there have been many pieces of research and literature that
highlight one aspect of TESOL comics pedagogy or another. Until now however, there has never been a thorough analysis of all aspects of the use of comics in ESL/EFL teaching. This document is the first of its kind.

Because the teaching utility of comics in the ESL/EFL classroom is a new, relatively unexplored area of TESOL research, there are a few terms in this thesis that may be unfamiliar to practitioners of TESOL. **TESOL comics pedagogy** is a term of my own creation that refers to the emerging subdiscipline of comics-based ESL/EFL instruction. **Comics scholarship** refers to the academic study of comic books, comic strips, and related cartoon art. Terms used by comics scholars include *word balloons*, the space used in comics for written language attributed to the characters, *captions*, written narrative language that is set aside in a space separate from word balloons, *panels*, individual images within a sequence of comic images, *sound effects*, onomatopoeic words that denote non-linguistic sound, and *graphic novels*, book-length comics narratives.

Although comics scholarship is not well-known in other academic disciplines, it is a field of study in its own right. It has its own degree programs, peer reviewed journals, and leading researchers. Three important comics scholars will be cited frequently in the pages that follow: Will Eisner, Scott McCloud and Neil Cohn.

Together, McCloud, Eisner, and Cohn are considered to be the founders of modern comics scholarship, much in the way that Noam Chomsky and Stephen Krashen are regarded as central, foundational figures in modern studies of TESOL. Because comics scholarship is a smaller, more newly emerging field in relation to TESOL, these three researchers have fewer credentials than Chomsky, Krashen and other prominent language learning theorists. Eisner and McCloud, who specialize in the rhetorical, literary and structural aspects of comics, do not even have college degrees or peer reviewed research to their names. However, they do have decades of experience in cartooning, creating instructional art, teaching at art academies, and guest lecturing at universities. In addition,
Eisner and McCloud’s work has been cited in a number of peer reviewed works by other scholars, including Neil Cohn. Cohn recently received his Doctorate in Psychology from Tufts University, and is generating a small but continuing stream of peer reviewed writings on the cognitive and structural nature of comics as a form of human communication. Noted language acquisition researcher Ray Jackendoff served as Cohn’s advisor while Cohn created his doctoral dissertation on the linguistic aspects of comics. This gives Cohn strong academic ties to the field of TESOL (Cohn “Curriculum Vitae”).
2. The Definition of Comics For TESOL purposes

2.1. The Need for a Clearer Definition of Comics in the Field of TESOL

What are comics? The casual reader of popular comics may be able to answer that question with ease. Comics, such a reader might say, feature everyone’s favorite famous characters: Snoopy, Donald Duck, Superman, and so on. They are found in the comics section of the newspaper, and on the comics rack at the bookstore. For a more serious comics fan, a comics scholar or comics professional, the definition of comics may be more nebulous. When the comics medium and industry are more closely scrutinized, it becomes difficult to tell the difference between comic books and children’s books. Both are picture-driven stories, usually drawn in a style that could be described as cartoony. Moreover, they are often drawn by the same artists. Numerous prominent picture book creators, including English education guru Dr. Seuss, draw newspaper strips and comic books along with their more famous children’s books. Looking at the illustrated work of Seuss and others, it is difficult to say how wordy comics can get and how separate the text can be from the pictures before comics stop being comics and start being something else.

Similar questions about the exact nature of comics emerge when their use is observed in the ESL/EFL classroom. Some of the visuals used by TESOL professionals, such as a comic I created for a TOEIC preparation course (fig. 2.1.1), are clearly comics. However, when an ESL/EFL instructor makes a hasty cartoon drawing on the board to illustrate a point (fig. 2.1.2), is that comics? What of a sequential collage of photos augmented with word balloons, as seen in the South Korean national curriculum (fig. 2.1.3)? Does that count as comics as well? This section will look at previous attempts to address such questions and build on previous work in this area. Section 2 also serves as a visual cross section of comics that have been used in TESOL and English education, showcasing a wide variety of cartoon art so that readers may literally see what comics are while reading this section’s
textual analysis of the nature of comics as a TESOL instrument.

Fig. 2.1.1. Excerpt from my comic “The Magic Flying Monkey”.

Fig. 2.1.2. An illustrated grammar lesson.

2.2. The Definition of Comics in Current TESOL and Linguistics Literature

Some linguists and language instructors take a prescriptive approach when defining and characterizing the English language (Pinker). A prescriptive definition of a language’s grammar explains how a language should be used, according to prevailing notions of propriety. These notions of “proper” grammar are often set by a society’s educated upper class rather than by the general public of a language speaking community (Canada). Prescriptive definitions of North American English grammar include a ban on double negatives, as seen in the sentence “I didn’t say nothing to nobody.” Other rules
include never ending a sentence with a preposition, a rule broken in the sentence “These are the times we live in,” and never beginning a sentence with and, as seen in the question “And then what happened?” Although the three examples above are all comprehensible to the average English language user, from a prescriptive perspective, they are not true instances of the English language.

In modern times, prescriptive characterizations of grammar are viewed by many scholars as arbitrary and limiting. Prescriptive parameters for language have gone out of vogue in favor of definitions that reflect the structure of language in actual usage. Modern TESOL professionals tend to embrace more flexible descriptive grammars defined by that can vary geographically and fluctuate
generationally, distancing themselves from earlier, more limited prescriptive models (Bourke 88). In light of this, it is perhaps ironic that the most prescriptive definitions of comics today come from the field of language education and applied linguistics. It would seem that many educators and linguists are quite eager to define the features that comics must have in order to be comics. Mario Saraceni, who wrote a scholarly book about comics for Routledge Press’ *Intertext Linguistics Series*, declares that word balloons, captions, and enclosed panels with distinct spaces between them are essential defining characteristics of comics (Saraceni 6-9). The Educomics Project, a European Union-sponsored initiative to promote TESOL comics pedagogy in Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Spain, and the UK, advises ESL/EFL instructors that comics must contain multiple images arranged in sequence (Retalis 3). Numerous other educators and linguists have suggested that comics must contain the elements listed above, must be drawn in a certain style, must cover certain subject matter, and so on.

Leone Tiemensma, a teacher of ESL/EFL and child literacy advocate in South Africa, offers a comprehensive overview of the modern characterization of comics that is most prevalent among linguists and TESOL professionals. Tiemensma’s definition, which she advises educators to follow when seeking out comics for their classroom, can be paraphrased in brief as follows: Functionally, comics should have a clear narrative. Structurally, comics should combine words and multiple strings of pictures, with pictures in a dominant role. Spatially, the panels should be separate with blank spaces between them, character language should be placed in word balloons, and narration should be placed in captions. Stylistically, comics should either use cartoony or realistic artwork (Tiemensma 4-6).

Tiemensma’s definition, while limiting in some respects, properly characterizes a number of TESOL-friendly comics that turn up in classrooms. The definition handily describes most of the work of cartoonist Jack Bradbury, whose comics have been distributed to language arts and ESL classrooms through the Maryland Comic Book Initiative (fig. 2.2.1) (“Maryland”). The episode of Runemaster Studios’ *Lions, Tigers and Bears* comic book in fig. 2.2.2 also matches this definition. Language arts
teachers have actively embraced *Lions, Tigers and Bears*, and a set of worksheets and lesson plans related to the series is available for free download at the popular teachers’ website *Comics in the Classroom (dot) Net* (Tingley “Lesson”). Functionally, the comics in fig. 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 have a clear narrative; one tells a story about a mouse with superpowers, and the other tells a story about two children who are traveling. Structurally, the samples of these comics below contain words and multiple images. Spatially, both comics separate their panels distinctly, and restrict character language and narration to word balloons and captions, respectively. Visually, both samples below would be described by most readers as cartoony. However, the format seen in fig. 2.2.1 and 2.2.2, while common in the comics medium, is not universal to all comics. Quite a few comics commonly seen in TESOL settings deviate from the definition enumerated by Tiemensma and embraced by so many of her colleagues in the field of TESOL.

Comics used in TESOL and in general educational settings frequently fall short of TESOL scholarships’ prevailing theoretical requirement for a narrative. Fig. 2.2.3 shows an educational comic of my own creation that does not tell a story in any conventional sense. The picture sequence does not advance a plot, but instead encourages ESL/EFL learners to associate the shapes of letters with the meanings of words, showing an uppercase /B/ and lowercase /b/ slowly change into the form of a baby and a bear lying in bed. Non-narrative comics like the one in fig. 2.2.3 lend themselves well to the teaching of ESL/EFL, because plot, character development, or other narrative conventions are not the best vehicles for explaining linguistic structure. The same goes for a number of other academic subjects. Fig. 2.2.7 reproduces non-narrative math and science themed comics from Larry Gonick. Gonick’s comic book-format academic textbooks are recommended for ESL/EFL learners by the European Union’s multinational Educomics project. Gonick’s work is also used in hundreds of English language high schools, colleges and universities (Retalis 6, 19; “Larry Gonick”). With the exception of the occasional depiction of historic events, Gonick’s work teaches concepts and gives information rather
Fig. 2.2.1. Supermouse, drawn by Jack Bradbury (Bradbury 1). Public domain.
Fig. 2.2.2. Lions, Tigers and Bears, drawn by Jack Lawrence (Bullock & Lawrence 104). © Mike Bullock.

Used in accordance with the Image Comics’ terms of use.
Fig. 2.2.3. A non-narrative educational comic strip.

than telling a story.

Having looked at functions beyond the use of narrative, let us now address the TESOL professions’ prevailing notions of comics structure. The definition outlined above states that comics must combine words and images, yet wordless comics are common in TESOL pedagogy (Cary 55). I have personally created a number of wordless educational comics, including a series of wordless sequences that I used as part of a speaking prompt in a beginner level class (fig. 2.2.4). One professionally produced wordless comic book that has recently become popular in ESL/EFL classrooms is *Korgi* (fig. 2.2.5), endorsed by educators and critics as a teaching aid for developmental reading and writing (Stafford 59-61, Buchanan). Moving from the realm of comic books into the arena of newspaper comic strips, many TESOL professionals make use of Mark Tatulli’s *Lio*, prominently featured in Thailand’s online EFL website *Student Weekly*. Note that the *Lio* sample in fig. 2.2.6 is not only wordless but also uses just one image, breaking the TESOL scholars’ rule that comics must have multiple images.

Where the structure of comics is concerned, TESOL literature also indicates that comics should contain more than one panel. In spite of this, single panel comics, like wordless comics, are a popular TESOL tool. Perhaps one of the most prominent single panel comics in education is *The Far Side*, endorsed as a classroom teaching tool by the popular teachers’ website *Dave’s ESL Café* (Mark). There is one way that the wordless and single panel comics mentioned above all conform to Tiemensma’s definition of comics structure: they all place images in a dominant communicative role, serving either
as the primary or sole means of communicating meaning. This is not the case for a number of other educational comics however. In the aforementioned work of Larry Gonick (fig. 2.2.7), text serves as the dominant source of meaning, with the visual elements of the comic taking a secondary role. Even when the pictures take up the majority of the page space, they still serve only as a secondary support to the more meaningful educational text.

![Wordless comics](image)

Fig. 2.2.4. Wordless comics I created for an ESL/EFL exam.

Next, some TESOL-purposed comics that contradict Tiemensma’s characterizations of spatial arrangement will be examined. The rule that comics panels must be separated is often broken in comics that are used to teach ESL/EFL. This is perhaps most obviously apparent in *Ripley’s Believe It or Not*, a long-running educational newspaper comic strip. I myself use this comic strip for reading activities with my students. It is also used in other TESOL settings. *Ripley’s* is available, for example, as an ESL resource in the Hastings, Minnesota public school district. This popular feature is also endorsed for use in TESOL by La Vergne Rosow, former curriculum director for the Los Angeles Community College
Fig. 2.2.5. Christian Slade’s *Korgi* (Slade 18). © Christian Slade. Use in accordance with Top Shelf Productions’ terms of use.

*Fig. 2.2.6. Lio*, drawn by Mark Tatulli (Tatulli). © Mark Tatulli. Used in accordance with Universal Press Syndicate’s terms of use.
Fig. 2.2.7. From left to right: Samples from *The Cartoon Guide to Calculus*, and *The Cartoon Guide to Genetics*, both drawn by Larry Gonick (Gonick 1, Gonick & Wheelis 61). © Larry Gonick and Mark Wheelis. Used with permission.

System (Rosow 58, 211-12, 313). In fig. 2.2.8, notice that the *Ripley’s* sample has no discernible separation between its panels. This lack of separation can also occur in conventional narrative comics used for language teaching. In fig. 2.2.9, note the lack of panel borders or clear panel divisions in a comic page by Bill Messner-Loebs, cartoonist and English literacy activist (Krug).

Many comics used in ESL/EFL instruction also break the spatial rules about dialogue and narration that are prevalent in TESOL scholarship, per scholars such as Tiemensma and Saraceni. A common example of this in TESOL comics pedagogy is the use of captions rather than word balloons to depict character language. This often occurs in political cartons, a genre of comics recommended for ESL/EFL learners by the educators’ website *Teaching Tolerance* and by the SIT Graduate Institute’s MA-TESOL program (“Editorial Cartoons”; Vincent). A visual example of this common spatial
arrangement of dialogue can be seen in the political cartoon in fig. 2.2.10. The use of captions rather than word balloons occurs in classroom-friendly multi-panel comics as well; fig. 2.2.11 revisits *Lions, Tigers and Bears* to reveal that this teacher favorite sometimes uses captions to reveal the main character’s inner monologue rather than to provide narration that is separate from character language.

Fig. 2.2.8. *Ripley’s Believe it or Not*, drawn by John Graziano (Graziano). © Ripley Entertainment, Inc. Used with permission.

Finally, this thesis arrives at the question of comics style, which must be either cartoony or realistic, per Tiemensma’s linguistics/TESOL inspired definition above. Anyone with a basic familiarity with comics should be able to recognize the cartoony and realistic styles that Tiemensma references in her definition of comics. Varied iterations of the cartoony style can be seen in a wide variety of popular comics that are humorous or marketed to children. This piece’s previous comics samples from *Donald Duck* (fig. 1.2.2), *Owly* (fig. 1.2.2), *Supermouse* (fig. 2.2.1), *Lions, Tigers and Bears* (fig. 2.2.2 and
2.2.11), and *Lio* (fig. 2.2.6) would all be readily identified as cartoony by the most readers. Similarly, most readers would see *Batman* (fig. 1.2.2), *Korgi* (Fig. 1.2.2 and 2.2.5) and *Ripley’s Believe it or Not* (fig. 2.2.8) as realistic.
Nonetheless, the distinction between cartoony and realistic comics is not as cut and dry as it appears to be at first glance. For example, most people would look at the *Romeo and Juliet* ESL-oriented comic book adaptation in fig. 2.2.12 and classify it as realistic. It certainly seems to match up to the TESOL scholar’s definition of realism in comics, containing the “realistic anatomy and shapes” Tiemensma mentioned when explaining the nature of comics (5). Most people would also characterize the comics I create for my ESL/EFL students as cartoony, demonstrative of the “comic effects…. 
variation of line widths” and “characters [who] tend to have rounded, simplified anatomy,” per Tiemensma (5). However, when one compares the cartoony work of my own creation in fig. 2.2.13 and 2.2.14 to the realistic sample from *Romeo and Juliet* that precedes it, one can see that both works contain some elements that Tiemensma would characterize as cartoony, and some that she would define as realistic. For instance, the building in the first panel of fig. 2.2.13 is realistically proportioned, much like the balcony and doorway in the second panel of the realistic comic in fig. 2.2.12. To further complicate matters, the tree leaves in fig. 2.2.14’s cartoony scene (full of humorous characters and exaggerated, rounded anatomy) are drawn perhaps more realistically than the vague, undetailed tree leaves in 2.2.12. Moreover, all three of the figures below use “variation of line widths,” a feature supposedly reserved for cartoony work alone. A quick inventory of earlier figures in this work reveals similar dichotomies. The characters in fig. 2.2.9 have realistic looking bodies with cartoony faces, the cartoony work in fig. 2.2.2 and 2.2.11 does not use much line width variation, and so on.

Tiemensma’s definition, embraced by so many contemporary linguists and TESOL professionals, is not without merit. The definition certainly describes comics in their most common form; the vast majority of comic books and newspaper comic strips printed both in and outside of the English speaking world have the function, structure, spatial arrangement and style described above. Given the popularity of comics as a mass medium, one would suppose that if an ESL/EFL instructor wanted to present comics that students would readily recognize and enjoy, comics that matched Tiemensma’s description would be an excellent choice. However, some of the comics sampled above that defy Tiemensma’s characterization have a pop cultural following as well. It is also important to remember that, while there is nothing wrong with making the learning process fun, enjoyability is not necessarily the most important measure of the value of a teaching aid. Outside of the field of TESOL, comics scholars Will Eisner, Scott McCloud and Neil Cohn have created a broader, less confining definition that can free classroom comics like the ones referenced above from the limitations that
TESOL researchers tend to place on the comics medium.

Fig. 2.2.12. *Romeo and Juliet*, drawn by Will Volley (McDonald & Volley). © Classical Comics. Used with permission.

Fig. 2.2.13. A political cartoon of my own creation.
2.3. The Comics Scholars’ Definition of Comics

Tiemensma’s limited definition of the features of comics remains prevalent in TESOL comics pedagogy yet has some obvious shortcomings. In defining the structure of comics so narrowly, Tiemensma excludes most of the ESL/EFL-friendly comics sampled above. Fortunately, leading comics scholars Will Eisner, Scott McCloud, and Neil Cohn have made a collective effort to characterize comics more broadly, looking at the structure of comics across many different genres and bodies of work, and measuring the things all comics have in common.

Eisner, McCloud, and Cohn’s shared definition, the definition most frequently used in the field of comics scholarship, can be summarized as follows: Functionally, comics should have a coherent
theme or message (McCloud *Understanding* 70-73; Cohn *Early Writings* 29-35). Structurally, comics consist of imagery, sometimes combined with words (Eisner 16; McCloud “Does”). Spatially, comics can feature a single image or multiple images. This means that a single image, if it is sufficiently communicative, can convey a story or idea with the same depth that a multiple image sequence would and can thus be seen as be seen as a form of comics (Eisner 39; McCloud *Understanding* 94-97).

Comics text, when present, may appear in captions, word balloons or sound effects; character language may appear in captions or word balloons (McCloud *Understanding* 134; Cohn “Time”). Stylistically, comics are simpler and more abstract in appearance than the real, three-dimensional objects referenced by their artwork (McCloud *Understanding* 28, 50-51).

Comics scholarship presents a more flexible definition that reflects the range of comics actually used in the practice of TESOL. By saying that comics should simply have a coherent theme or message, rather than needing to tell a story, this broader definition includes the non-narrative comics in fig. 2.2.3 and 2.2.7. By characterizing words as an optional component of comics, wordless incarnations of the medium can also be included as well. Additionally, since this definition includes both single image and multiple image comics, self-contained single panel comics like the ones in fig. 2.2.6 and 2.2.10 are now also included. By allowing character language to appear in word balloons or captions, this definition additionally covers the kind of caption usage seen in fig. 2.2.10 and 2.2.11. Moreover, by simply classifying all comic art as simplification of real visuals, this definition gets rid of the false, difficult to parse dichotomy between cartoony and realistic art in the definition of comics discussed in section 2.2.

The comics scholars’ definition can certainly help instructors of ESL/EFL understand the range and variance in the structure of potentially useful comics-format teaching aids. However, it still has some shortcomings where TESOL comics pedagogy is concerned. While the definition of comics proposed by modern TESOL scholars is too limiting to accurately describe the range of comics used in
TESOL, the comics scholarship definition synthesized from the work of Eisner, McCloud and Cohn is too inclusive. By removing the most common features of comics (word balloons, narrative captions, distinctly separate panels, and narrative) from the definition of comics itself, comics scholars include as “comics” a number of items that ESL/EFL students are unlikely to recognize as comics. Because comics no longer have to have a narrative the medium can theoretically include instruction manuals and other illustrated activity guides, such the elementary school learning resources seen in fig. 2.3.1. Furthermore, because comics no longer need word balloons or even words, Eisner et al.’s definition can also include the children’s picture book samples in fig. 2.3.2 and 2.3.3. These figures are particularly ESL/EFL relevant, as they feature a sample from a bilingual Bible adaptation marketed to EFL Sunday schools in South Korea and pages from a book by Rosemary Wells, whose work is endorsed by numerous TESOL professionals (“Worcester;” Albury; Johnson; Gordon 2). Finally, because no specific features of the cartoony or realistic style are specified, the photographic collage seen back in fig. 2.1.3 could also be seen as a comic, because two-dimensional photographs with superimposed word balloons are less realistic and more abstract than actual visual stimuli.

In Eisner, McCloud, and Cohn’s domain of comics scholarship, well outside the purview of the contemporary TESOL professionals’ definition, it may be all well and good to say that the photo collage in fig. 2.1.3 and the materials in the three figures immediately below are comics in theory. This is not compatible, however, with the practical notions of ESL/EFL teachers and learners who have a cultural perception of what comics are and are not. Ultimately, Tiemensma’s definition and the definition generated by Eisner et al. are burdened with the same flaw: these definitions simply do not characterize the nature of “comics” as it is perceived by actual users of comics in authentic TESOL settings. Clearly, a third definition, truly tailored to TESOL, is needed.
Hey Kids!

1. Complete the Dot-to-Dot to make a mini-poster. Color it in!
2. Share it with your family!

(Your name)
can prevent wildfires.

Family Talk!

Dear Parent/Caregiver:
Did you learn about Smokey Bear when you were young? What Smokey Bear stories can you remember? Please take a moment to share your memories with your child. If you are not familiar with Smokey Bear, invite your child to share Smokey’s story with you.

1. Fold the paper in half widthwise.
2. Fold the paper in half the opposite direction and fold in half one more time.

Fig. 2.3.1. Top: A connect-the-dots activity page. Bottom: Illustrated instructions (“Dot-to-Dot”; Park “Book 1” 226; “Teach and Learn”). Public Domain.
Fig. 2.3.2. The *See With Me Bible*, drawn by Dennis Jones (D. Jones 105). © Dennis Jones. Used with permission.

Fig. 2.3.3. *Shy Charles*, by Rosemary Wells (Wells 1, 2). © Rosemary Wells. Used with permission.
2.4. The Definition of Comics for TESOL Purposes

Tiemensma’s definition of comics is useful for teachers because it aptly describes what most learners expect comics to look like. Eisner et al.’s definition is useful as well, because it characterizes comics that are pedagogically useful but unconventionally formatted. Unfortunately, both of these definitions also create a gap between theory and reality, characterizing comics differently than they would be characterized in practice by students and instructors. Dilemmas remain. How far can a comic stray from Tiemensma’s apt description of common comics features and still have the same educational utility as most other comics? Are text-heavy, non-narrative nonfiction comics like *Ripley’s Believe it or Not* useful in comics-specific classroom activities, or do they stray too far from conventional comics to belong in TESOL comics pedagogy? Can children’s picture books ever be presented to students as comics? Does an illustrated instruction manual readily take on comics-like properties if its artwork is simplified and word balloons/captions are added to it? Teachers of ESL/EFL who are curious about TESOL comics pedagogy may very well ask these and many similar questions without getting a satisfactory answer from the two definitions outlined above.

To solve such dilemmas, practitioners of TESOL comics pedagogy must not see the TESOL scholarship and comics scholarship approaches to defining comics as an either/or proposition. Instead, they should regard elements of both definitions as useful and valid. To better understand how Tiemensma’s tight definitional parameters and the broader characterizations put forward by Eisner, McCloud and Cohn can be used to identify the definitional boundaries of comics, let us compare the boundaries of the comics medium to the boundaries of individual languages such as Hmong, Somali, English, and so on.

Just as the boundaries of “comics” seem unclear and arbitrary in both definitions above, linguists notice similar unclear boundaries when defining an individual language and determining what separates that language from other languages. One of the most obvious ways to differentiate one
language from another is by looking at mutual intelligibility (Hurley). After all, if two different
language speakers can understand each other, are they not speaking the same language? This sounds
commonsensical, but falls flat in practice. For instance, Cantonese Chinese and Mandarin Chinese are
regarded as different dialects of the same language by their speakers, but are mutually unintelligible
(“Yue”). Conversely, one can look at the case of Norwegian and Swedish. Speakers of these two
languages can understand each other with minimal difficulty, but the world recognizes Norwegian and
Swedish as separate languages (Daniela & Reiss 74).

To solve this problem, linguists have treated the tangible property of mutual intelligibility as
just one component of individual human languages such as English, Sami, and so on. Other
components are less tangible: they are political and cultural. In a cultural sense, the boundaries of a
language are defined by the people who actually speak it. In a political sense, one language ends and
another begins where the political rulers of a group of language speakers say it does. The latter two
components are quite subjective, and give linguists and language users the ability to define and redefine
a given language in a way that satisfies those who actually use and encounter the language (Hurley). In
short, individual languages have some qualities that can be observed empirically, but they are also
socially constructed by groups of speakers (Isac & Reiss 74-75). Since these social constructs can shift
and change, there is in a sense just one human language upon which all individual human languages are
constructed, the Universal Grammar discovered by renowned linguist Noam Chomsky (N. Smith).

In the same way that there is one human language with many distinct variations, Neil Cohn
posits that that there is one “visual language” that humans use, and that comics comprise one distinct
variation of visual language (Early Writings 9-14). As to where comics end and other forms of visual
language begin, Cohn states that “comics can only be understood as a sociological, literary and cultural
artifact, independent from the internal structures comprising them” (Early Writings 14). In this way,
Universal Grammar is to Somali as visual language is to comics, and Somali is to Hmong as the comics
medium is to children’s books, or printed text, or any other variation of visual language. Moreover, like Somali, Hmong, English, etc., the boundaries of comics, children’s books, and other visual languages are determined in part by the users and creators of those visual languages. ESL/EFL pedagogy consultant Stephen Cary further builds on Cohn’s notion of comics as a social construct. Through his work with countless students and instructors, Cary compiles a list of the art forms most commonly accepted as comics by ESL/EFL learners and instructors: single panel cartoons, newspaper-format comic strips, comic books, and book-length graphic novels (Cary 10-11). With this in mind, those who work in the field of TESOL can use the two definitions described in 2.2 and 2.3 to treat comics as the social artifact they are, defining comics in a flexible way that addresses the varying expectations of ESL/EFL students from many different cultures.

Elements of all of the characterizations of comics above can be combined to create an appropriately useful definition of comics for TESOL purposes: Comics are simplified or abstracted images, sometimes combined with words, that tell a story or demonstrate a concept (McCloud Understanding 28, 70-73; Eisner 16). Comics employ a variety of conventions, most commonly word balloons, captions, multiple images, and narrative structure (Tiemensma 4-6). Currently, the most universally recognized forms of comics are single panel cartoons, newspaper-format comic strips, comic books, and book-length graphic novels, but such perceptions may vary from learner to learner (Cary 10-11; Cohn Early Writings 14).

This new definition, assembled from a multidisciplinary coalition of linguistics, TESOL scholarship, comics scholarship, and classroom pedagogy, can now truly address the needs of TESOL professionals as they select (or create) comics material for their classroom. It references Tiemensma’s cultural sensibilities about what a comic should look like, allowing teachers to know what expectations students generally have of comics. It also references Eisner, McCloud, and Cohn’s description of the functional structure of comics, so that teachers can recognize how comics transmit messages and
identify mediums that are similar to comics and may have comparable educational value. Finally, it uses Cohn and Cary’s notion of comics as a social artifact. This helps teachers realize that, while certain art forms are more likely or less likely to be recognized as comics by students, perceptions of the boundaries of the comics medium may vary by culture and by individual.

2.5. Case Studies in the Usefulness of Comics Classification to ESL/EFL Instructors

By relying so heavily on the TESOL and comics scholarship definitions created before it, this TESOL-tailored definition is not a superior replacement to earlier characterizations of comics. Rather, instructors who are interested in effective TESOL comics pedagogy would do well to use all three definitions together. The definition of comics for TESOL purposes completes the earlier two definitions and allows them to work together, while the earlier two definitions in turn give additional meaning and dimension to the summarized information in this third and final definition. To show you how these three definitions can be applied to actual teaching practice, I will now describe a number of short case studies from my own teaching experiences, instances where I utilized the information in the three definitions above to better serve my students through the use of comics.

The definition of comics derived from TESOL scholarship and linguistics has helped me properly accommodate the tastes and sensibilities of individual students of mine when giving them comics for the purposes of enjoyment and reading practice. In South Korea, numerous students of mine, upon learning that I draw and collect comics, let me know that they too had an interest in comic books, and asked to borrow American comics from my collection. Realizing that young comics fans tend to read typical comics from large publishing houses, affiliated with pop culture and characterized by the features outlined by Tiemensma, I chose to give my students comics where character language generally appeared in word balloons, narration typically appeared in captions, and stories were told in multiple panel-format. After all, my students were not asking to experience new or unusual kinds of
comics; they were asking to experience new language through the kind of comics they already knew and liked.

Tiemensma’s definition is also useful in another way when I recommend manageable, visually supported reading for students who have no particular interest in comics but are struggling to find reading material they can understand with ease. Because these students are not already interested in comics, they may see mainstream comics’ fictional narratives, cartoony art styles and pop cultural tropes (superheroes, teen romance, talking animals, etc.) as useless or uninteresting “fluff.” To avoid this potential problem, I eschew works with features strongly associated with Tiemensma’s limited but commonly accepted definition of comics. In one such case, I was approached by an international graduate student who came to the tutoring center I worked in, seeking help with general reading ability. She was a serious scholar, not interested in fictional stories, cute cartoony characters, short humorous sequences, or most of the other tropes typically associated with comics. Still, it was apparent that she could benefit from the visual context provided by comics. Knowing that she had a great appetite for nonfiction and interesting facts, I gave her a paperback collection of Ripley’s Believe it or Not. Perhaps not strikingly recognizable as a comic, Ripley’s still provides helpful visual context for written English in the same way that other more conventional comics would. In another similar situation, an international medical student approached me, looking for texts on biology that were as informative as her primary texts but easier to read. I recommended a number of graded science readers to her, and lent her my copy of Larry Gonick’s Cartoon Guide to Genetics.

While comics given for pleasure reading may be selected based on their general look and feel as measured against Tiemensma’s listing of common comics features, comics used for specific pedagogical goals should be scrutinized more carefully. This is where the definition of comics provided by Eisner, McCloud and Cohn can be quite useful. The definition draws ESL/EFL instructors’ attention to the variety of function, structure, space, and style found in the comics medium, helping instructors to
know their options and make informed decisions as they seek out comics.

When an instructor understands that comics may have any number of themes or messages beyond the conveyance of a narrative, they will be able to search for a wider variety of comics that serve specific purposes or cover specific content areas. Internet searches for phrases like nonfiction comics have allowed me to find Guy Delisle’s travelogue/political essay comic book Pyongyang: A Journey in Korea and recommend it to a colleague of mine who wanted to find visually supported reading related to her course topics: global politics and social justice (fig. 2.5.1). Similarly, by understanding that comics may or may not have words, I have been able to search for a wealth of wordless comics that prompt productive language skills. Such works compel my students to be creative by adding their own words to the narrative (fig. 2.2.5 and 2.2.6). Similarly, my familiarity with captioned single panel comics has helped me find many short, one panel comics with easily removable captions. Such comics are ideal for classroom activities where students must either match captions to their appropriate illustrations or create new captions of their own (fig. 2.2.10).

Of course, learning which kinds of comics exist is merely the first step in comics selection. The comics scholars’ definition of comics also helps teachers of ESL/EFL to know how the features of comics can vary. My reading of Eisner, McCloud, and Cohn’s body of work has helped me become more aware that artwork and text can have a variety of relationships in comics, and that these relationships can be used to different teaching ends. For instance, while I was working as an English trainer for an international construction company, I was approached by a student who wanted some extra practice reading. I had already noticed a problem when this student read English language instruction manuals related to his trade. He had great difficulty relating the pictures to the text. Instead, he tended to read the text while ignoring the pictures, or “read” the pictures while ignoring the text. To correct this, I gave him a Beetle Bailey paperback. I selected Beetle Bailey because that particular comic strip often makes its pictures and text interdependent so that neither component is fully
meaningful without the other. Confronted with visuals and text that completed each other like two pieces of a puzzle, my student was able to develop better reading skills that suited his vocational
language needs (fig. 2.5.2). In another situation, I needed to teach a group of beginner level ESL/EFL learners the relationship between certain determiners (this, that, these, those) and plurality/proximity. In this case, the language presented needed to exactly match the imagery without ambiguity. It was important that students could clearly see multiple objects and the space between objects in the comic strip, and relate this information directly to the text. For these purposes, I carefully created a comic strip where the words and pictures paralleled each other, each telling the exact same story at the exact same pace (fig. 2.5.3). Perhaps the most important message teachers can take away from my definition of comics for TESOL purposes is the message that the users of comics help define the medium. This means that user input, specifically student input, can make the presence of comics in the classroom more powerful. My colleague Kurt Nieman, whom I have worked with at Metropolitan State University in Minnesota, knew this all too well when he approached me to create a series of comics for his TOEFL preparation course. At his suggestion, I tailored these comics to the requests of his students. His students specifically asked that I create a comic that put their vocabulary words in the mouths of talking cockroaches and rats, two very common kinds of wildlife in their home environment of urban Taiwan. The comic in fig. 2.5.4 marks the first in a series of several vocabulary-focused, vermin themed comics I created for Mr. Nieman’s classroom. Nieman reports that the comics not only delighted the students, but also noticeably improved their comprehension and retention of new vocabulary, proving more effective than other visual aids the students had not had a hand in creating and defining (K. Nieman, personal communication, March 30, 2011).

The principle of student input as a tool to amplify the impact of comics in the ESL/EFL classroom can also be utilized by instructors who do not draw their own comics. When teaching American culture alongside American English, for example, I have often chosen to use comics featuring Batman, the Simpsons, Snoopy, Donald Duck, and so on, knowing that my students already perceive such comics as iconic symbols of the culture and language they are studying. When culture is
Fig. 2.5.2. *Beetle Bailey*, by Mort Walker (Walker “Beetle”). © King Features syndicate. Used with permission.

Fig. 2.5.3. A grammar worksheet in comic strip form.
Recine 41

Fig. 2.5.4. A TOEFL preparation comic that I designed, based on student input.

less of a focus and I am simply trying to maximize my students’ comfort with the reading material as they struggle to learn a new language, I will often use comics associated with the regional styles of the students’ home cultures. In these cases, when teaching Asian students I am likely to use Japanese comics, which stylistically exemplify Asian cartooning conventions. In similar interactions with European ESL/EFL learners, I frequently use English language translations of the Francophone comics *Asterix* and *Tintin*, two series that are strongly symbolic of European cartooning and European popular culture. I have often seen my students’ eyes light up when presented with a comic strip or cartooning style associated with the comforts of their home language and culture, and I have found that such
comfort can reduce anxiety and cause the learning process to go more smoothly.

2.6. Defining Comics: What ESL/EFL Instructors Should Know and Do

The overview of the varied definitions in this section, followed by the case studies outlined immediately above, points to what TESOL professionals should know and do in order to use the varied definitions of comics to their advantage as they teach. Teachers should know that the comics students are likely to read for fun fit under Tiemensma’s definition of comics. When gathering or recommending materials for pleasure reading, teachers should include comics that tell a story with a combination of words and pictures, use word balloons for character dialogue and captions for narration, etc.

Teachers can also make good use of comics that do not match the typical form of popular reading but do line up with Eisner, McCloud, and Cohn’s broader characterizations of the comics medium. Comics that are non-narrative, transmitting facts and ideas rather than conventional stories, may provide a useful visually supported learning experience to ESL/EFL students who are otherwise not interested in comics or fictional stories. To help students learn English content as well as English language skills, teachers should offer comics such as *Ripley’s Believe it or Not* and the highly academic comics-format work of Larry Gonick. For lower level learners who need classroom support for their skills and are not ready for extensive reading, wordless comics are also very useful as language prompts or visually supportive companions to written text.

Teachers should also pay attention to Cary and Cohn’s assertion that the comics medium, much like an individual ethnic or regional language, is in part defined via social construct. This is to say that comics are defined by a given group of people who use them. One group of students may recognize Dennis Jones’ *See With Me Bible* (fig 2.3.2) as a comic book while another group of students may recognize it as a children’s picture book. If students who recognize it as a children’s picture book happen to be adolescent or adult, they may find the use of Dennis Jones’ work to be demeaning or
condescending. TESOL professionals should be aware of their students’ perceptions of the boundaries of the comics medium and present their students with comics material that addresses such sensibilities.

Finally, teachers should understand that the comics medium has at least as many different genres as standard literature. Comics can be fictional, nonfictional, historical, wordless, or quite wordy. While the medium is most famous for humorous children’s stories and action/adventure sequences featuring powerful heroes, there are also comics about science, math, travel, the daily lives of ordinary people, and every topic in between. Armed with the knowledge of the versatile body of work within the medium of comics, teachers can and should seek out different comics for different learning situations. For instance, an ESL/EFL teacher who wants to teach history to his or her students should be aware of the existence of nonfiction comics that educate readers and be able to seek such comics out.

You may notice that in discussing the direct application of the three definitions of comics above, I mentioned instances where I either selected or created comics on behalf of my colleagues rather than for the benefit of my own students. In turn, my colleagues, their students, and my own students have all influenced comics selection and usage in my teaching practice. Moreover, the three definitions themselves are distilled from the work of many other TESOL professionals and from comics and linguistics professionals who have an academic kinship with the field of TESOL. The web of mutual alliances demonstrated and described above illustrates yet another important component of TESOL comics pedagogy: networking. Effective utilization of comics as a teaching aid should be done in collaboration with the surrounding TESOL community, the broader education community, and the cultural and social forces that encapsulate both the learning process and the creation of comics. The next section of this thesis will address the collaborative nature of TESOL comics pedagogy in greater depth.
3. Current Use of Comics by ESL/EFL Learners and TESOL Professionals

3.1. Comics and Global, Cross-Cultural Communication

“Our real education begins outside the classroom with the joy of discovery,” writes the journalist Paddy Wordworth (“Our Real Education”). When it comes to learning about other language and cultures, Wordworth’s words are especially true of comics, due to their cross-cultural, worldwide popularity, a popularity that permeates the classroom and extends far beyond it. The French comic book series *Asterix* has been translated into 107 languages (“Translations”). *Tintin*, a popular Belgian comic book series, is also available in more than 100 languages (“Fun Facts”). Similarly, Disney Publishing International states that its comics are “printed across 85 countries in more than 75 languages,” and that its company is “the largest publisher of children's comics (excluding manga)” (Levine 1). By Disney’s own admission, Japanese comics, also known as “manga,” maintain an even larger global presence than Disney’s own impressively popular lineup (Levine 1). Internationally popular comics in turn are tied to other globally distributed media products. Movies featuring comic book characters such as Batman, Spider-Man, Superman, The Avengers, and so on are global box office hits. Similarly, popular animated television shows such as *The Simpsons* and *Spongebob Squarepants* appear in many countries, along with their licensed comics.

Clearly, comics are associated with a number of internationally recognizable stories and characters. It is perhaps for this reason that the comics medium itself is a highly recognizable, commonly seen form of mass media the world around. Moreover, unlike their visual cousins, television, movies, and video games, comics can be disseminated to classrooms and other settings with little or no technology or infrastructure, as I mentioned in section 1 of this paper. The iconic nature of comics, combined with their ease of production and distribution, make the art form ideal for the sharing of ideas and knowledge across international borders and cultural boundaries. This kind of sharing is
integral to the profession of TESOL, where a global language is taught to people from around the world.

Comics’ ability to traverse linguistic, social, and political barriers is useful to TESOL professionals and also has not been lost on nations and governments wishing to export their language and culture to others. At the height of their colonial power in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the British used English language comics to promote their culture in India, Hong Kong, and Japan. In turn, the local cultures created comics of their own that satirized or countered the imperialist cultural teachings found in British comics (Petersen 114, 117, 119-120). A similar exchange happened after World War II when the United States used comics as a Westernizing influence during its military postwar occupation of Japan (Yoshimi, 234; Gravett 12-13). The Japanese responded with their own locally created comics (Gravett 13). To this day, the Japanese comics industry has a noticeable influence on U.S. popular culture, entertaining Westerners with Eastern ideas and visual styles (Chen 1-3).

Alongside educators and governments, religions have also harnessed the cross-linguistic, multicultural power of comics. As Islam encroached on Hinduism in the 1970s, Hindus began to publish popular comic book adaptations of Hindu legends in the predominantly Muslim nation of Malaysia. Meanwhile in India, where Islam and Hinduism were also competing for influence, the comic series *Badahur*, featuring a devout Hindu Indian superhero, went into print in 1976 (Petersen 117-118). Christians of the 20th century have also used comics heavily in their attempt to proselytize to many different language users and cultures. Legendary Christian cartoonist Jack Chick has a language count comparable to the international hits *Tintin* and *Asterix* (“Tract Languages”). In fact, with a circulation of over one billion, Christian cartoon pamphlet creator Jack Chick is heralded by many comics fans as “the most widely distributed underground cartoonist in the world” (Marshall). Islam is following the lead of Hinduism and Christianity where comics are concerned. Teksheel Media group’s
Muslim superhero comic *The 99* is internationally distributed, with a message that Islam possesses “values shared by the entire world” (“About Us”).

With their ties to international popular culture, global politics, and world religions, comics are turned to by many people who want to glimpse into another culture or get a feel for a different language. Comics have certainly proven useful in out-of-school cross-cultural learning among for many individuals who find themselves faced with a new language and culture. Manas Sanyal, an Indian migrant to the American Midwest, reports that comics were instrumental in his cultural and linguistic adjustment. As a child in his home country, Manas and his peers learned English from English language editions of *Tintin, Asterix,* and locally created comics published by Amar Chitra Katha Media (M. Sanyal, personal communication, April 13, 2012). Ingeborg Wie Henriksen, a Norwegian national who studied in America and currently works as a teacher in Oslo, credits American comics not only for her English proficiency but also for her knowledge of and interest in American culture, a knowledge she shares with her students (I. Wie Henricksen, personal communication, October 31, 2011). Alex Hatheway, a bilingual instructor of ESL/EFL who teaches international students in the U.S., used Mandarin language comics to help himself learn Chinese during his years in China and Taiwan (A. Hatheway, personal communication, July 16, 2012). Erik Meyer, a bilingual substitute teacher who currently works with ESL/EFL students in the North Dakota’s public schools, also used comics to create a social and linguistic bridge between himself and his students. He turned to Walter Moer’s popular German language comic book series *Das kleine Arschloch* as he acclimated to German culture and language while he taught EFL in Germany (E. Meyer, personal communication, January 28, 2011). I myself have learned much about Korean language and culture by reading “Tiger the Long Tail,” a Korean language fantasy comic and “Nawi Manhwa Yusan Dapsagi,” a Korean language graphic novel series designed to educate readers about local geography and history.
3.2. TESOL Professionals’ Resources for Effective Comics Use

Noting the use of comics by so many cross-cultural communicators and learners, TESOL professionals have come to regard comics as a useful tool. Stephen Krashen, one of the more prominent researchers in modern TESOL scholarship, offers personal testimonials on the usefulness of comics in language learning, creating a list of anecdotes similar to mine in 3.1. Building on anecdotal evidence for TESOL comics pedagogy, Krashen actively promotes comics as an important TESOL tool (*The Power of Reading* 106-109). Stephen Cary, author of the TESOL comics pedagogy book *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom*, showcases his own list of anecdotes from students and teachers alike who see comics as a useful tool in TESOL (5). Bonnie Norton, a Vancouver-based TESOL researcher, is generating ongoing TESOL comics pedagogy of her own and indexes the emerging comics-related work of other TESOL researchers (Norton & Vanderheyden 203-207).

As teacher interest in TESOL comics pedagogy has grown, governmental support systems for teachers of ESL/EFL have responded, generating resources for this subdiscipline. Supports vary in scope and depth and occur on the international, national, and regional level. The most visible international governmental resource for instructors of ESL/EFL who want to use comics in their classrooms is the “Educomics Project,” a joint effort by Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Spain and the U.K. to promote comics use in many areas of education, including TESOL. This project is directly sponsored by the European Union and publicly provides advice, sample lesson plans, and research findings to ESL/EFL teachers (“Comenius”). The United Nations also supports TESOL comics pedagogy through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO has conducted and published studies that touch on the use of comics in TESOL settings in non-English speaking countries such as Senegal (Montagnes 4), Romania (Alexandru), and Myanmar (Middelborg 21). In addition, UNESCO endorses the use of comics in language education in its 2005 international teachers’ guide (N’Namdi 9). The Commonwealth of Nations, a collective of former British colonial countries, offers more specific
guidance on the use of comics in the classroom. In the Commonwealth’s web-based resource for
English teachers, the Open Resources for English Language Teaching (ORELT) Portal, sample lesson
plans that incorporate comics into ESL/EFL lessons are publicly available to instructors (Boruah
“Module 3” 37, 66; Boruah “Module 5” 19).

While the European Union, the United Nations, and the Commonwealth have made a noticeable
mark on the subdiscipline of TESOL comics pedagogy, their global influence is rivaled and perhaps
even overshadowed by a single country: the United States. One of this country’s most prominent global
initiatives is the U.S. State Department’s Office of English Language Programs, which works with U.S.
embassies to promote ESL/EFL education abroad (“Office”). The Office’s academic journal, available
online, offers an list of comics-related activities for the ESL/EFL classroom (Csabay 155-157), a list of
comics that ESL/EFL students may enjoy (Chou et al. 21), and research pieces on the value of comics
in language acquisition (Fay 2-11). Moreover, the State Department’s Fulbright Program, which also
promotes overseas English education, advises its instructors to use comics as teaching materials
(“Orientation & Policy” 28).

Domestic support for comics in TESOL comes from many states, cities, and school districts in
the U.S. A truly thorough cataloguing of local efforts to support comics use in TESOL in America
could comprise an entire Master’s thesis in its own right, so only a few examples will be given. State
level examples include the official use of comic books published by the National Reading Styles
Institute in Kentucky’s statewide curriculum for ESL classrooms (National Reading Styles Institute 1-
4) and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s recommendation of comics as a teaching aid
in the state’s official guide for ESL instruction (Boals 6, 23-25). City and county level agencies support
TESOL comics pedagogy as well. San Diego’s public Vista Adult School, an adult basic education
institute, has a section of comics-based textbooks for ESL students and instructors in its library
(Moleson 1). Individual school districts in Nevada (“ESL Curriculum” 41), Massachusetts,
(“Peabody”), North Carolina (‘Useful Links”), Pennsylvania (Pierce), and most other states recommend comics as a TESOL aid as well.

Other English speaking nations are beginning to follow America’s lead in supporting TESOL comics pedagogy. Australia’s Department for Education and Child Development endorses TESOL comics pedagogy at the national level (Groves 36), while both the Northern Territory and Victoria Province public school systems mention officially recommend comics for use in ESL classrooms (“ESL Secondary” 79; “Secondary Years”). At Australia’s local level, schools in cities such as North Brighton, South Australia also endorse TESOL comics pedagogy (“Brighton Secondary” 59). In New Zealand, TESOL comics pedagogy enjoys support from the New Zealand National Library (“Graphic Novels”) and from public schools such as Botany Downs Secondary College (Sturgess 3). The United Kingdom and Canada provide little or no domestic support for TESOL comics pedagogy on the national level, aside from their active participation the Educomics Project and ORELT, respectively. Regional resources in these countries are more common and include Scottish governmental research endorsing of comics in the ESL classroom (McGonigal & Arizpe 48-50, 65-81), along with a similar endorsement of comics as an ESL/EFL classroom aid aid from the Canadian province of Alberta (Panwar 207).

Although governmental venues host the most visible supports for TESOL professionals who wish to use comics in their classrooms, it is important to remember that comics are generally created by private interests like the ones mentioned in section 3.1. Companies such as Teksheel Media, Amar Chitra Katha, Disney, and the National Reading Styles Institute all work to create materials for use in actual comics-based teaching. Less profit-driven private institutions such as literacy promotion agencies and professional educator associations also have a vested interest in the use of comics in the classroom. Such organizations create many teachers’ resources related to TESOL comics pedagogy. Thus, the public support outlined in the paragraphs above is guided by content from the invisible hand of the private sector, in both its for-profit and nonprofit incarnations.
The comics and textbook publishing industries provide the most prominent private sector support of comics-based ESL/EFL teaching. Amar Chitra Katha and NSRI, already mentioned above, publish TESOL-oriented comic book adaptations of classic stories. Other publishers generating similar material include Archie Comics and King Features Syndicate, who sponsor editions ESL/EFL adapted of Archie and Beetle Bailey, respectively (Scarpelli & Boldman; Walker “I Feel Good”). Rather than simply allowing their comics to be repackaged as resources for the field of TESOL, some comics professionals such as Brian Boyd and Bill Zimmerman have created online comic strips specifically intended for use by ESL/EFL learners and TESOL professionals (fig. 3.2.1 and 3.2.2) (Boyd “Grammarman”; Zimmerman & Bloom Make Beliefs). Even more direct curricular support comes from the short comic strip spots embedded in many ESL/EFL textbooks from major publishers. Oxford University Press, Cambridge, and Pearson all embed comics into their materials in the same manner as the visual samples seen in fig. 1.1.2.

Fig. 3.2.2. Opening sequence from the first episode Grammarman, by Brian Boyd (Boyd “Introducing”). © Brian Boyd. Used with permission.
Publishers of teachers’ resources provide additional literature that helps TESOL professionals better use publisher, syndicate, and artist-generated comics resources like the ones listed above. A number of books about comics in language education have been published recently, including Stephen Cary’s Going Graphic, Michael Bitz’s When Commas Meet Kryptonite, Maureen Bakis’ The Graphic Novel Classroom, and Katie Monnin’s Teaching Graphic Novels (Books). Among the popular books currently available, only Going Graphic places its primary focus on the practice of TESOL (Books). However, the other books mentioned at least touch on the subject of TESOL and contain information that is useful to ESL/EFL instructors and mainstream English language arts instructors alike. In
addition to book offerings, scholarly journals such as the *Asian EFL Journal* (Nikolova 272), *TESOL Quarterly* (Liu), *The Internet TESL Journal* (J. Derrick), and *Language Awareness* (Lucas 1) also have articles that either feature or mention comics as an aid to ESL/EFL instruction. TESOL resource websites provide comics-related information as well, with sites such as *ESL Teachers Board* (Hughes), *Dave s ESL Caf é* (Mark), *Teach Children ESL* (*Teach Children ESL*), *Boggle s World ESL* (“ESL Comics”), and others, all hosting material related to classroom comics use.

Outside of the for-profit print and web publishing industries lies another source of private sector support for TESOL comics pedagogy: the nonprofit professional association. TESOL International, perhaps the most visible professional association for ESL/EFL teachers worldwide, lists useful comic book-based resources and lesson plan advice for TESOL, both on its website and in its print materials (Corsi; Brown). The American Library Association, a coalition of professional librarians in the United States, endorses the use of comic books in TESOL and hosted a workshop on the value of comics in ESL/EFL pedagogy at its 2011 ALA Annual Conference and Exhibition (Naficy). Similarly, the International Reading Association provides an online comics-based website for use in ESL/EFL classrooms (“Student Interactive”). The National Association of Comic Art Educators also disseminates TESOL comics pedagogy resources worldwide in a variety of ways (“Graphic Novels”). Regional membership-based professional teachers’ associations such as New Jersey TESOL and TESL Ontario provide teachers with advice on comics use as well (D. Derrick; Judy Smith).

### 3.3. Comics Use in Modern TESOL Practice

How does the sum total of the social, governmental and private supports for TESOL comics pedagogy manifest itself tangibly in actual TESOL practice? Against the backdrop of social forces and professional resources listed in sections 3.1 and 3.2, several common uses of comics arise. Comics seem to be especially popular as an aid to literacy. Some oft-recommended comics-related activities
focus on extensive reading, with teachers of ESL/EFL encouraging their students to read longer comic books for enjoyment. Other activities focus on more basic reading skills, using the visual information in comics to support text comprehension. Comics also enjoy popularity in modern ESL/EFL writing pedagogy, as instructors prompt their students to add words to the images in comics, just as I did in the comics seen fig. 2.2.4.

Comics are most frequently used in extensive reading. Such reading is facilitated and lightly guided by teachers to encourage greater reading proficiency (Krashen *Power of Reading* 100-110). The utility of comics in extensive reading has been the subject of a number of scholarly studies, many of them conducted by the TESOL discipline’s resident comic book enthusiast, Dr. Stephen Krashen. According to Krashen, teachers often steer reluctant and low proficiency readers toward comic books as a way to draw them in to extensive reading so they can later move on to more challenging non-comics reading with less visual support (*Power of Reading* 103). Building on Krashen’s research, Stephen Cary has noted that school libraries also stock comics to draw in students and increase general interest in reading (30-31). While much extensive comics reading involves student-selected comics, some TESOL professionals assign specific comic reading to their students. Culturally charged books such as American Born Chinese, Maus, and Persepolis have all been assigned in public school English classes as a means of drawing ESL/EFL learners from other cultures into reading-related activities (Templer; Stearns; Bakis).

In addition to facilitating extensive reading, comics are used to promote more basic reading skills. A few types of comics-based reading comprehension activities are mentioned frequently in a wide body of teachers’ resources. Prompting students to use both visual and written clues to place out-of-sequence comic panels in proper order seems to be a common activity (McCoy 1-2; Advanced Teacher Training; J. Derrick) (fig. 3.3.1). Separating a comics’ text from its images and prompting students to properly match the words and images correctly (or add new language of their own) is also
frequently suggested (J. Derrick; Boyd “Blank”; DeRykel 3) (fig. 3.3.2). Both of these activities, along with other common classroom activities that use comics to teach reading, encourage students to use comics’ extralinguistic visual context to improve reading comprehension and make the task of reading seem less intimidating. Liu notes that TESOL professionals often use the visuals in comics to provide contextual clues to meaning and to make text reading “more enjoyable” (1).

Some common ESL/EFL reading activities treat the acquisition of cultural knowledge not as a component of a literacy lesson but as a primary objective facilitated by literacy. Norton and Vanderheyden have observed that Canadian teachers use comics and cartoon characters as an accessible way to acclimate newly arrived ESL/EFL students to popular culture so they can have a common frame of reference with their classmates and their instructors during class discussions (203-207). To meet this goal, some instructors have created book clubs and in-class group reading activities that use comics to prompt group discussions on cultural values related to the fictional tropes often found in comics (Carter 17; Ranker 296-305; Papple). Overall, ESL/EFL teachers often find comics especially useful for cultural discussions due to their appeal to developing readers, their cultural and political themes, and their use of colloquial language, ethnic accents, and regional dialects (Baker 6, 23).

Finally, comics are used quite frequently in the ESL/EFL education as a writing prompt. Some prompts are fairly simple, encouraging students to simply add words to wordless comics. This common activity is endorsed by Stephen Cary in his book *Going Graphic* and has also been mentioned on popular teaching websites such as *Comics in the Classroom (Dot) Net* (Tingley “Owly”) and *TeachersFirst3.0* (“TeachersFirst”). A comic I created for my own version of this popular activity appears in fig. 3.3.3. Even comics that have words are often used in writing exercises, because the pictures still carry a lot of unwritten information. Students can and do mentally add their own words to comics as they read them, whether the comics themselves contain words or not (Norton & Vanderheyden 211).
What's her story?

A. Cut and arrange in order.

Fig. 3.3.1. An out-of-sequence comic strip (Park “Book 3” 78; “Teach and Learn”). Public domain.

Let's speak

A. Say the expressions about daily activities.

Fig. 3.3.2. A word-picture matching exercise (Park “Book 3” 71; “Teach and Learn”). Public domain.
3.4. Case Studies in the Use of Comics in Their Common Present-Day Roles As a TESOL Aid

Attentive readers may have noticed that the last three figures above are all taken directly from TESOL resources used in my own career. Fig. 3.3.1 and 3.3.2 come from the South Korean national curriculum, which I used in my days as a public school teacher in South Korea. I used the activities in those figures passively. I did not create them myself or make an active choice to use them; they were merely part of the curriculum I was required to follow in my classroom. At the time I encountered these activities, I was not aware that they represented prevalent trends in TESOL comics pedagogy. As my career has progressed and I have become more aware of popular comics-based ESL/EFL classroom
activities, my engagement in comics-related TESOL has become much more active, to the point where I am researching popular uses of comics and creating my own original comics for TESOL purposes, as seen in fig. 3.3.3. Knowing the specific ways comics are commonly used and being able to create activities consistent with those uses is an important aspect of TESOL comics pedagogy, but it is not the only component of good teaching practice where the role of comics in ESL/EFL learning is concerned. In order to effectively utilize one’s knowledge of the current role of comics in TESOL, an instructor must also be mindful of the broader role of comics beyond the classroom and the resources available to users of comics in ESL/EFL instruction. Below, I will provide a number of concrete examples from my own experience that demonstrate real ways to apply one’s knowledge of comics’ established role as a TESOL tool.

There are a number of ways that teachers of ESL/EFL can use their knowledge of comics’ connection to global popular culture, national interests, and religions. As mentioned in section 3.2, certain characters have massive multinational appeal. This is the reason I tend to use Disney characters with nearly every group of learners I teach. They are perhaps the most famous comic book characters in the world, and their presence in my classroom evokes a feeling of comfort and shared knowledge that crosses cultural boundaries. I have used images and comics featuring Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck with students as young as three and as old as 55, from regions as diverse as the Middle East, East Asia, West Asia, Latin America, and East Africa. In most TESOL settings, one can find students who will react to the classic Disney characters with recognition, understanding, and approval. Other comics appeal greatly to some religious or ethnic groups of students but not others. I have used Dennis Jones’ comics-format illustrated Bible to teach ESL/EFL Sunday school students in my wife’s Korean church, but would be unlikely to use the book in more secular contexts. Similarly, I have used English language translations of Won Bok Rhie’s graphic novel Korea Unmasked to help adult South Korean learners boost their reading skills with familiar material they can enjoy. However, I have avoided presenting
Rhie’s work to other Asian students due to its distinctly nationalistic Korean perspective on Asian history.

As I navigate the sometimes thorny trail of comics’ cross-cultural appeal and occasional lack thereof, it has been useful for me to remember that I am not navigating the trail alone; my efforts at TESOL comics pedagogy have a base of support from governmental and private sources. Because I (and perhaps most other teachers of ESL/EFL) teach a multinational base of students, I have found multinational government sources to be the best state-based support for my teaching efforts. It was the European Union’s Educomics program, for example, that inspired me to start recommending Larry Gonick’s sophisticated college level comics-format textbooks to my adult ESL/EFL tutees (Retalis 6, 19). Moreover, when I first began to help East African ESL students in the U.S., I was unsure if they had the same familiarity with comics as my Asian, European and Latin American students. Fortunately, I was able to turn to the United Nations’ broad body of research in TESOL comics pedagogy and find that comics have been used successfully in a wide variety of African TESOL settings (Ouane & Glanz 43). Local resources have been excellent as well. In my work in American public schools I have been delighted to find that local school districts tend to make comics available, both in school libraries and in ESL classrooms.

Privately published comics designed for the TESOL community have also been a great support to me; you will recall that I used a Beetle Bailey paperback to help an EFL student improve his skills at integrating visual context with written words, as mentioned in section 2.5. What I did not mention earlier was the particular kind of paperback I chose to use, a Beetle Bailey collection created jointly by King Features Syndicate and Shinyeong Media, a Seoul-based TESOL resource publisher. In this TESOL-friendly edition designed for South Korean learners and the EFL teachers who work with them, the comics panels are subtitled in Korean and English language idioms are highlighted and explained (fig. 3.4.1). I have used similar collections of modified Peanuts and Archie comics with other low
proficiency students and seen improvements in reading speed and comprehension over time.

Published teachers’ resources related to comics have helped me as well. An article in *TESOL Quarterly* first alerted me to the fact that custom-created comics that support text can serve as a powerful memory aid. Since then, I have often created my own cartoon illustrations to support the target language and grammar of course texts (fig. 3.4.2). By using comics in the manner described in *TESOL Quarterly*, I have been able to replicate the results found in the article (Liu 227, 236). Books such as Stephen Cary’s *Going Graphic* have also given me great ideas for new ways to use comics. Before I read Cary’s book, I felt the need to avoid using the many comic strips and books that use colloquial language. In his book Cary explains that colloquial dialogue in comics “reflects how native
English speakers use dialogue during informal conversation, packed with contractions…
compressions… and reduced forms…” This helped me realize that colloquial language, far from being
distracting and inaccurate, represents real, sometimes challenging language forms. I further realized
that comics provide supportive visual cues that can help ESL/EFL learners decipher colloquial forms
(Cary 152). Since then, I have been more capable of teaching colloquial English to my students, often
using comics of my own creation that make heavy use of Midwestern U.S. colloquial speech (fig.
3.4.3).

Finally, professional teachers’ associations have also supported me in my quest to use comics
effectively in TESOL. When I first began using comics as a teaching aid in South Korea, I was able to
network with many like-minded comics loving teachers and administrators at the professional
development conferences the school district periodically sent me to. My use of comics was met with similar encouragement and collaboration when I returned to the United States and received training in language arts pedagogy from The New Teacher Project, a nonprofit organization that trains teachers for potential work in troubled public school systems. These experiences have not only allowed me to share and exchange ideas but have also given me a legitimate, community-based source of authority to
When I am confronted by school administrators or parents of students who are skeptical about the use of comics as a teaching aid.

3.5. The Current Use of Comics in ESL/EFL Instruction: What Teachers Should Know and Do.

Knowledge of the current, most widely accepted roles of comics in the TESOL profession and society as a whole has informed my personal approach to teaching, as described in section 3.4 above. As demonstrated in my fieldwork, any ESL/EFL teacher can use certain key information about the social/educational roles of comics in modern global society to guide their own use of comics as a teaching aid.

Looking to the role comics have in society, TESOL professionals should be aware that some comics enjoy international appeal, while other comics and cartoon characters have varying popularity in different parts of the world or have only regional appeal. While most ESL/EFL teachers may be aware that certain cartoon characters are internationally famous, they may not be aware of exactly which comics feature will appeal to a given group of learners. Teachers should know, for example, that the Warner Brothers characters (Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, etc.) are not particularly popular in Western Europe and are lesser known in the massive EFL nation of China due to censorship (Flippo, Grimes). Disney characters tend to be more popular in these regions and in the world at large, and Disney comics should be treated as a source of near universal appeal by instructors of ESL/EFL facing diverse student groups. Certain other comics, such as Japanese comics or comics with religious or nationalist themes may appeal to certain nationalities of students while leaving other student ethnic groups disinterested or even offended. Teachers must know do their best to know the tastes of their students and know which comics and cartoon characters appeal to such tastes.

There are a number of teachers’ resources related to the use of comics in TESOL that can help
teachers not only find comics that appeal to their students, but also get advice on how to use comics in specific, educationally beneficial ways. Teachers should know that international, national and local governments all provide guides for the use of comics to teach ESL/EFL. They should also know that numerous print and web resources are available from the private sector as well, both through for-profit publishers and nonprofit organizations created to aid English instructors and learners. TESOL professionals who use comics in their classroom should consult such resources regularly. They should make use of materials available through these resources and follow the excellent advice these resources offer. In this way, teachers can not only benefit from the findings of their colleagues, but also use comics in ways that are broadly approved of by education administrators and society at large.

While the current network of governmental, private, and nonprofit resources for TESOL comics pedagogy has certainly helped a lot of teachers to use comics more effectively in the classroom, it is also important to understand the limitation of comics in their current common usage in ESL/EFL teaching. In the examples of current comics use in section 3.4, it is apparent that comics are primarily used in TESOL to teach reading, cultural knowledge associated with reading material, and writing activities closely tied to the reading of comic books. Such reading and writing activities above make comics useful, but narrowly useful, as a tool in TESOL. Perhaps most glaringly, none of the prevailing uses of comics utilize the comics material that is often embedded as a partial component of published TESOL materials and official ESL/EFL curriculum (fig. 1.1.2).

This is not to say that current comics usage in TESOL is theoretically unsound. Indeed, much research indicates that comics are a powerful tool for reading literacy, writing literacy, and cultural literacy, all important skills for ESL/EFL learners. However, to use comics primarily for literacy, as the TESOL profession currently does, is to ignore a wealth of additional research related to comics and the role of line-drawn comics-style imagery in language acquisition and general learning. There is a large body of academic knowledge that is relevant to TESOL comics pedagogy but is not yet commonly
applied to TESOL situations. A handful of teachers are using parts of this virtually untapped body of knowledge, but more needs to be done. In the next section, I will look at theories that are often undervalued, ignored, or simply unknown within the small but growing arena of TESOL comics pedagogy. Using these theories, I will reveal ways that all instructors of ESL/EFL can properly use the comic artwork that is so ubiquitous in published ESL/EFL materials and create original materials that harness the instructive power of comics in new, increasingly beneficial ways.
4. Maximizing the Effectiveness of Comics in TESOL: Cognitive and Linguistic Theory

4.1. The Evolution of Visual Language

If comics are images that tell a story or demonstrate a concept, many of the modern images that people think of as “art” are functionally far removed from comics. Most art in modern society is decorative, with minimal semantic content. Take the artistic logo for the United States Department of Health and Human Services, seen at the top left in fig. 4.1.1. It does not really tell a story about the organization, and anyone not already familiar with this particular government office will not be able to attach much meaning to the symbol at all. The other images in fig. 4.1.1, a wildlife painting designed for a postage stamp (Levin), an image of a ship printed on a box, and an insect themed tee shirt design also carry relatively little meaning; they may have aesthetic appeal but they exist only as adornment. None of these pieces of artwork carries a discernible message and it is unlikely that the artist even intended to send a message; art in its modern day form is a device sparse in meaning.

The images referenced above are the most common manifestation of art in modern times. However, adornment was not the primary function of art in the ancient world. Like comics, the earliest known art was nearly always designed to send a message or demonstrate a concept. The parallels between ancient art and comics do not end there. Ancient European buffalo cave paintings were line-drawn, like comics, communicating the sacred nature of hunting (fig. 4.1.2). Ancient Egyptian picture writing uses multiple images to tell stories of Egyptian life and mythology, using sequential imagery similar to that of modern comics (McCloud *Understanding Comics* 13-15). The famed South African San Rock paintings used silhouetted, cartoon-like characters to tell stories about the spirit world and the historical actions of the San shamans (fig. 4.1.3) (Petersen 2-3). Mesoamerican artwork attributed speech to its important figures using “speech scrolls,” which archaeologists have noted are similar to word balloons in modern comics (Wirth) (fig. 4.1.4). The Assyrian Stele of Vultures, created in Sumeria, tells a story
in a multiple picture sequence, separating the sequential images with lines that resemble comics panel borders (Petersen 10-11) (fig. 4.1.5). Australian Aboriginal narrative artwork, which first appeared thousands of years ago in Australia, infuses its visual stories with abstract symbols that are neither words nor directly representational, just as comics sometimes do (Petersen 3-5; Cohn “Visual Lexicon” 46-48) (fig. 4.1.6).
In short, the earliest forms of art around the world are, if not exactly comics, a very comic-like form of visual language that I will henceforth refer to as *proto-comics*. Proto-comics sprang up spontaneously in different parts of the ancient world with no evidence of intercultural collaboration or transmission. It would appear then that the earliest precursors to comics occurred as natural form of human expression rather than an invented one. The parallel development of comics across human societies does not end there, however. The earliest proto-comics developed into picture-recitation, the practice of verbally narrating a series of pictures before a live audience for entertainment purposes. This form of proto-comics, like modern comics, combines sequential pictures and words. It arose spontaneously in India, Europe and Japan (Petersen, 12, 18-19, 26, 37-39, 42). Next, in the middle of the first millennium A.D., duplicative printing processes developed simultaneously in the Western and Eastern hemispheres. Soon, China, Japan, England, Germany, and many other Eastern and Western societies began to print collections of line art meant to amuse or inform. These printed materials often featured captions or word balloons, two visual tropes that had already been appearing in non-mass-
produced art in both hemispheres (Petersen 21-36). Such book collections began to be known as “manhua” books in China and Korea, “manga” books in Japan, and “cartoon” books in England. To this day, modern comics go by these names (Petersen 40-41, 79-80).

As you can see, all of the proto-comics art forms that came before the advent of the modern comics medium were designed to inform and entertain, two important functions that cartoonists and
Fig. 4.1.4. Mesoamerican artwork using speech scrolls to depict speech (Harmanşah; Roufs). Public Domain.

Fig. 4.1.5. My recreation of the basic visual elements in the first two panels of the *Stele of Vultures*, based on previous photographs and reconstructions (Winter 13).
teachers both share. Appropriately, the first modern comic strip was invented by a man who was both a cartoonist and a teacher: Rodolphe Toppfer, a Swiss schoolmaster and language instructor who initially began drawing comics to entertain his students. Toppfer’s comic book narratives used multiple images to depict different moments in a single scene and also used word balloons (fig. 4.1.7). The latter technique was still relatively uncommon in Toppfer’s day, and the former was unheard of before Toppfer tried it. Both the use of multiple panels to depict a single scene and the use of word balloons quickly became standard in comics. At this point in human history, world wars, global alliances, international diplomacy, and continent-spanning trade abounded, carrying new ideas and inventions from one part of the world to another more rapidly than ever before. This allowed Topffer’s narrative techniques to spread quickly and change the world’s proto-comics into comics as they are known today.

When one looks at the kinds of comics that are common in both comic book shops and ESL/EFL classrooms in modern times, it is clear to see that Toppfer, building on the work of so many proto-cartoonists before him, revolutionized the visual nature of both popular illustration and classroom imagery (Petersen 49-54; McCloud Understanding Comics 17).
So, how can knowledge of proto-comics help those who teach ESL/EFL to teach more effectively? Well, for one thing, modern comics do not resonate with all modern students. Some cultures and some individuals find comics to be childish or too closely tied to popular culture to be acceptable in a serious learning environment. Proto-comics, on the other hand, can bring an air of history, archaeology and culture into the ESL/EFL classroom. In fact, Vicki Jones, a public school ESL teacher in Texas, has used sequential proto-comics from Mesoamerica and ancient Egypt in her classroom much in the way that many other teachers use modern comics but with the added excitement and intrigue that such ancient artifacts can bring (110-128).

Other lessons on how to use modern comics in the classroom can also be derived from proto-comics. The use of wordless comics as a verbal language prompt, as mentioned in section 2.2, reframes modern comics as proto-comic picture narrations. Such activities encourage students to narrate wordless comic images in the classroom, sometimes on a completely impromptu basis. Enthusiastic student interest this activity often echoes the reception picture narration received as a form of ancient
public entertainment, and the effort students make to find the right words to describe each comic image mimics the challenges faced by travelling picture narrators in the past.

Proto-comics point not just to the innate utility of comics as a tool for human self-expression, learning, and entertainment in the classroom. They also provide clues to the link between comics and the evolution of language, making connections that should be of particular interest to teachers of ESL/EFL. This paper has already demonstrated that the visual language seen in comics, like the human language in speech and writing, is an innate form of human communication. Further research into the history of visual language reveals that comics share an even deeper connection with human language. It seems apparent that “picture writing,” an early form of written language that uses ideograms to represent words, is a visual descendant of the pictures in proto-comics, in which pictures represent objects (McCloud Understanding Comics 13; Olson 1-8) (fig. 4.1.8). Eventually, written language diverged further from the visually referential images first seen in proto-comics and picture writing. As human writing began to serve broader purposes, ideograms proved insufficient, unable to capture abstract semantic meaning or encode phonetic sounds with ease (Frost 273). In response to these new demands, written language evolved to include non-pictorial characters that represented abstract concepts and non-representational characters that symbolized phonemes (Hung & Tzeng, 121-124). To this day, some languages use all three orthographic components: ideograms, characters, and phonemic symbols (fig. 4.1.9). Thus, humanity’s early use of comics-like art to encode meaning is the cradle of written language.

Through the use of comics, this same historical procession from representative pictures to picture writing to ideograms and authentic literacy can occur in the modern ESL/EFL classroom. Fig. 4.1.10 shows a short sequence I used as part of a writing prompt for my students, taken from Andy Runton’s Owly comic book series. I heartily recommend Runton’s work as a TESOL aid, and it is also recommended for ESL/EFL and language arts classrooms by a number of education professionals.
Owly employs the use of picture writing by placing images rather than words in the word balloons of the characters. This technique is designed to get the reader (possibly an ESL/EFL learner or preliterate young child) to imagine the characters’ dialogue in their own words, converting the word balloon imagery into language. Owly compels learners to infer the finer details of a narrative through simple pictures, functioning similarly to cave paintings and indigenous Mesoamerican art (fig. 4.1.2, 4.1.3, 4.1.4, 4.1.5 and 4.1.6).

South Korea’s national curriculum for EFL takes cartoon drawings a step further on literacy’s evolutionary plane. As seen in fig. 4.1.11, some of the national curriculum materials use picture writing as a substitute for specific nouns and prepositions rather than using it as an open ended language
prompt. By giving pictures highly specific semantic meaning and using them to form sentences, the activity in fig. 4.1.11 is different from cave paintings and Mesoamerican art, but similar to ancient art’s
successor, picture writing such as the sample seen in fig. 4.1.8. Fig. 4.1.11’s closest kin, however, is modern character-based written languages such as Chinese and Japanese. Like Chinese and Japanese, fig. 4.1.11 blends recognizable ideograms that reference words and abstract concepts with non-representational words that do not physically resemble their referent meaning. The South Korean national curriculum takes picture writing still an evolutionary step further in fig. 4.1.12. In this figure, the pictures that are no longer truly ideogramic at all, but represent sounds, with an image of an orange representing the o sound, and an image of the number 9 representing an n sound. At this point in the curriculum, students are presented with pictures that take on the properties of Western rather than Eastern orthography, mimicking sounds rather than whole words, much like the Latinate letters of the English alphabet.

Fig. 4.1.11. Ideogramic images in EFL curriculum (Park “Book 2” 119; “Teach and Learn”). Public domain.
A. Look and speak.

- Where is the restroom?
- It's ___ the charger.

Fig. 4.1.12. Pictures as sound substitutes in EFL Curriculum (Park “Book 2” 135; “Teach and Learn”).

Public domain.

The picture writing devices in TESOL-friendly comics like Owly and the varied use of pictures and ideograms in ESL/EFL materials illuminate the development of literacy, both in ESL/EFL learners and in the human race at large. It is apparent that just as proto-comics served as the cradle of human literacy, allowing drawings to develop into ideograms and modern writing, so comics and cartoon art can be used by TESOL professionals as a cradle for literacy in a second language. Students may start by using their imagination to interpret comics in a variety of ways, and then slowly grow to associate meaning with images in more specific ways, linking imagery to lexis, grammar, and even sound. Still, this illumination of the role of art and comics in language development leaves some questions unanswered. Why is human art so innately linked to human language? What psychological properties do art and language have in common? What psychological mechanisms allow us to link pictures to lexis, grammar, and abstract concepts with such ease? In section 4.2, I will explore these questions in depth, looking at psycholinguistic theory as it pertains to the evolution of literacy and the link between pictures and language outlined above.
4.2. Constructivism and the Processing of Visual Language

Because comics and written language are commonly rooted in proto-comics, they can be used together by TESOL professionals to promote English literacy. Scholars have further noted that comics and language, written or otherwise, have a variety of features in common. While comics do not show the cultural variation or mutual unintelligibility of language, they do have certain culturally transmitted features. Most any fan of both Japanese and Western comics will tell you that Japanese comics portray certain emotions and other visually symbolized abstract concepts differently than Western comics. For a side by side comparison of some visual tropes of Japanese and Western comics, see fig. 4.2.1.

Fig. 4.2.1. Top: Visual conventions in Japanese comics, drawn by Neil Cohn (Cohn “Japanese”). Bottom: Visual conventions in Western comics. Top image © Neil Cohn. Used with permission.
Aside from culturally transmitted variations, comics also have features similar to the universal characteristics of language identified by Chomskian linguists. While the imagery in comics is far more representative of real objects than language, comic imagery also contains the linguistic feature of *semanticity*, the use of communicative elements that stand for something other than themselves (Schmidt 3). For instance, in comics a light bulb over a character’s head is meant to stand for an idea, and smoke over the head is meant to stand for anger (fig. 4.2.2). Comics, like language, can also contain elements that are *arbitrary*, representing something while not resembling it at all (Schmidt 3). Note the “surprise lines” and “impact angles” in fig. 4.2.3, featuring Doug TenNapel’s *Iron West*, a graphic novel I have used with my own ESL/EFL students in the past. These kinds of jagged angles and radiating lines are simple images that do not resemble anything in particular in the world. Instead, they are arbitrarily used in many comics (and arbitrarily accepted by many comics readers) to symbolize the abstract concepts of surprise and physical impact. Comics also have *openness*, the ability to convey a broad, perhaps infinite, variety of messages (Schmidt 4). Of course, there are other aspects of language that are not clearly demonstrated in comics. Still, the resemblance that visual language has to actual language is striking in some respects.

Fig. 4.2.2. From left to right: An angry cartoon pig I drew, a cartoon character with an idea (“Idea”).

Image on right © New Vision Technologies, Inc. Used in accordance with CoolClips.com’s terms of use.
Fig. 4.2.3. Sequences from Doug TenNapel's *Iron West* (TenNapel 61, 81). © Doug TenNapel. Used in accordance with Image Comics’ terms of use.
It appears that humans create and comprehend comics and other visual language using the same cognitive process that Noam Chomsky identifies as the basis for generative human language: the construction of meaning. Chomsky and other scholars posit that through the construction of meaning, humans do not perceive the world as it objectively is. Rather, humans take the stimuli from their environment and assign meaning to it in a uniquely human way (Isac & Reiss 20-33). To demonstrate how this works, when one looks at the image on the left in fig. 4.2.4, one sees a triangle with a complete circle hiding partly underneath it, even though the image is, in reality, a complete triangle and a curved line that does not form a circle. Similarly, when one looks at fig. 4.2.5, one sees a three-dimensional cube, even though the image is actually a set of nine two-dimensional lines on paper. This same skill allows us to hear rhythm and mood in music and respond to it accordingly, while other species are not affected by the sound of music (Jackendoff 165-171).

Fig. 4.2.4. From left to right: An image of a triangle that partly overlaps a circle, and another image that separates the “circle” line (not actually a complete circle) and the triangle lines.

Fig. 4.2.5. A drawing of a three-dimensional cube.

The construction of meaning is key to the perception of both human speech and the visual communication found in comics. In auditory human language, construction of meaning is demonstrated
by onomatopoeias, lexical words meant to describe non-linguistic sounds. For example, when an
English speaker hears the simple word “boom,” he or she perceives similarities between the sound of
the word and the sound of a real explosion, even though a real explosion has considerably different
auditory properties. More importantly, the construction of meaning from auditory stimulus allows us to
perceive individual words in a spoken stream of speech, even though speakers do not pause between
one word and the next (Isac & Reiss 30-32). The construction of meaning also allows us to hear or
encounter the word “tree” and picture a real tree, in spite of the fact that the spoken word does not
sound like a tree and the written word does not look like a tree. Similar construction of meaning occurs
when people read comics, although in this case meaning is constructed from visual rather than auditory
stimuli. This cognitive phenomenon is what allows the stars and hearts in fig. 4.2.6 to be understood as
love and pain, or my own sparse arrangement of lines and dots in fig. 4.2.7 to be understood as the
faces of a man and a woman (Liu 229, Cary 80-81, 91, 106, 156).

Constructivism of true language and the visual language of comics are often blended in TESOL
settings. The series of simple, cartoony illustrations in fig. 4.2.8 draws students’ attention to the sound
differences in minimal pairs. Learners are able to easily tell the differences between simple images of
common objects such as a saw, a shore, a seat, and a sheet. Once learners have perceived visual
differences and constructed semantic meaning from the visual language, they are then ready to perceive
phonetic differences between the second language words that describe the images. From there, they can
construct very different semantic meanings from similar-sounding utterances. Fig. 4.2.9 shows a
different piece of ESL/EFL classroom cartoon art that aids perception of utterances at the discourse
level rather than the phonemic level. I showed the comic book page in fig. 4.2.9 to my students while
narrating it with simple sentences. The students were able to use their understanding of the simple
visuals to extrapolate individual words from my speech stream, and construct their meaning into a
coherent narrative that matched the visual language in the comic.
Fig. 4.2.6. Images from Jeff Smith’s Bone (Jeff Smith 154, 171). © Jeff Smith. Used in accordance with Cartoon Books’ terms of use.

Fig. 4.2.7. The faces of a man and a woman.
### sh/s listening pairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>saw</th>
<th>shore</th>
<th>seat</th>
<th>sheet</th>
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<th>see</th>
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<th>save</th>
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Fig. 4.2.8. An educational graphic that teaches phonics (Stanton). © Mayer-Johnson. Used in accordance with Mayer-Jonson’s terms of use.
Fig. 4.2.9. A page from my own comic “Pig Out West.”
While constructivism was used to help students understand full sentences in the activity outlined above, the human ability to construct meaning from extremely simple cartoony visuals is a powerful aid to the teaching of individual lexical items as well. This is especially true when dealing with low proficiency students who meet frequent vocabulary roadblocks. Imagine that group of absolute beginners does not yet know the words *cloud* or *sun*. Perhaps the teacher does not have images of a cloud and sun handy, and cannot point to the real things, because it is heavily overcast, dark out, or the classroom simply has no windows. Said instructor, regardless of his or her drawing ability, can still hastily draw a cloud or sun, communicating the semantic meaning of this beginner level vocabulary with ease (fig. 4.2.10). More complex, intermediate to advanced vocabulary can also sometimes be taught through simple teacher created cartoon drawings, as seen in the teacher produced comic strip in fig. 4.2.11. This strip was designed to teach the business English term *subcontractor* to a group of adult ESL graduate students in an American MBA program.

![Fig. 4.2.10. A simple drawing I made of a cloud and the sun.](image)

Thus far, this thesis has looked at the constructivist properties of comics and language as separate but similar processes that sometimes interact with each other in supportive or collaborative roles. While the processing of images and language can certainly be wholly or partly separate, sometimes they are fully merged, with no clear boundaries between the processes. Chomsky’s theories, as outlined above would seem to indicate that constructivism is a process that applies equally to pictorial and linguistic
Fig. 4.2.11. A comic strip that teaches the word *subcontractor*.

perceptions. Similarly, Neil Cohn argues that visual languages operate under the same fundamental principles as verbal languages such as “English, Japanese, and Sign Language” (*Early Writings* 10). The simultaneous, blended perception of words and images seems all-but-inevitable when comics are presented to language learners, as comics in TESOL settings always call for the simultaneous use of words and images; even wordless comics are accompanied by referential language in the ESL/EFL classroom. In section 4.3, this paper will examine the degree to which the mental processes of language perception and the picture reading of cartoon artwork can and should blend in TESOL settings, and look at ways that such blending can be used to the advantage of TESOL instructors and ESL/EFL learners.

4.3. The Language Faculty in a Broad Sense

Because of the structural and cognitive similarities between language and art, many linguists
say that the human ability to create and understand things like art and music are part of the same cognitive mechanism, the “language faculty in a broad sense” (Fitch 21-22). The notion of a language faculty in a broad sense maintains a small but noticeable presence in language education. Writing for the Harvard Educational Review in 1977, pedagogical researcher Tom Wolf spoke of “reading in a broad sense” (qtd. in Eisner 7-8), the idea that the reading includes the integration of many other stimuli besides written words, stimuli such as pictures, symbols, charts and so on. The push to treat reading in a broad sense as an educational goal is called “visual literacy” (Avgerinou). Visual literacy enjoys growing popularity among educators in the modern age of mass media (Stafford 1-4).

The blending of language and visual stimuli has numerous implications for TESOL comics pedagogy, both within literacy instruction and beyond. The words in a language, after all, do not exist in isolation. Words reference tangible things beyond themselves. Everyday language is used in physical settings that can be perceived by the senses and language allows its users to navigate and understand their surroundings. Hence, the visuals in comics do not merely help students slowly build up skills until they can scaffold to “real” language. Nor do such visuals merely coat language in something sweet, to make reading or learning more pleasurable. Ultimately, comics, because they contain sensory extralinguistic context, can make language more meaningful and authentic.

Comics also play to basic human visual needs and instincts. Dr. Stuart Medley, a professor and researcher in the fields of art and communication, notes that comics echo certain visual stimuli from the real environment that humans dwell in. Pointing out that cartoon artists tend to reduce detail and rely on outlines to define characters and objects, Medley notes that all people must make those same visual reductions mentally in situations where their normal seeing abilities are taxed or impaired. For example, when a human being looks at something from a distance, he or she sees an image that is in effect simplified. Many details are missing because at a certain distance they simply cannot be perceived by the human eye. Details vanish for a different reason when lighting is poor. In a dimly lit
room or a dark nighttime environment, humans may not be able to see many details of the objects they look at. In fact, they may be able to see only the outline of a given object, with all other details obscured by darkness. For survival purposes, humans have the ability to interpret such reduced objects (56-57). This ability helps us determine the difference between a cluster of fruit bushes and a pride of lions on the horizon, or the difference between the family dog and a burglar in a darkened living room at night. This same ability allows learners to look at comics like the one in fig. 4.3.1 and instantly recognize the simply drawn, clearly outlined characters and images. This Timbertoes comic strip writing prompt is featured on the website of the educational magazine *Highlights For Children.*

So what exact psychological functions allow humans to properly interpret visually ambiguous stimuli, both in their environment and in comics? For one thing, when confronted with an ambiguous, low-detail object, humans tend to apply the simplest possible interpretation to it (Medley 57-59). For example, when viewing fig. 4.3.1, readers are likely to perceive the character with a bow and long hair as a girl and the character with short hair as a boy. Since the characters are otherwise identical with no sex differentiating traits aside from their hair, it is possible that the short haired character is a girl with bobbed hair, and that the long haired character is a boy who has chosen to wear long hair, tied in a bow. It is also possible that both characters are the same gender. However, the latter two explanations are not the simplest explanations, so they will be dismissed by the reader unless further information is given.

According to famed cognitive psychologist Karl Popper, human beings tend to choose the simplest explanation because it is the easiest explanation to modify or refute (qtd. in Medley 59). This ability to refute an initial interpretation with minimal thought also has obvious implications for survival. It allowed our hunter-gatherer ancestors to quickly reverse course if the fruit bushes they thought they were approaching turned out to be lions upon closer scrutiny. It allows someone like you or I to take quick evasive or defensive action if we suddenly realize the moving object in our living room is a burglar and not the family dog. This re-interpretive skill can also be put to use in TESOL
Fun in the Mud

Art by Judith Hunt

Fig. 4.3.1. Timbertoes Comic Creator writing activity, drawn by Judith Hunt (Hunt). © Highlights for Children. Used with permission.

comics pedagogy. Note in fig. 4.3.2 that the adding of words to the Timbertoes comic above prompts a quick reinterpretation of the genders of the characters I first showed you in fig. 4.3.1. The human ability to quickly reinterpret simple objects is demonstrated in my own classroom use of the cartoon drawing seen in fig. 4.3.3. I had unfortunately drawn this image so simply that the time on the clock was ambiguous. Contrary to my intended time of 10:05 p.m., some students at first interpreted the clock as pointing to 1:50 a.m., after rather than before the “midnight” referenced in the word balloon. Fortunately, one student asked me to clear up the ambiguity. I did, and every student completed the test question correctly without further confusion. A photo-realistic image of a clock that clearly pointed to the wrong time would almost certainly have been more distracting and harder to quickly re-explain and
Fun in the Mud

Art by Judith Hunt

Spot is a puppy. He likes mud.

Frank is a little boy. His hair is too long. He uses his mother's bow while he waits for a haircut.

Frank likes mud too. So does his friend Tommy.

The puppy and the two little boys play in the mud.

Fig. 4.3.2. The image fig. 4.4.1, textually reinterpreted. © Highlights for Children. Used and modified with permission.

Future tense cartoon:

The underlined verb is:

I) Future perfect progressive
J) Simple present
K) Present progressive
L) Simple future

EXTRA CREDIT: Why does he describe ringing in the New Year with this tense?

Fig. 4.3.3. A test item from the grammar portion of an ESL/EFL exam I created.
reinterpret. Similar explanations can be used as a re-interpretive fix for other comics that ESL/EFL students initially misinterpret.

Aside from the cognitive skills used to perceive visual ambiguities caused by distance or darkness, humans have general perceptual skills, used in ordinary situations. These skills also let us interpret comics with ease. One such skill is a phenomenon psychologists call “perceptual constancy” (Medley 61). Perceptual constancy allows us to see different visual versions of the same thing, and interpret them as “constant,” all depicting the same object (Medley 61-63). For instance, it allows us to recognize a person’s face, even if the face expression has changed radically or is being viewed from different angles in different instances (fig. 4.3.4). Where cartoon art is concerned, this skill further allows us to perceive the same object when it is real, when it is drawn somewhat realistically, or when it is simplified and distorted in a very cartoony drawing (fig. 4.3.5).

Fig. 4.3.4. Multiple photographs of the same person (Lee “Constructive”; DuBois; Lee “Letterman”; Lee “President). Public domain.
An additional skill comes into play when looking at the distorted, caricatured imagery in comics. While perceptual constancy allows people to recognize different instances of the same image, the use of a memorized set of “stored norms” about the way things should look is used to differentiate objects that are similar, but not the same (Medley 65). To differentiate a specific tree and all other trees, a specific house, or an individual’s unique face, people pay close attention to features that deviate from the norm and exaggerate such features in their mind. This allows human beings to readily recognize the similar but slightly distinct faces of the people they know. It also allows them to enjoy the caricature techniques commonly employed in comics (Medley 65-67). The principle of stored norms comes into play often when cartoony, humorous illustration is used in TESOL comics pedagogy. Canadian ESL instructor Jeremy Hill uses stored norms to effectively communicate ideas to his students through his website, The English Blog. In the sample in fig. 4.3.6, Hill uses a political cartoon about the elderly to appeal to students’ stored norms of what old people look like and visually teach students about the old age-related idiomatic phrase “bucket list” (“Bucket Lists”).
4.4. The Application of Cognitive and Linguistic Theory to TESOL Comics Pedagogy: Case Studies

Because this section covers largely uncharted territory beyond the prevailing conventions of present-day TESOL comics pedagogy, I have already been compelled to show you a few of my own efforts to apply cognitive and linguistic research to the use of comics in TESOL settings, rather than relying solely on the sparsely visible efforts of other TESOL professionals in this area. It is certainly true that the work of Noam Chomsky and other modern linguists has inspired numerous individual comics-based prompts in my classroom, including the ones referenced in fig. 4.1.10, 4.1.11, 4.1.12, 4.2.3, 4.2.9, 4.2.11, and 4.3.3. However, these theories, widely accepted and frequently taught to me in my training as an MA TESOL candidate, have had a far reaching impact on my approach to teaching that extends beyond the creation of individual activities. I will now give a deeper explanation of the
direct impact my knowledge of psychology and linguistics has had on my overall approach to the use of comics in TESOL.

My knowledge of the evolution of visual language has changed the way I approach comics culturally. Prior to my MA TESOL training, I bought into the popular notion of comics as a uniquely American invention (Horgen; Suiter; Nelson). In my field work in South Korea, where I was often encouraged to teach language and culture at the same time, I tried to selectively present my students with Western comics and treat comics activities as teachable moments about Western culture. Studying the history of comics and tracing the medium back to its globe-spanning origins has helped me realize that while certain cartoon characters represent the culture they came from, the comics medium itself originates from innate rather than culturally transmitted sources. Now, unless the comic I am presenting has an overt cultural theme that is relevant to the lesson, comics are presented to my students with minimal cultural commentary. This leaves my students and me with more time and energy to use comics for their primary value: the transmission of language and information.

I also recognize that early proto-comics represent the earliest, purest forms of picture narrative and picture writing, and were a near-universal means of communication in ancient times, when all or nearly all of humanity was preliterate. As such I understand that, when dealing with students who are preliterate in English or still struggling to develop their English literacy skills, comics that mimic the features of proto-comics are ideal. For instance, when I taught low proficiency international students in a remedial English language transition program, I used my own comic *Creekbed Tales*, which utilizes the ancient devices of picture writing in its word balloons (fig. 4.4.1). I also used the *Owly* comic sampled in fig. 4.1.10 with a group of students who were struggling in a new developmental stage of English literacy. In this case, *Owly* provided excellent cognitive support to international graduate students who had only been writing English at the paragraph level in their home country and now needed to write at the discourse level. The students looked at *Owly* and a number of other structurally
similar children’s comics and were asked to write a multiple paragraph critical review of the comics, summarizing plots and making judgments about the comics’ suitability for young readers. In both cases, these proto-comic-like reading materials were more successful in prompting writing and discussion than more complex word-picture arrangements the students were also encountering. Similarly, when I taught in South Korea using that country’s national curriculum, I found that the picture reading exercises seen in fig. 4.1.11 and 4.1.12 were more helpful to low proficiency students than activities that used more modern conventions such as text-filled word balloons and captions.

Beyond the value I have found in historical and evolutionary research on comics, psychological research on constructivism also informs and shapes my approach to TESOL comics pedagogy on an ongoing basis. My knowledge of constructivism, acquired largely through my graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, has made me less afraid to use and create very simple artwork. In my early years as a teacher, I created far less artwork for my students. I felt that the artwork needed to be complex and detailed in order to be interesting and useful, and that I simply did not have time to create such complex work on a regular basis. I now know that, through the phenomenon of constructivism, my students can enjoy and apply great meaning to sparse, undetailed, even crudely drawn artwork. My output of hastily drawn simple visuals, such as the ones seen in fig. 4.2.11 and 4.3.3, has greatly increased. The classes I teach now benefit from a steady incoming flow of customized, teacher created-comics. Some of the sloppiest and simplest drawings I create, such as the ones seen below in fig. 4.4.2, have also been among the most popular and effective comics in my classroom.

These kinds of simple drawings, made coherent and meaningful by constructivism, have obvious advantages but can also lead to potential breakdowns in understanding. This is because, per research on the language faculty in a broad sense, the simpler a piece of artwork is, the more likely learners are to interpret it in the same manner that they would interpret written words. Just as a written passage has
Fig. 4.4.1. A sequence of my own creation from “Creekbed Tales.”
ambiguities and subtleties that can be interpreted in different ways by different readers, the visual simplicity that characterizes all comics to some degree leaves room for varied interpretation by students. This is why, when I am using a visually simple comic strip or cartoon drawing that is supposed to convey a very specific piece of linguistic information, I sometimes do a classroom interpretation check, similar to a comprehension check for a word or sentence. I do this by explaining the intended meaning of the artwork to the class, and then making sure that each student understands the intended meaning and perceives it within the artwork. At other times, comics in my classroom may be designed to prompt varied creative responses, and no agreed upon interpretation in required. Wordless comics such as *Owly*, *Korgi*, and *Creekbed Tales*, designed to prompt personal production of language, seldom require any kind of check for comprehension or interpretation.

Just as it is sometimes good to do interpretation checks when presenting comics to ESL/EFL students, it is sometimes also good to check students for perceptual constancy, the skill that allows us to perceive different versions of an object and still perceive them as the same object. Of course, barring
pathological cognitive problems, all students should be capable of perceptual constancy where visual input is concerned. However, they may not always be able to take a newly acquired word and link it to the perceptually constant object it is supposed to reference. To further illustrate what I mean, I will tell you about the time I taught the word *snail* to a group of beginner level students in South Korea. In my initial attempts to teach the students the word *snail* on a flash card with a drawing of a snail. The students all acquired the word and its meaning almost instantly, or so I thought. The next day, in the course of review vocabulary drills, I showed them a photo of a snail, showing it at a different angle than the snail illustration in the original flash card drawing. I also showed them another snail illustration, where the snail was drawn in a different style and shaded a different color than the one in the flash card. These two new versions of the snail caused confusion among some of the students. They had not yet learned that *snail* means any snail, and not just the particular kind of snail they saw on the first flash card. In order to effectively teach a lexical item, I now try to present students with numerous different visual referents for it, in order to cultivate perceptual constancy of language as well as imagery. When they can apply a lexically constant word to their visual sense of perceptual constancy, I then know that they fully understand the new word. Comics are especially good for perceptual constancy and lexical constancy, as they tend to use recurring characters and imagery.

4.5. Cognitive and Linguistic Theory as it Relates to TESOL Comics Pedagogy: What Teachers Should Know and Do

As the information in this section of the thesis demonstrates, cognitive and linguistic research already informs the study of ESL/EFL learning, and can easily be applied to the subdiscipline of TESOL comics pedagogy. When TESOL practitioners are mindful of key research in these areas and apply the research properly, the effectiveness of comics can be enhanced greatly in the classroom.

With the culturally varied students they face, instructors of ESL/EFL should be especially
mindful of the fact that the comics medium does not belong to any one culture. It may be tempting for Western instructors to claim comics as their own, given that modern comics were invented in Europe and popularized by European and North American artists; non-Western teachers of ESL/EFL who want to incorporate the cultural aspects of English into their teaching may feel tempted to do the same. However, comics belong to no one society and are neither fully Eastern or Western. The most modern incarnations of the comics medium can be traced to dual Japanese and American roots, while the deeper threads of comics as a form of human expression can be traced back to nearly every ancient civilization that archaeologists have unearthed. Comics are in fact a universally human form of expression. To avoid the spreading of misinformation or cultural distraction, comics should be presented to students as such. While certain individual licensed comics properties such as the American comic strip *Peanuts*, the French comic strip *Asterix* and so on may serve as cultural artifacts, comics in general can and should be used to teach language skills to all learners, regardless of their cultural origins or their interest in the cultures that surround specific popular cartoon characters.

To use comics properly as a form of human discourse, teachers should understand the role that ancient proto-comics had in the development of literacy. Before the human race developed the ability to read and write, conceptual and narrative drawings were used for non-spoken communication. This gave way to picture writing, the use of imagery to symbolize specific spoken words and sounds. From there, picture writing developed into orthography, the most modern form of human literacy. Once teachers understand this, they can recreate the development of human literacy on a smaller scale with their students. This can be accomplished by using wordless comics that communicate concept and narrative pictorially to prompt basic writing and reading ability in beginner students. Students that already have the ability to read and write on a very basic simple level may have their literacy elevated through the use of picture writing, where symbolic pictures are substituted for words or sounds that the students may not yet be able to read. As ESL/EFL students develop greater literacy skills, instructors should use
comics as a literacy aid less, easing students from visually supported literacy development to the full ability to read and write without visual supports.

ESL/EFL teachers should also realize that humans take naturally to comics due to the cognitive function of constructivism. Because constructivism allows learners to derive meaning from extremely simple, abstract imagery, teachers are free to use extremely simple or highly abstracted comic artwork just as effectively as highly detailed, realistically rendered pictures. This leaves teachers free to present artwork that is caricatured or drawn with minimal detail. It even allows teachers to incorporate simple hastily drawn comics of their own creation into their lessons. Since constructivism is used for both picture interpretation and the interpretation of language itself, teachers may also blend comics imagery with written and spoken language easily. In fact, because images are easier to construct meaning from than a new second language, instructors may use images to activate their students’ constructivist skills and ease them into the comprehension of new language.

ESL/EFL teachers should further be aware that comics share the innateness and constructed nature of language because they are part of the language faculty in a broad sense. This can be a double edged sword. On the one hand, because comics behave so much like language in terms of communicative function and cognitive impact, teachers can use comics to prompt every kind of language skill. To maximize the effectiveness of comics in their classroom, instructors of ESL/EFL should use comics to prompt the productive skills of writing and speaking and to aid comprehension in the receptive skills of reading and listening. On the other hand, while the close kinship comics have with language allows them to be used alongside all language skills, it also means that comics, like language, can be misunderstood or misread. This is especially true with very simply drawn comics, which approach the abstract, subjectively interpreted nature of linguistic forms. Teachers should take care to make sure that their students understand simple artwork correctly, constructing the meaning they need to construct for the learning task at hand. When presenting ESL/EFL learners with extremely
simplified or highly caricatured artwork, teachers should occasionally do an interpretation check to make sure the artwork is being interpreted correctly, similar to a language comprehension check.

Ultimately, ESL/EFL teachers should be aware that comics’ potential for communication is limited only by the human imagination. Just as language can be used to discuss matters that are unreal, hypothetical, or displaced from the language user’s immediate situation, so the unreal, distorted visual world of comics is one that learners can easily accept and learn from. Through the human ability to readily accept and interpret images that are simplified in comparison to reality and exaggerated from our stored norms beyond real-life visual deviations, comics creators and comics readers alike can construct new unreal worlds that reflect our own world in intriguing ways. As cognitive scientists Giles Fauconnier and Mark Turner wrote in their book *The Way We Think*,

“In some cases—such as a cartoon in which Elmer Fudd turns red, beginning at his feet and climbing thermometer-like to his head, at which point smoke blows out his ears—we consciously set up a world to instantiate the blend, a world in which angry people really do have smoke coming out of their ears” (Fauconnier & Turner 302).

This cognitive flexibility on the part of learners gives educators a chance to bring in (or create) offbeat comics material for their classrooms with the confidence that such material will entertain and inform students without confusing them. The varied, outlandish, but readily acceptable stories and messages that comics can convey have already been seen throughout this thesis; readers have been presented with worlds where stark-white, blobbish creatures called “Bones” interact with realistically drawn humans, where a family of conscious wooden puppets play with their carved wooden pets, and where animals wear clothes, smoke, or take on other human characteristics. All of the worlds can be perceived and accepted with ease in spite of their obvious unreality. Instructors should take advantage of the cognitive flexibility comics facilitate, using the comics medium to present language in a near-limitless variety of contexts. At times, teachers should prompt their students to interpret and reinterpret
the linguistic contexts of the comics they read in ways that encourage creativity, as seen in the
*Timbertoes* writing prompt in fig. 4.3.1 and 4.3.2. At other times, the flexible meaning encoded into
comics visuals should be clarified and adjusted by instructors to fit the pedagogical needs of a learning
situation, as seen in fig. 4.3.3.

Once instructors realize that comics are linked not just to literacy, but to language as a whole,
the function of comics in the ESL/EFL classroom is virtually limitless. Still, the findings in this section
raise yet more questions. The concept of visual simplicity as an aid to constructivism has been
mentioned time and time again, but how simple is simple? What visual components create the right
kind of simplicity for the construction of linguistic meaning? For that matter, what about cognitive
skills that are more specific to the learning process than constructivism? How can comics be used to aid
classroom skills such as the comprehension and retention of specific subject material? Which features
of comics make them easy to comprehend, and which features might leave students feeling confused or
ambivalent about the meaning of the material? Beyond classroom cognitive skills and
comprehensibility, what kind of comics are students most likely to enjoy and want to keep reading?
These questions will be addressed in the next section, which moves on from psychology and linguistics
into the realm of learning. Influential research by educational professionals will be analyzed as it
pertains to TESOL comics pedagogy, to finally create a complete picture of this relatively new
subdiscipline of the TESOL profession.
5. Maximizing the Effectiveness of Comics in TESOL: Learning Theory

5.1. Dual Coding Theory

Constructivism clearly plays an important role in language acquisition and the perception of meaning. This is true both in language and in the visual context surrounding language, as seen in comics and other entertaining visual stimuli. However, the cognitive task of reading a comic book (or reading a children’s book, watching television, etc.) is obviously not the same as the cognitive task of learning a second language through instruction. If these activities were cognitively identical, there would be no need for second language classrooms; popular media alone would suffice to teach second language. Second language popular culture and second language education are not identical, of course. The consumption of second language entertainment and the active learning of a second language are two very different cognitive exercises. The latter is much more cognitively demanding and requires a strategic, focused use of constructivism as a cognitive tool. One of the constructivist theories most often used to guide the effective application of comics in TESOL is Allan Pavio’s Dual Coding Theory (DCT), which encourages the use of both linguistic and visual elements (the two elements occurring in most comics) to facilitate learning (8-13).

A very wide variety of experiments have been conducted to test and support DCT. For the purposes of this thesis, a few experiments specific to the use of comics in TESOL will be highlighted. A 2009 study of EFL learners in Iran notes that teaching aids with a visual component promote comprehension and retention. While this study focuses primarily on the use of film, experiments conducted in the course of the research demonstrate that single panel cartoons, when combined with new vocabulary words, improve vocabulary learning and retention (Aryadost 338). In a 2004 learning experiment, Liu used comics to test previous research showing that dual coding teaching methods work better for low proficiency language learners than for high proficiency ones. Using a comic strip to
support comprehension of a written passage, the lower proficiency ESL students Liu observed did indeed have better comprehension and retention of a challenging reading passage. Liu further notes that the comic strip visual aid used in the experiment actually had a slightly adverse effect on the higher proficiency students he studied (235-239). Jessica Holte, a graduate researcher for Hamline University also conducted DCT research by using comics in an ESL classroom. In Holte’s experiment, students who gained information through comics did better on oral comprehension assessments, but performed similarly to students who had learned without comics when answering written comprehension questions (71-78).

As can be seen, while experiments generally support Pavio’s theory that word image combinations can be beneficial for learning, the details of the research are somewhat inconsistent. Some researchers have found that comics are useful only with low proficiency students, while others have reaped the benefits of the dual coding through comics with higher level students (Liu 228-229, 235-239). Beyond the prominent studies listed above, there are rare, seemingly anomalous experiments in which the use of comics have no impact one way or the other on language learning, such as an experiment in Iran in which a group of 62 beginner level EFL students were able to develop language skills equally well with or without comics (Khoii & Forouzesh 174-176). Further research reveals the probable cause of such inconsistencies: comics take on many different forms, visual styles, and writing styles, some of which are less useful in the classroom than others.

The findings pertinent to identifying comics that are conducive of successful dual coding are scattered among the research of educational psychologists, curriculum/learning material designers, and TESOL professionals. Within this body of research, a number of scholars have identified specific qualities that are useful in educational visual aids. They have also indexed the kinds of word-picture combinations that occur often in instructional material, identifying combinations that are particularly conducive to learning.
W. Howard Levie compiles an excellent list of desirable visual properties for learning settings, per research in the areas of DCT and the psychology of imagery. Particularly relevant to comics use are the properties of distinctness and figure-ground clarity, two visual features that are quite compatible with the simple line-drawn style often used in cartooning. When these visual features are absent or insufficient from educational artwork, the art becomes less comprehensible. Student confusion and distraction can result when such poor compositions are used (12).

When an image is distinct, the learner should be able to quickly, easily see what the image is supposed to be depicting. The difference between distinct and indistinct imagery can be seen in fig. 5.1.1, which shows two versions of an ESL/EFL writing worksheet created by a TESOL professional from New York City. This cartoon illustration is relevant to the clothing-related activity, as it depicts characters wearing a variety of clothing styles. However, due to poor image contrast, this picture is indistinct, requiring scrutiny for comprehension. Bolder outlines along the edges of the characters’ clothing, facial features, and body parts would make the picture easier to decipher without effort and distraction. Note the difference in the modified image on the bottom half of 5.1.1.

Even when bold outlines are present, they have to be drawn clearly and consistently in order to be distinct. Lack of distinctness can be seen in the wordless comic *Fish* (fig. 5.1.2). As the sample panels reveal, in much of this comic’s imagery it is difficult to even tell that the main character is supposed to be a fish with legs. Objects can be equally difficult to identify; the line in the middle of the first sample panel and the forms in the second and fourth panels are particularly hard to identify. When presented with wordless comics, students learn language by creating their own linguistic meaning, not by deciphering unclear non-linguistic visuals. In spite of the utility of wordless comics in TESOL (discussed in sections 2-4), *Fish* is one wordless comic that might actually impede the learning process of ESL/EFL students. *Fish*’s ambiguity is overt, and easy for teachers to identify and avoid. However, other comics may be indistinct in ways that catch ESL/EFL instructors off guard. *Pogo* is a comic strip
Writing Task: *Clothes*. What we usually wear and what we are wearing now.

My mother usually wears skirts and jackets, but today she is wearing a dress.

My father usually wears a suit to work, but today he is wearing black trousers and a blue shirt.

I usually wear jeans to school, but today I am wearing a Spiderman costume.

My brother and I wear track suits and trainers when we play sports, but today we are wearing shorts and T-shirts.

My best friend wears boots in the winter, but today he is wearing sandals.

My grandmother usually wears gloves and a hat in winter, but today she isn’t wearing them.

My Uncle often wears jeans and T-shirts when he visits, but today he is wearing a black jumper and black jeans.

I always wear socks with my shoes, but right now I am not wearing my socks.

My grandfather always wears a tie with his shirt, but today he is wearing a new belt and no tie.

Fig. 5.1.1. Top: An ESL/EFL worksheet activity. Bottom: The same activity, with the edges of the images outlined in black (Kifissia “What”). © Kifissia. This file is licensed by ISLCollective user Kifissia under a Creative Commons Attribution License.
that may seem distinct at a glance, but in fact lacks distinctness. Titular character Pogo Possum looks nothing like the opossum he is supposed to be, and his friend Albert the Alligator does not strongly resemble an alligator. The androgynous non-human male characters are also frequently depicted wearing female clothing to humorous effect, making gender and species alike indistinct. These features certainly distracted my students considerably when they read The Pogo Primer for Parents, a beginner level visually supported piece of reading about the effects of television on children (fig. 5.1.3). Instead of using the visuals to support the written meaning, my students asked many speculative questions about who and what the characters were supposed to be.

Fig. 5.1.2. A sequence from Peter Kielland’s Fish (Kielland 26). © Peter Kielland. Used in accordance with Kim Rehr Productions’ terms of use.
In creating my own comics for ESL/EFL classroom use, I too have struggled at times with distinctness. By consulting both my students and TESOL professionals who understand the principles...
of visual distinctness, I have refine my work and reduced visual characteristics that are not conducive to learning. When I created “Creekbed Tales” (discussed earlier in sections 2.2, 3.3, and 4.4), I showed my initial drawings to my EFL students and fellow English teachers in South Korea’s Gyeonggi Province school system. I found that students spent an uncomfortably long time scrutinizing the pictures; I had hoped they could read the pictures with ease, devoting their time and energy to expressing the story in their own words. For advice, I turned to Joe Sharpnack, a fellow Gyeonggi EFL instructor and award-winning American political cartoonist (“Publisher”). Looking over my drawings, Sharpnack correctly pointed out that they had insufficient figure-ground clarity. Key characters and objects were visually indistinct from less important background imagery (J. Sharpnack, personal communication, September 5, 2009). I ultimately redrew the opening sequence. I made the castle simpler in design so that its basic form was not lost in its finer details and I removed any background imagery from my initial shot of the Creek King, an important central character. The scene where the Royal Chef meets the Hunter was also redrawn so that the characters had much bolder outlines than the background objects, enhancing figure-ground clarity. The redrawn version was much more functional, and I have used it successfully as an ESL/EFL writing and speaking prompt often over the years. The original drawings and their final versions, with improved figure-ground clarity, can be seen in fig. 5.1.4.

The meaningfulness of educational art used in dual coding is determined not just by the way that images interact with each other, but also by the way they interact with the surrounding text. Researchers Russell Carney and Joel Levin outline five functions images have in relation to educational text, ranking them from least meaningful to most meaningful (8). Decorational images bear little or no connection to the text (fig. 5.1.5). Representational images are somewhat more useful; pictures repeat the information in the text visually, but do not add extra information (fig. 5.1.6). Organizational images visually represent information in the text and augment the text with additional structural information,
Fig. 5.1.4. Top: Images from the rough draft of "Creekbed Tales." Bottom: The final versions of the top images.
and have greater utility than decorative or representational works. Illustrated step-by-step cooking instructions (fig. 5.1.7) are a common type of organizational illustration. Interpretational images are even more useful than organizational images, clarifying the meaning of the accompanying text. Such images are common in practical guides and instruction manuals (fig. 5.1.8). Transformational images are considered to be the most useful educational pictures. They symbolically encode the meaning of the text into a visual metaphor. Common examples of this in ESL/EFL instruction are mnemonic/metaphorical illustrations, designed to visually codify a language with somewhat abstract meaning (fig. 5.1.9) (7).

![Writing Task: Clothes - What does your family usually wear and what are they wearing now?](image)

Fig. 5.1.5. Illustrated ESL/EFL writing activity about clothing. The images of the little girls playing (bottom middle) and the flowers (bottom right) are decorative (Kifissia “What”). This file is licensed by ISLCollective user Kifissia under a Creative Commons Attribution License.
Fig. 5.1.6. Illustrations of English language sports words (Park “Book 1” 233; “Teach and Learn”). Public domain.

Fig. 5.1.7. Sequence from a comics-format cookbook (Hattori & Manga 45-46). © Japanime Co. Ltd. Used in accordance with the Manga Culinary Institute’s terms of use.
Measuring Height Accurately At Home

To measure height accurately at home to calculate BMI-for-age:

1. Remove the child’s shoes, bulky clothing, and hair ornaments, and unbraided hair that interferes with the measurement.

2. Take the height measurement on flooring that is not carpeted and against a flat surface such as a wall with no molding.

3. Have the child stand with feet flat, together, and against the wall. Make sure legs are straight, arms are at sides, and shoulders are level.

4. Make sure the child is looking straight ahead and that the line of sight is parallel with the floor.

5. Take the measurement while the child stands with head, shoulders, buttocks, and heels touching the flat surface (wall). (See illustration.) Depending on the overall body shape of the child, all points may not touch the wall.

6. Use a flat headpiece to form a right angle with the wall and lower the headpiece until it firmly touches the crown of the head.

7. Make sure the measurer’s eyes are at the same level as the headpiece.

8. Lightly mark where the bottom of the headpiece meets the wall. Then, use a metal tape to measure from the base on the floor to the marked measurement on the wall to get the height measurement.

9. Accurately record the height to the nearest 1/8th inch or 0.1 centimeter.

Fig. 5.1.8. Instructions from the United States Center for Disease Control website ("About BMI"). Public domain.

Carney and Levin’s effectiveness rates for the different kinds of text picture relationships are determined by measuring average results across many different educational materials. The usefulness of a given individual piece of educational illustration can vary. Statistically useful text-picture arrangements can falter if they fail to meet Levie’s requirements for clarity and distinctness. Even when they are well-drawn, organizational visuals can also be arranged in a way that is haphazard or muddled, and transformational visual metaphors have the potential to be obtuse. In short, all educational imagery has its limitations. To use comics effectively in TESOL, an instructor also needs to understand what
Fun time
Each picture below illustrates a common English phrase, idiom, or proverb.

Fig. 5.1.9. Menomonic illustrations for the idioms “high time,” “time flies,” “once upon a time,” and “serve time” (“Idioms” 113). Public domain.

communicative functions pictures are capable of and how visual qualities and text-picture relationships foster these levels of communication. Evelyn Goldsmith, an ESL/EFL resource designer from the U.K., has done some excellent research in this area, advising instructors and fellow designers of educational material on the best ways to use images to their fullest effect, whether they are representational, organizational, interpretational, or transformational.
Goldsmith groups the visual and relational factors that affect the comprehensibility of an image as follows:

1) Unity (the visual cohesiveness and consistency of a single image)
2) Location (the spatial arrangement of components in a single image)
3) Emphasis (the interrelationship between related but distinctly separate images)
4) Text parallels (the relationship between visual imagery and text) (54).

She then identifies three levels of communication that these visual factors are capable of:

1) Syntactic communication (the interrelation of multiple pictures, or the interrelation of elements within a single picture)
2) Semantic communication (the comprehensibility of an image)
3) Pragmatic communication (meeting the needs of the communication situation) (54).

A number of Goldsmith’s findings are especially relevant to TESOL comics pedagogy. In the area of syntax, her most comics-relevant findings involve “syntactic text parallels”, or the juxtaposition of illustration with text, as is common in most comics (64-65). Her research shows that when illustration and text are combined, the visual cues should guide the eye to the most important element first. Thus, if the illustration holds the most important information, it should not be “lost” alongside more visually striking text. Conversely, if the text carries the most important information, it should be more visually prominent than the illustration. Proper use of such visual clues can be seen in *Popeye*, a comic strip that is endorsed by TESOL academia (“Teaching” 3; Lebedko 2-3), has spawned a TESOL themed Nintendo game (“Popeye’s”) and is featured in a series of educational comics for developing and international readers of English (Wildman & Wildman). In the comics sequence in fig. 5.1.10, readers see Popeye and his friend Wimpy blast a cat-like alien back into outer space. Recognizing that English is read from left to right and from top to bottom, artist Bud Sagendorf places the sound effects, a questioning noise, and a “meow” to the right and underneath the departing rocket. These visual cues
encourage readers to look at the rocket first, and look at the less important sound effects that characterize it second. In the remaining panels the dialogue provides the most important information, so it appears above and to the left of the characters as they speak. Note that the dialogue also takes up substantially more panel space than the sound effects in the first panel. By consciously letting either the visuals or the words dominate the panel space as needed and strategically placing important words and images where English readers will look first, Sagendorf follows Goldsmith’s rules of syntactic text parallels handily to educationally beneficial effect.

Fig. 5.1.10. A sequence of panels Popeye, by Bud Sagendorf (Sagendorf 96). © King Features Syndicate. Used in accordance with IDW Publishing’s terms of use.

In the area of semantics, Goldsmith focuses on unity and text parallels as the key to semantic effectiveness. She states that simple, stylized line drawings (commonly seen in comics and cartoon art), with their lack of complexity and minimal number of potentially distracting details, exemplify the
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visual cohesiveness and consistency required for unity. She further states that cartoon imagery is the best vehicle for representing familiar items and generalized vocabulary. As she explains, a less stylized, more detailed lexical illustration could cause a student to be distracted by specifics and thus miss the general meaning of the lexical item (57-58). For instance, in the three images of trees on the next page, fig. 5.1.11 denotes the word *tree* unambiguously. The other two more detailed images might mislead a beginner level ESL/EFL student to think that *tree* means *pine tree*, *sapling*, or *flowering tree*.

![Fig. 5.1.11. Images of trees (Ibrahim; Dat; Eliseeva). © Dat, Elena Eliseeva. Image on left is public domain. Rights to the middle image and right image purchased through Dreamstime.com.](image)

When specificity cannot be avoided in an image, semantic text parallels can be used to give the image an overt name. Thus, the student is not distracted by the task of naming an ambiguous image (58). A good example of semantic text parallels appears in fig. 5.1.12, a handout I used in a comics-based lesson plan. Through such parallels, this handout textually labels otherwise confusing fantasy figures from a comic book of my own creation used in the lesson. Another semantic unity concern addressed in Goldsmith’s research is the matter of partly cropped, incomplete images (commonly seen in the truncated bodies of characters in “close up” comics panels). She reveals that in numerous studies such semantic omissions do not actually create comprehension problems. Students are able to use their
own mental constructions to correctly infer the missing parts of the pictures (58).

Fig. 5.1.12. A character guide for my comic “Creekbed Tales.”

Goldsmith also touches on some interesting findings on semantic emphasis. Studies in semantic emphasis reveal that students (and people in general) pay special attention to the human figure and face (65). Since comics and cartoon art can vary widely in their use of abstraction and expressiveness in
these areas, teachers would do well to scrutinize depictions of people carefully in the comics and illustrations they use. An example of a simply-drawn expressive image of the human figure and face juxtaposed next to an unexpressive one appears in fig. 5.1.13. Note the subtle yet significant difference that just a few lines can make. The more expressive image on the right encodes much more meaning.

![Two simple stick figure drawings.](image)

**Fig. 5.1.13. Two simple stick figure drawings.**

Finally, Goldsmith takes a look at the pragmatics of line drawings. Here, she states that cultural context must be taken into account (69-70). When showing Omani English learners an image of a woman, for example, the woman should probably be wearing a headscarf and other traditional clothing that is acceptable for women in Oman’s strongly traditional Islamic culture. To portray a woman in more Western attire may confuse or even offend. Visual context is also important. Studies show that an image of a lexical item such as the word “hole” will be far more recognizable if it is accompanied by an image of a person digging the hole and a pile of displaced dirt (59-60). Other visual cues teachers should be mindful of are abstractions (69). Examples of such abstractions in comics include “speed lines” and “speed clouds,” which denote rapid physical movement. These abstractions appear in the Japanese and American cartoon drawings in fig. 5.1.14.
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Fig. 5.1.14. Top: Shuho Sato’s *Black Jack*. Bottom: Jeff Smith’s *Bone* (Sato 39; Jeff Smith 218). © Sato Shuho, Jeff Smith. Both images used in accordance with the copyright holders’ terms of use.

Note the significantly different portrayal of fast movement in Japanese and American art above. Such abstract cues, much like the ones in fig. 4.2.1 and 4.2.2, are culturally transmitted and may not be universally understood. Research indicates that showing a figure in running or active posture would be far more consistently effective in cross-cultural learning. In the figure above, the running posture is more evident in *Bone*, making it more suitable for ESL/EFL instruction, per Goldsmith’s findings.
When selecting comics, cartoony abstractions of things like motion and feeling may not hinder learning per se. However, teachers should ensure that, whenever possible, these abstractions are accompanied by clearer, more literal visual representations.

The cultural pragmatics explored above are particularly relevant to the cross-cultural properties of comics mentioned in section 3.2. Next, Goldsmith moves on to sequential pragmatics. This area is especially relevant to the use of comics in teaching, because most comics are essentially sets of sequential images. She reminds instructors that truly communicative sequential images must have “reasonable continuity of actors and background” (60). If images do not seem to be connected by such recurring elements, the language of the art will be unclear and the intended message may be lost. Teachers should scrutinize graphic novels and comic sequences to make sure they demonstrate sequential pragmatics and can be understood with ease. A visual example of the difference between strong and weak sequential pragmatics appears in fig. 5.1.15. Both of these figures show the same comics sequence, drawn by the same artist. However, the first image is a “rough draft” of the sequence, with weaker sequential pragmatics than the final version that appears below it. Note the stronger continuity of background in the final version. The fence border of the farm’s pig pen can be seen from different angles in the first and third panels, the row of trees on the horizon can be seen in panels three and five, and clouds connect the backgrounds in the fourth and fifth panels. Continuity of character is stronger in this second version also, with the farmer (or at least part of the farmer’s body) visible in the final two panels. While fig. 5.1.15 shows decisions made by an artist, ESL/EFL teachers can make similar decisions, choosing comics with strong, clear sequential pragmatics and eschewing pragmatically weak picture sequences that may confuse their students.

Dual Coding Theory is perhaps the most relevant theory related to TESOL comics pedagogy, and also one of the learning theories least commonly applied to comics usage in the ESL/EFL classroom. It is worth noting that in all of the DCT research referenced above, the visual qualities
Fig. 5.1.15. Top: The rough draft of a comic strip sequence from Monty Rhode’s webcomic *Vegetables For Dessert*. Bottom: The final version of the sequence. (M. Rhode, personal communication, May 3, 2012). © Monty Rhode. Used with permission.
found to promote memory and retention all relate to comprehensibility. Per Levie, distinctness and figure-ground clarity allow learners to comprehend imagery clearly. Carney and Levin’s list of the image-text relationships that occur in learning materials (including comics) identify the picture-text arrangements that best allow the student to comprehend images and text smoothly, without one element detracting from the comprehensibility of the other. By listing the visual and relational properties of educational images, Goldsmith catalogues the best ways to make imagery comprehensible not just in relation to text but also in relation to other imagery. She additionally identifies the levels of communication that serve as the building blocks of image comprehensibility: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic communication. This wealth of knowledge, approached critically and applied carefully, allows TESOL professionals to select and create optimally comprehensible comics for their classroom.

What DCT research does not address is how to best use comprehensible input in TESOL, once said input has been identified and gathered. Fortunately, a body of research more commonly applied to TESOL can be integrated with the less well-known Dual Coding Theory research. Stephen Krashen’s findings on comprehensible input and its use in language learning allows teachers to better apply DCT in their classrooms.

5.2. The Input Hypothesis

As mentioned in the section above, Levie, Carney, Levin, and Goldsmith all ultimately focus on comprehensibility as the key factor in the usefulness of an image to dual coding. This focus on comprehensibility marks the intersection of Allan Pavio’s Dual Coding Theory and Stephen Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, which also revolves around the concept of comprehensibility as it pertains to learning. While DCT focuses on general learning, however, the Input Hypothesis focuses specifically on second language acquisition. Krashen maintains that new language can only be acquired when it is accompanied by comprehensible input (Isabelli 1-4). One way this can be achieved is by presenting
more difficult language to a student with the support of less difficult language. This technique is called “scaffolding” because it uses using one level of input, the comprehensible level, to allow a student to move to a higher level of input that is not yet comprehensible. Once the higher level becomes comprehensible, the student can use that new level of comprehensible input to once more climb to a new level of understanding and acquire still more new language (Bilash).

To see how this can occur through the use of comics, take the sentence “Oranges, lemons, and grapefruits are citrus fruits.” An intermediate ESL/EFL student may not know what the word *citrus* means, but probably knows the meaning of the fruit names, the conjunction *and*, and the verb *are*. Such a student could use the comprehensibility of the other words to acquire the new word *citrus* and realize that *citrus* must refer to fruits that have thick rough skins, are juicy, and have an acidy flavor. Suppose this same target language were presented to a beginner student. Such a student might not know the meaning of *citrus* or the fruit names. An absolute beginner may not even know *and* or *are*. In this case, the comprehensible input that allows for the acquisition of new language would either have to be presented in the learner’s first language or presented extralinguistically. Since Krashen specifically champions comics as a source of extralinguistic comprehensible input (Krashen “Comments” 11), I will demonstrate (using artwork of my own creation) that a comic strip that can provide comprehensible support for all of the words in the sentence “Oranges, lemons, and grapefruits are citrus fruits” (fig. 5.2.1). Note in the figure below that clear images of the fruit, accompanied by a character looking at the reader and explaining the fruit images in English can visually bridge the linguistic gap faced by a beginner level ESL/EFL learner.

In studies, comprehensible input is a proven aid in the scaffolding of language use and ability. In a 2010 study, teachers in California used Gene Yang’s graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, popular with ESL/EFL educators, to provide comprehensible input to students in a remedial English class. The instructors involved report that the images in Gene Yang’s comic provided a comprehensible starting
point that allowed the students to better comprehend and analyze the comic book’s text. Having scaffolded the students from picture comprehension to text comprehension, the instructors then prompted the students to create a new level of comprehensible input of their own, analyzing the comicbook for its complex and nuanced cultural message in a written online discussion. The instructors reported that with the comprehensible input of comic book imagery as a starting point, students were able to reach new heights of comprehension and skill as readers and writers (Gomes and Carter 71-73, 75). Stephen Krashen himself notes that comics are consistently “at least as beneficial as other reading” where advancement to new levels of language skill is concerned (*Power of Reading* 101). Krashen also
points out research and case studies indicating that comics are a stepping stone between everyday spoken language and advanced academic language and can be used as a comprehensible “conduit to more challenging reading” (Krashen “Comments” 11).

Krashen’s research on the importance of comprehensible input reveals that comprehensible input is vital to the acquisition of new, not-yet-comprehensible language. Of course, comprehensible input can take many forms, and is not just found in comics. Krashen himself notes that there are a variety of other forms of “light reading” beyond comics that also can provide comprehensible input to ESL/EFL learners as they improve their learning (Power of Reading 110-115). Similarly, the Dual Coding Theory researchers who index the visual components of comprehensibility focus on many different kinds of visuals, not just comics. This may lead one to wonder if comics, for teaching purposes, are unremarkable. Simplicity, word-picture juxtaposition, visual mnemonics, and other important contributors to comprehensibility may be common in comics, but they can also be found in many non-comics materials, such as the ones in fig. 2.3.1-2.3.3, 5.1.6, and 5.1.8. Are comics just one of many forms of comprehensible input, interchangeable with other comprehensible stimuli? Does this medium have any special link to student learning that distinguishes itself from other sources of comprehensible input? Clearly, further data is needed to determine what exactly makes comics unique as a communicative device, and how this uniqueness can be applied effectively in ESL/EFL learning situations.

5.3. The Affective Filter Hypothesis

So why should a TESOL professional create or obtain a comic strip that provides extralinguistic input, rather than just using the learner’s first language? Aside from the logistic reality that not all ESL/EFL teachers are competent in their students’ first language, Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis gives additional reasons to use visual comprehensible input rather than first language comprehensible
input. Per Krashen, the affective filter is a psychological barrier to learning. Language learners raise this filter, blocking the acquisition of new language, when they are not happy with the learning process, due either to boredom, anxiety, or other negative emotions (Vialpando et al. 7). Krashen points out that a sense of accomplishment and competency gives students the confidence and satisfaction they need to lower their affective filters and pursue still more knowledge (Krashen *Principles and Practice* 30-32).

Since most modern ESL/EFL students aspire to use their second language without the aid of their first language, comprehending new second language through visual support rather than through first language support is bound to be more satisfying for many students. In addition, visual meaning gives students an opportunity to add their own personal thoughts to the new language they read or hear, as they mentally interpret the pictures they are looking at. Numerous TESOL and literacy researchers have noted the value of “ownership of meaning” (Phillip and Lie 185-186; Norton 1). The link between comics and popular culture, mentioned in my definition of comics for TESOL purposes in 2.4 and explored further throughout section 3, also makes comics conducive to positive student affect. To quote one of my students from Seoun Elementary School in South Korea: “English is important because Spider-Man is in English.”

The popularity enjoyed by the comics medium in many different world cultures gives comics a special usefulness in education that other forms of comprehensible pleasure reading do not necessarily share. Research shows that comics hold emotional appeal for many ESL/EFL learners, and have been used successfully to increase interest in English language reading by numerous schools and libraries (Cary 31; “High Interest” 6; Raugust). However, a few caveats regarding the supposedly universal appeal of comics have gone underreported or unnoticed by comics loving TESOL professionals. In a number of cultures, especially English speaking cultures, comics are seen as being primarily for children. This has certainly been the traditional view in India and the United States, two major hubs of the English speaking global community, for quite some time (Pidaparthry; Bousquet). Moreover, in
child education settings, comics may be disliked or seen as harmful by PTA members or school administrators (Norton & Vanderheyen 213-214; Cary 30, 32). While the potential detrimental effects of comics have been disproven in research, this view of comics popularized by famed American child psychologist Dr. Frederick Wertham in the 1950s, persists to this day (Krashen *Power of Reading* 93-97; Cary 30). Because of the cultural stigmas associating comics with childishness and impaired literary development, there are also situations where comics usage may come across as infantile or condescending to a group of learners, especially if the learners are adolescents or adults. In such cases, ESL/EFL teachers should proceed with caution and be prepared to credibly justify their use of comics.

While the cultural view of comics as childish or anti-literary has been waning in recent years, comics can still bring other cultural problems into the classroom. There remains a broad perception that comics are created for male readers and not female readers in the U.S. and other parts of Western world (Smetana 229; Ujiie & Krashen 2-3). The Western comics industry plays to this perception, presenting comic book buyers with stories told from a primarily male perspective, created largely by male writers and artists (Carter 10). It has also been noted by many critics within the comics industry that superhero comics, the most visible genre of comics in North America (and one of the most visible worldwide), focus on “adolescent male power fantasies,” and tell stories with patriarchal and even misogynistic undertones (Rogers; Quinn). In addition, some ESL/EFL students come from cultures where comics are simply uncommon and thus difficult to interpret. W. Howard Levie notes a number of problems that arose when showing a comic strip to a group of adults from a rural Botswanan community where comics are not common. The comic strip shown to the Botswanan group featured three sequential images of a boy watering a potted plant, drawn in a simplistic, caricatured art style. The group did not understand that the three pictures were supposed to depict the same figure rather than three different figures. Perhaps finding the cartoony style eerie, some of the students also thought the figure was supposed to be a ghost and mistook the boy’s sweat for blood or tears (Levie 8).
In short, while comics can do a lot to lower students’ affective filters and put them in the right frame of mind for language learning, not all students like comics. When considering comics as a possible teaching material, TESOL professionals should consider the cultural attitudes that parents, students, and school officials may have toward comics. They should also consider the gender and age of their students, choosing gender and age appropriate comics. Lastly, if they are dealing with students from a culture that is somewhat detached from global popular media, they should know whether or not comics are well-known in that culture.

So far, this fifth section of the thesis has revealed a lot of illuminating information for ESL/EFL instructors who wish to use comics in their classrooms. Krashen’s studies of the affective filter as it relates to comics and culture says a lot about how and when ESL/EFL instructors should use comics with different demographics of students and maximize learner satisfaction by assigning comics as a reading material. Krashen’s Input Hypothesis reveals how comics can be used to scaffold learning when an instructor chooses to introduce comics to a classroom. The wide range of research in Dual Coding Theory shows how useful comprehensible comics material may be identified to begin with, before it is introduced to the classroom. This information is useful largely outside of the classroom, during the research and planning stages that occur before lesson materials are assembled and delivered to students. Section 5.4 will explore the direct applications of Dual Coding Theory, the Input Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis in the classroom itself, with specific examples from my own teaching career.

5.4. The Application of Learning Theory to TESOL Comics Pedagogy: Case Studies

I have already given a few examples of the direct application of Dual Coding Research in my classroom. In 5.2 I gave two visual examples of comics I have chosen not to use in my classroom, *Fish* and *Pogo*, and explained how my decision was related to DCT researcher W. Howard Levie’s principle
of distinctness (fig. 5.1.2 and 5.1.3). I also looked at Levie’s research on figure-ground clarity, demonstrating revisions I made to my own artwork to improve its figure-ground clarity and describing the positive impact those changes made on my students’ learning process (fig. 5.1.4).

Carney and Levin’s research on picture-text relationships also have direct relevance to my teaching. Knowing that decorational visuals have proven to be of little or no use in learning, I have avoided creating purely decorational illustrations on handouts I give to my students, and have directed their attention away from any purely decorational imagery in assigned class texts. Similarly, I have made an effort to both create and seek out organizational, interpretational and transformational comics and imagery for my students, knowing that such imagery has proven to be the most effective in DCT experiments and research.

I have also grown to realize that, while Carney and Levin have found representational imagery to be less effective than certain other types of educational visuals, such imagery may have different, potentially more beneficial effects in TESOL settings. This is because, to the eye of an ESL/EFL learner, a representational image may be more comprehensible than the language that it illustrates. This means that some representational images are actually interpretational, clarifying the meaning of unfamiliar accompanying words. This can be seen in the comics panels in fig. 5.4.1. I created these panels for a group of beginner learners and used them to teach and clarify basic terms like cable, news bulletin, voice mail, and so on through illustrative support. In TESOL settings, representational imagery can also potentially take on mnemonic properties. Comics that visually represent information in a humorous, novel, or expressive way are more likely to stick out in the minds of students, mnemonically associating the lesson’s target language with memorable imagery. This became especially apparent when I used a custom-made comic booklet to teach prefixes to my students. They had a consistently easier time learning prefixes that I had illustrated with novelty, humor, and emotional subtext than the ones accompanied by ordinary imagery. To get an idea of what a mnemonic educational comic might
look like in comparison to an educational comic that is merely interpretational, compare the mnemonic comic in fig. 5.4.2 and the interpretational comic in fig. 5.4.3.

![Fig. 5.4.1. A comic strip I created to teach communications terms.](image)

When I select comics and cartoon artwork for my lessons, I am especially mindful Evelyn Goldsmith’s DCT-based research on the visual factors of unity and location. In the interests of unity (visual cohesiveness and consistency), I avoid showing my students *jam comics*, works created collaboratively by multiple cartoonists with varied art styles (Runton “Lesson Plans” 19; Abel & Madden 13). Such comics are, in the words of comics scholars Jessica Abel and Matt Madden, “a little chaotic” (13). Lacking visual unity, this genre of cartoon art is likely to disorient and confuse ESL/EFL students (fig. 5.4.4). Goldsmith’s findings on location, the use of clear, uncluttered spatial arrangement between visuals within a single image, cause me to approach *splash panels* in comics cautiously as well. Splash panels are large comic book images that tend to introduce the characters, setting, and plot
Fig. 5.4.2. A comic I created to teach the prefix *un-*.

Fig. 5.4.3. A comic strip I created to teach the prefix *co-*.

of a comics sequence ("Comic Vocabulary"; Edkin). I like to use splash panels as writing or speaking prompts, because they generally contain a lot of detail and visual information that students can write or
verbalize about in a variety of ways. Unfortunately, quite a few comic book artists fill their splash panels with densely packed visual elements that compete with each other for the reader’s attention. Such visually busy images can be entertaining, but they do not use location in an educationally beneficial way. I avoid graphically dense splash panels like the one seen in fig. 5.4.5 in favor of simpler scenes like the one in fig. 5.4.6, where there is significant space between the most important visual elements.

Goldsmith’s relational factors of emphasis (the interrelationship images have with each other) and text parallels (the relationship between picture and text) help me a good deal when I create my own comics-format learning materials. After reading Evelyn Goldsmith’s writings on emphasis, for example, I realized that my “Creekbed Tales” comic book had poor emphasis on some of its pages. On page 13, for example, I chose to make the most important image, the image where the dragon has captured the protagonist and is flying away with him, the smallest image. I also placed it in the bottom right corner of the page, weakening its emphasis even more by placing it in the last place a reader would look, given the English language’s top-to-bottom, left-to-right order (fig. 5.4.7). Sometimes when using this comic I present my students with an alternate arrangement that places more appropriate emphasis on the final climactic panel, as seen in fig. 5.4.8. I have already demonstrated one way that supplemental text parallels can make a TESOL-purposed comic more comprehensible, adding written meaning to my wordless comic “Creekbed Tales” via the handout seen in fig. 5.1.12. I often also integrate text parallels directly into comics-format teaching aids. In fig. 5.4.9 below, I strategically place a minimal amount of words into an otherwise wordless writing prompt comic strip, using captions and signs to indicate the locations of the characters as they engage in global trade, and using numbers and monetary symbols to indicate that money is being spent. These text parallels give my students all the information they needed to match business-related words such as *bid, invoice, purchase,* and *ship* to the numbered comics panels.
Fig. 5.4.4 Jam comic book page from *normalman* (Valentino 432) © Jim Valentino, Don Simpson, Batton Lash, Scott McCloud, Scott Saavedra, Jeff Smith, Mike Allred, Bob Burden, Larry Marder, Arn Saba, Colleen Doran, and Bob Crabbe. Use in accordance with Image Comics’ terms of use.
Fig. 5.4.5. Splash panel from Steve Purcell’s *Sam and Max* (Purcell 1). © Steve Purcell. Used in accordance with Telltale Games’ terms of use.
As an effective practitioner of TESOL comics pedagogy, I work to ensure that the comics in my classroom succeed on the three levels of visual communication Goldsmith discusses in her work: syntactic communication (comprehensible arrangements of multiple pictures), semantic communication (the comprehensibility of the imagery) and pragmatic communication (the appropriateness of imagery to a given situation). I recently viewed and chose not to use a syntactically muddled comic strip writing prompt I found on an online worksheet database. The comic strip, pictured in fig. 5.4.10, places many of its characters and word balloons partly or completely outside of the comics panel borders. It is difficult to tell where one image ends and the next begins, or how the images should be sequenced to
Fig. 5.4.7. Page 13 of “Creekbed Tales.”
adult students who do not come from drinking cultures or my many students who are under the legal drinking age. When dealing with students from the Muslim world, secular ESL/EFL instructors should be mindful of both alcohol and depictions of women when selecting comics materials. For instance, the female leads in *Archie* dress in clothing that is normal and fashionable in secular non-Islamic contexts, but potentially scandalous in more conservative cultures (fig. 5.4.12). For this reason, I avoid using *Archie, Wonder Woman*, and a number of other comics with secular adult female protagonists when I am teaching learners from the Middle East.

So far, section 5.4 presents an abridged overview of case studies in Allan Pavio’s Dual Coding Theory to TESOL comics pedagogy. A complete cataloging of the varied, highly specific ways that DCT manifests in TESOL case studies could probably fill a book. Hopefully, some future scholar
Fig. 5.4.9. A comic strip I designed to teach language related to international trade.
Fig. 5.4.10. A comic strip writing prompt (Kifissia “Frankenstein”). © Kifissia. This file is licensed by ISLCollective user Kifissia under a Creative Commons Attribution License.
will rise to that challenge and create a new lengthy work on DCT, comics and TESOL that builds on the findings of this report and the works that have informed it. For the sake of brevity, I will end my own indexing of the usefulness of DCT at this point in the report, and move on to the relevant theories of Stephen Krashen. Krashen’s work is relevant to TESOL comics pedagogy in a much broader, less specific way than the work of Pavio and his followers, and its impact on my teaching is summarized in brief below.

Krashen’s Input Hypothesis shows that comics can be used to ease beginners and intermediate learners into expanded language use by utilizing comics imagery as comprehensible visual support for an as of yet unknown second language. Where literacy skills are concerned, the ultimate goal should be
to ease the student into reading text that is far less visually supported than comics or not visually supported at all. Because of this, I tend to use comics as a literacy aid fairly heavily with beginning learners, moderately with intermediate learners, and minimally with advanced learners. This use of comics as a scaffolding tool for progressive literacy development can be seen in a quiz I created for a group of low-beginner students in a reading and writing class, shown in fig. 5.4.13. Note that the top half of the quiz prompts the students to infer the meaning of words through comics-based visual context, while the bottom half provides context for word meaning only from the surrounding text. After taking several quizzes in this format, my students became increasingly proficient with the text-only portion of the task and I removed the comics component from subsequent quizzes. My students in the
advanced section of this class received no visual support for vocabulary tasks, and were only given comics as mnemonic memory aids.

READING QUIZ, 9-13-2012

Part 1:

**Name:**

**Part 1:**

**Your horse has the**

**Yes, my horse has been reading since 2008. He has 4 years of reading.**

**Wow! Your horse must have very high**

**One feature of the giraffe is its long neck.**

**This tree has a**

- of 5 meters
- 2) adaptive
- 3) intelligence
- 2) friendly
- 3) economic
- 2) unique

**2. intelligence 2) ability 3) experience**

**Please — the width of the pizza carefully, so I can cut it at the middle!**

**1) measure 2) exact 3) divide.**

**This long neck and long legs help the animal to the tall trees in its**

**4) zoological 5) physical 6) ecological**

**5) general 2) economic 3) unique**

**Part 2:**

**WORD BANK:** musical, affect, adopt, effect, attention, activity, opposite, conclude

My cat listens to a lot of music. (1)________________________ sounds

(2)____________________ my cat in many different ways. For example, if I play rock and roll, my cat is very interested, and gives the music her close (3)____________________. If I play hip-hop, my cat shows a lot of physical (4)____________________, jumping up and down. Classical music has the (5)____________________ (6)____________________ on my cat. When she hears it, she just purrs and falls asleep. I must (7)____________________ that my cat loves music. I love music too. I'm glad I decided to (8)____________________ my cat from my neighbor, who gave her to me when he moved.

Fig. 5.4.13. A vocabulary quiz of my own design.
Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis reveals that the educational value of comics can be augmented by the enjoyability of the comics medium. Enjoyability is subjective; there is no magic formula to accurately determine which comics will or will not be enjoyed by any given student. Consequently, practitioners of TESOL comics pedagogy must be attentive to the ongoing reaction students have to the comics they are being presented with. The first time I used “Creekbed Tales”, for example, I tried to use the 16 page comic as a half-semester writing project, with my students creating text for every single panel. By about the fourth week, my students were only halfway through the booklet and visibly bored with it. To keep their affective sufficiently positive, I abandoned the book for a few weeks, addressing the students’ learning needs with other writing tasks. When I did return to “Creekbed Tales”, I had the students write a description of each remaining page rather than breaking down the story panel by panel. In this way I was able to keep their attention and make the remainder of the activity manageable and enjoyable.

In my efforts to ensure that comics contribute positively to student affect, I also try to be mindful of the place comics may have in the culture of my students. I once tutored a Hmong refugee from rural Laos. Knowing that Lao Hmong tend to have conservative attitudes toward popular culture, I suspected my student would see comics as a medium for Americans and children. I gave him a folder of learning materials to pick from. When he saw the comics in the folder, he pulled them out, frowned at them, and pushed them away dismissively. In this case, a comics-based lesson would have been likely to give the learner poor affect. When I am able to establish that a group of learners likes comics, I then try to find out which comics they like the most and use characters that are associated with the popular culture of the group. When I lived in South Korea, I quickly learned that Dooly Dinosaur was that nation’s most popular locally created cartoon character. To heighten my students’ enjoyment, I drew a number of comics featuring Dooly and his friends, including the comic seen to the left in fig. 1.2.1 in this paper’s introduction. Similarly, I have used *Peanuts* with Taiwanese learners and *Asterix*
with European learners, knowing that those two comic strips are particularly popular with those two respective cultural groups.

5.5. Learning Theory and TESOL Comics Pedagogy: What Teachers Should Know and Do

As one can see from the research and case studies above, the roles, visual qualities and communicative functions of images greatly affect their educational utility. Moreover, the dual nature of comics as a visual support for language and as a venue for entertainment in popular culture give the comics medium a unique role in the learning process both inside and outside the classroom. Practitioners of TESOL comics pedagogy can use their knowledge of the educational value of different kinds of imagery to select the right kind of comics for their classroom and use various kinds of comics to their most appropriate and useful educational ends.

When using comics as a teaching aid, ESL/EFL teachers would do well to mind Carney and Levin’s research on the different roles that visuals play in education, and the relative educational value of these roles. Decorational imagery, which only serves to make learning materials more aesthetically pleasing, has little or no educational value. Teachers should avoid deliberately inserting purely ornamental comic strips or cartoon drawings into the materials they create, and they should direct student attention away from any decorative cartoon art that appears in the textbooks they use. Practitioners of TESOL comics pedagogy should also know that imagery which organizes, interprets or mnemonically transforms information has the highest educational value. Teachers should make an effort to select and create comics that fulfill these functions in their classrooms.

TESOL professionals should additionally appreciate the fact that representational imagery, imagery that merely serves as a visual duplicate for textual information, has a special value in ESL/EFL learning. Although Carney and Levin assign representational imagery relatively low educational value
in their own research, such imagery can also be organizational, interpretational, or transformational when it is used to teach English to ESL/EFL learners. This is because students may not have a firm grasp on the textual information that is being duplicated by representational imagery. Thus, imagery meant to simply illustrate textual information may organize, interpret or visually transform text for students who find the text difficult to comprehend. When introducing newer more difficult levels of text to ESL/EFL learners, instructors who use comics should seek out works where the comic imagery gives the same information as the word balloons and captions. Such parallel visual support can help learners confirm and retain the meaning of difficult textual language.

While the function of comics imagery is important, teachers of ESL/EFL should also be aware that certain visual qualities are necessary for comics to effectively fulfill their educational functions. Comics should be distinct, depicting representational imagery with as little ambiguity as possible. To truly tell if a comic is distinct, a discriminating TESOL professional should pay attention not only to the distinctness of individual objects or characters in the artwork, but also to figure ground clarity, the visual distinction between background and foreground objects. When selecting comics for ESL/EFL lessons, teachers should also make sure that the artwork has unity, visual consistency that makes it look like one unified image. Comics that are drawn by multiple artists or by a single artist who experimentally uses several different styles within the same work may lack unity and confuse learners. Even when the cartoon art style is cohesive, imagery can still be confusing if it makes poor use of location, the space put between important parts of an image. Some comics artists try to cram in as much imagery into a comics panel or comics page as possible. While this visual approach can infuse a fun sense of chaos or detail into a comics story, it can be distracting to learners who wish to use comics to better understand a second or foreign language. Teachers should avoid comics that have such clutter. As they look for comics with suitable educational utility, teachers should also make sure that the works they use emphasize the parts of the visual and textual elements that are most important to the meaning
of the narrative or message. Educationally valuable comics should always make the most important imagery more visually striking than images of lesser importance, and should draw the eye to the text rather than the pictures in instances where the text carries the most meaning.

The varied functions and qualities of the imagery in comics determine much of their educational value. However, teachers should also pay attention to the levels of communication that imagery is capable of. When selecting comics, teachers should know that the imagery in comics communicates syntactically, using multiple images to form a kind of visual grammar. Much like linguistic grammar, visual grammar can only communicate effectively if every component is clearly related to its surrounding components and no parts of the visual sequence are missing. When previewing comics for possible classroom use, ESL/EFL instructors should make sure that each comics sequence makes sense. Teachers should also scrutinize images at the semantic level communication, making sure they are comprehensible. If a comics sequence contains individual images that have unclear, difficult to recognize visuals, the sequence has poor semantics and should not be used in the classroom. Finally, imagery can communicate pragmatically, portraying messages and ideas that seem appropriate and proper to the social situation. Because socially appropriate discourse varies widely in different cultures, professionals in the field of TESOL should take care to select and create materials that speak to the social sensibilities of the learners who will use the materials.

Knowing the social sensibilities of ones’ students is part of a broader quality that dedicated practitioners of TESOL comics pedagogy should possess: insight into the cognition and thought processes of their students. Teachers should be aware, per Krashen, that students are most able to comprehend new, previously incomprehensible language when that language is supported by comprehensible input. Because well-designed illustration can communicate comprehensibly across language barriers, teachers would do well to use comics in which the imagery provides strong, comprehensible contextual cues to the meaning of the language that accompanies it. Teachers should
also know which comics their students may or may not enjoy, as Krashen also states that enjoyable comics can improve the mood and attitude of learners, which in turn improves their ability to learn. Practitioners of TESOL comics pedagogy should learn their students’ tastes and present learners with comics that match their tastes. Instructors should also be aware that not all students like comics. In situations when learners dislike comics or view them as anti-intellectual, comics should be used very sparingly or not used at all.

By focusing on learning theories rather than the broader subjects of comics scholarship, comics usage, and human cognition, this section of the paper provides a focused metric for assessing the educational usefulness of comics material in ESL/EFL learning. Together, Levie, Carney, and Goldsmith’s findings can be used as a tool to measure the comprehensibility of any given comic. Once comprehensible comics are selected and arranged properly in relation to learning texts, they can be used to provide comprehensible input, allowing for the scaffolding techniques referenced in Krashen’s Input Hypothesis. In turn, these scaffolding techniques can ease the learning process, improving student affect during learning activities. This benefit can be further built upon by following the principles of Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis, which encourages the continued use of any educationally beneficial comics that students find particularly entertaining or enjoyable.

The tools presented in this section cannot be used without firm foundational knowledge, however. It is important that teachers inform their application of Dual Coding Theory, the Input Hypothesis and the Affective Filter Hypothesis with broader knowledge about TESOL comics pedagogy as a whole. Knowledge of the various definitions of comics is needed to help TESOL professionals know what comics are to begin with. Effective practitioners of TESOL comics pedagogy must also know the current state of this emerging subdiscipline and be familiar with the broader global role of comics that shapes the medium’s place in world education. Once instructors know what comics are, and are able to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of modern TESOL comics pedagogy, they
can build on TESOL comics pedagogy by increasing their awareness of the processes of human cognition that are activated by both illustration and language, the two components of the comics medium. From there, TESOL professionals are finally prepared to select effective, well designed comics-based teaching materials. These materials, selected on the basis of research in Dual Coding Theory and Krashen’s hypotheses pertaining to input and affect, will allow teachers to apply their knowledge of the structure, educational role and cognitive nature of comics to its best effect. In the next and final section of this thesis, I will sum up all of the information presented in this body of research and outline a streamlined code of rules instructors can follow in order to maximize the effectiveness of comics in the ESL/EFL classroom.
6. Conclusion

The significance of TESOL comics pedagogy as a subdiscipline is self-evident. There is an active discussion about the nature, role, communicative value and educational utility of comics occurring among modern educators and scholars. The comics medium itself is a well established aid to cross-cultural communication, education, and ESL/EFL instruction. Because the comics medium is so intertwined with language and learning, much research that is relevant to language and learning can also be applied to the use of comics in the learning of language. Cognitive and linguistic research, especially in the areas of the evolution of language, constructivism, and the language faculty are relevant to the use of comics, a form of human communication that arises from the same evolutionary processes that generate human perception and language. Learning theory is closely linked to TESOL comics pedagogy as well, with Dual Coding Theory, the Input Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis acting as particularly useful guides for instructors who use comics to teach ESL/EFL. From this active discussion of comics as a teaching aid and from the theories that inform it, TESOL practitioners can glean many important lessons on how to maximize the effectiveness of comics in ESL/EFL learning situations.

The first thing that teachers must do to maximize the effectiveness of comics in TESOL is to understand what comics are and how they are classified. They should know that there is a popular perception of comics as a form of visual narrative with sequential panels, word balloons, and captions, drawn either in a realistic or cartoony style. Comics in this popular format are a useful source of pleasure reading for ESL/EFL learners who need to practice their reading skills.

There is also a broader, more scholarly classification of comics that includes works that may lack words or narrative structure, or use text in unconventional ways. Such comics, frequently less popular than their conventionally formatted counterparts, may serve great educational use within the
classroom, even if they are not suitable for pleasure reading. Wordless comics are particularly useful as productive language prompts, and non-narrative educational comics are excellent for transmitting visually supported academic content. Teachers should also remember that the boundary between comics and other similar forms such as children’s books or illustrated tutorials is flexible and at least partly user defined, much like the boundaries of regional and ethnic languages. When selecting comics, teachers should be aware of how their students define the comics medium, choosing comics in a way that is sensitive to student perceptions. Above all, teachers of ESL/EFL should know that comics are a medium, not a genre. Comics can communicate as many different kinds of messages and ideas as written discourse. With that in mind, teachers should seek out widely varied comics for widely varied learning situations.

Teachers should additionally know the overall role of comics as a tool of global communication and international language acquisition. Certain comics and cartoon characters have multinational appeal, while others have targeted regional appeal. Teachers should be aware of which comics appeal to which groups of ESL/EFL students and select comics for their classrooms accordingly. They should also know the prevailing use of comics as a literacy aid in contemporary TESOL pedagogy, using comics to that end and looking for ways to expand the use of comics into additional valuable learning experiences.

As practitioners of TESOL comics pedagogy make an effort to use comics to their fullest effect, they should be aware of the many governmental and private resources available to aid them in using comics effectively, including websites, workshops, peer-reviewed journals, commercially published guides, and so on. These resources should be consulted as needed, and instructors who have found their own new and interesting ways to use comics in ESL/EFL should share their knowledge through these teacher support venues if possible.

Teachers should also familiarize themselves with bodies of relevant research that are not
specific to comics, but are relevant to the use of comics in ESL/EFL nonetheless. Teachers should especially appreciate the close kinship that the comics medium has with the evolution of literacy, the construction of meaning, and the language faculty in a broad sense. Because proto-comics were integral to the evolutionary development of human reading and writing and modern comics are interpreted through the same cognitive processes that allow humans to understand and use language, teachers should use comics to foster literacy development and language skills in their ESL/EFL students. Literacy development can be accomplished through the use of picture narrative and picture writing, two ancient precursors to written language that still appear in modern comics. Comics can also promote all language skills, whether they are receptive of productive. Wordless or near-wordless comics can prompt writing and speaking, and comics’ visual support for language can be used to aid reading and listening comprehension.

Certain learning theories also have particularly salient relevance to TESOL comics pedagogy. Dual Coding Theory (DCT) states that images, when combined with language, can enhance learning, memory, and retention. Per DCT research, these enhancements are most effective when comics imagery is placed in an appropriate relationship with language, supporting and enhancing linguistic information. The comprehensibility of the comics visuals also effects their educational value. Comics visuals should be well composed, and multiple images should be arranged in complete, logical fashion, with each visual component emphasized in a clear, appropriate way. Moreover, when comics contain both pictures and text, the images and words should work well together, arranged in proper relationship and emphasis to each other. Finally, teachers should be mindful that comics, like language, can have pragmatic qualities. Comics should contain imagery and words that are appropriate to the social and situational sensibilities of the ESL/EFL learners who use them.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of comics as an aid to Dual Coding, teachers must be mindful of all of the above visual qualities and look for these qualities in the comics they select. It may
be rare to find a comic that flawlessly satisfies every ideal condition that promotes language learning thought visual support. Once teachers select the best comics they can, they should be prepared to compensate for any qualitative shortcomings that comics might have. For example, if a handful of images in a comic lack figure-ground clarity, a teacher may draw his or her students’ attention to these shortcomings and inform them of the image’s intended meaning. A teacher may also apologize for a lapse in pragmatic appropriateness if, in spite of the teacher’s best efforts, a comic contains certain elements that confuse or offend a given cultural group of learners.

Finally, TESOL professionals who use comics should understand Stephen Krashen’s Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis, recognizing the relevance these hypotheses have to the use of comics as an instrument of ESL/EFL instruction. The Input Hypothesis states that new, previously incomprehensible language may be acquired if it is accompanied by comprehensible input. Given that well-composed imagery can be comprehended by anyone regardless of their native language, and given that comics combine imagery with a wide variety of language, both simple and complex, teachers should turn to the comics medium as a versatile source of visual comprehensible input for language at the beginner, intermediate, and advanced level. The Affective Filter Hypothesis, which states that students learn better when they are in a good emotional state, also points to comics as a particularly useful teaching tool. Comics are a greatly enjoyed artifact of popular culture across the world. Because of this, comics material can provide joy and entertainment to many students, aiding their learning by elevating their mood. Teachers should use comics as a salve for student emotion with caution however, as the appeal of comics varies from culture to culture. In some cultures, comics are considered to be primarily for male readers or primarily for children. In other cultures, comics are considered to be fun but anti-intellectual. In still other cultures and subcultures, comics aren’t liked at all. To maximize the good attitudes of students, comics should be used liberally with learners who like comics, but used sparingly, cautiously, or not at all with students who may dislike the medium.
Above all, those who practice the subdiscipline of TESOL comics pedagogy should be ever inquisitive and ever exploring. They should look for their own unique ways to maximize the effectiveness of comics, and share new methods or insights they discover with the TESOL community at large. As fields of study, language acquisition and pedagogy stretch back centuries and could even be argued to be millennia old. The subdiscipline of TESOL comics pedagogy is only a few decades old. With continued practice, inquiry and diligent scholarship, the body of knowledge on the best uses for comics, a centuries-old teaching tool, could expand greatly, benefitting not only TESOL practitioners but the broader fields of education and science that surround the TESOL discipline. Ultimately, those who hope to master English as a second or foreign language will be the true beneficiaries of continued work in this subdiscipline. For the benefit of learners everywhere, the work collected in this thesis should serve as a foundation for more research and pedagogical development in the decades and perhaps even the centuries to come.
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