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Incorporating Graphic Humor and Comic Vignettes in Second Language Teaching

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Abstract: This article explores the integration of graphic humor, specifically comic vignettes, into a foreign language teaching (FLT) context and its impact on enhancing communicative competencies. It addresses the paradox of how simple humorous sketches can convey complex meanings and discusses their relevance in a globalized world with approximately 7 billion inhabitants. By examining Alonso Abad's (2010) insights on the intersection of psychology and language pedagogy, the article highlights the advantages of using comic strips over more traditional or conventional verbalist approaches. The current discussion, includes theoretical frameworks such as Krashen's Affective Filter Theory and the CEFR's concept of existential competence, emphasizing the role of emotional and personal factors in language learning. The article defines graphic novels and humor graphics, illustrating their ability to engage students with a variety of alternative topics and create meaningful learning experiences in the learning field. It also delves, into the semiotic models of humor and cartoons, noting the cognitive effects of combining verbal and visual elements. Practical aspects of incorporating graphic materials into language teaching are discussed, including the need for specific teacher training and the development of an alternative set of discourses connected with visual competencies. The article concludes with some recommendations based on Littlewood's (1981) procedures for designing didactic materials, aiming to foster a positive classroom environment and enhance language acquisition through humor. Overall, the integration of comic-based learning materials is presented as a necessary approach, which intends to fulfil the lack of intuitive and critical thinking in the second language teaching (SLT) field.

Keywords: graphic humor, images, cartoons, vignettes, communication, creativity, critical thinking, innovation.

Introduction:

In the realm of foreign language teaching (FLT), educators continually seek innovative methods to enhance language acquisition, engaging students in re-

sourceful and meaningful ways. One such method gaining increasing attention is the use of graphic humor, particularly through comic vignettes, as an innovative pedagogical tool. This approach presents a fascinating paradox: how can a series of simple, and often whimsical sketches combined with dialogue balloons convey such complex and nuanced meanings? Comics, vignettes and other graphic humor materials with their unique blend of visual and verbal elements, offer a distinctive mode of communication that can add a new creative dimension in the language learning setting.

The relevance of humor in education has been traditionally played down, and underscored by its ability to address sensitive or controversial topics, in a manner that might be deemed inappropriate in other contexts. As Ricardo Liniers Siri [1], a world-renowned Latin-American cartoonist, aptly puts it, “humor exists in every context and in every place.” In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, humor becomes not only a universal language but also a crucial element in facilitating interactions across diverse cultural contexts, as reflected in the “Erasmus+ Program” in the European Union.

This article explores the theoretical and practical dimensions of incorporating graphic humor into FLT. By leveraging insights from Alonso Abad’s research on the parallel evolution of psychology and language pedagogy, it examines the potential of comic strips to provide an engaging and effective alternative to traditional language teaching methods, exclusively based on mass-produced textbook materials by mainstream editorials. The discussion includes an analysis of affective variables, such as motivation and empathy, which play a critical role in language learning, as outlined by Krashen’s Affective Filter Theory and the CEFR’s concept of existential competence.

Furthermore, the article delves into the semiotic models of humor and cartoons, highlighting how their combination of visual and verbal components impacts critical cognitive processes and enhances communication in the learning context. By integrating cartoons, comics and other graphic materials into the language classroom, educators can develop a wide array of intercultural learning materials that resonate with students on both emotional and intellectual levels.

In summary, this article aims to demonstrate how graphic humor, through its rich interplay of imagery and text, can serve as a valuable pedagogical tool in foreign language education, offering new avenues for student engagement and language development as well as to diversify the nature of cultural inputs.



Image 1. Ricardo Liniers Siri, *Macanudo* (2016). Macanudo comes to Cartoon Network. *La Vereta*. 08.12.2016. <https://lavereda.com.ar/macanudo-llega-a-cartoon-network/?lang=en>.

Image 1. Ricardo Liniers Siri, *Macanudo* (2016). *Macanudo* is a comic strip which is published by Liniers (Ricardo Siri), since 2002 in the Argentinian newspaper *La Nación*. Nowadays there are about ten books published with the *Macanudo* characters as protagonists.

Theoretical overview

When analyzing graphic humor in general and the use of humor vignettes or comics specifically in foreign language teaching (FLT), several intriguing questions arise, making this topic particularly appealing to second language teachers and researchers. At this point, we are presented with a paradox: on how an apparently simple humoristic component made out of a few sketches and strokes, which are presented along with dialog bubbles, thought bubbles or narration boxes, are able to provide such a complex meaning? In the Latin-American region there is a solid tradition of including humoristic vignettes in their mainstream news journals, some of these vignettes or cartoons explore controversial topics, that otherwise would be rude or even offensive in any other type of publication. As Ricardo Liniers Siri, one of the greatest Latin-American cartoonists from Argentina, explains for *Todo Noticias*, “humor exists in every context and in every place”, and this idea is especially true, if we assume that our intercon-

nected planet has reached already about 7.000.000.000 million inhabitants. Keeping these figures in mind, makes humorous interactive elements, more necessary now than ever before, because humor can be useful in any given situation, and especially as we interact with each other in an increasingly crowded and ever-changing world.

The comic phenomenon, is something relatively new as mentioned by Vilches (2014) [2], this is due to the idea that comics and other graphic materials, as we commonly known them today, refers to an industrial object as its origins are based on the printing industry. As we are aware, the Swiss pedagogue, writer, painter, as well as caricaturist Rodolphe Töpffer [3], due to a common eyesight condition, named myopia, in which he wasn't able to clearly see in the distance, started creating visual stories, possibly the first cartoon figures to be created. As these funny and whimsical figures, started to be popular among students, he continued to work on them, and eventually started to be published in several journals in Europe. Töpffer's drawings were able to establish some principles of the whimsical art and, in particular, to awaken inspirational artistic bases in which other artists could be reflected, therefore developing a series of new graphic art elements (Vilches, 2014). [4]. Another important figure in the cartoon evolution would be, Richard Felton Outcault, as presented by Humor Sapiens (2024) [5], script writer, cartoonist and artist who started his career as a humoristic graphic artist for different magazines like *Judge* or *Life*. In 1895, worked for the *New York World*, where he created the series of *Hogan's Alley (Yellow Kid)*, who was a protagonist from the suburbs and whose yellow shirt served as a canvas for the different texts.

For Alonso Abad (2010) [6], the continuous parallel evolution of psychology, along with language pedagogy, allowed that important advances in the psychologic research studies, could easily be applied in some way, to the learning field. According to this, Canto Moreno (2023) [7], argues that the exploitation of comic strips in the language classroom becomes a relevant didactic vehicle, which presents itself with some critical advantages over a more orthodox verbalist-based approaches, with shortcomings which are difficult to overcome. Working closely with humor-based learning materials takes us back, to an emotional state, that is related to our youth years, because this is the period of our lives, in which it was more likely that we were in close contact with comics as humor artifacts. Therefore, a series of linguistic mechanisms and innovative learning-oriented concepts like affective variables, motivation or the importance of empathy in the socio-cultural context become important elements to be considered.

The influence and relevance of affective variables in foreign language teaching (FLT) are underscored by various factors, as examined by Krashen (1983) [8] in his Affective Filter Theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of considering students' overall emotions within the learning and teaching con-

text from a holistic perspective, which includes the general attitudes of students, their feelings, emotional states, and a set of different emotions. The existential competence is another key component of the affective variables approach, as highlighted by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) [9], proposed by the European Council in 2002, which reflects on the concept of “knowing how to be”. As illustrated in the *Dictionary of Key Terms in Spanish as a Second Language* (ELE) Martin Peris (2008) [10], defines the existential competence, as a set of personal characteristics, and the individual traits of each person, which give form to the idea of self-awareness, as well as the capacity to relate to other individuals in any given sociocultural setting.

A graphic novel usually refers to a book-length fiction or nonfiction story, that is manufactured in the style of a comic book (Chung, 2009). [11] Humor graphics and vignettes, organized in various ways, create a specific form of visual communication that makes use of images or pictures, which are usually brief, in order to convey a humoristic impact on its readers. Graphic material and comics in applied to the learning context, can contribute to create meaningful learning experiences, presented as cultural artifacts for students of different ages, and incorporate materials open to wide range of themes and topics, that can be rather difficult to cover with traditional and more conventional approaches. For Brines (2012), comics and vignettes generally present a more informal registry and usually a relaxed atmosphere, this combination allows for puns and word expressions that are not commonly found in language course textbooks.

When we analyze cartoons in an academic context, we could highlight meaning and humor, and both are essentially two semiotic models: the verbal component and the visual component. The semiotic models are defined by Gee (2003) [12] as “any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g. oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meaning”. Therefore, the combination of both visual and verbal components highlight the non-linearity of graphic humor and cartoons, as they affect cognitive processes (Samson & Hempelmann, 2006) [13]; (Hempelmann & Samson, 2007). [14] As graphic humor and cartoons in general have long been associated with the written mass media like major newspapers and publications mentioned earlier, they have been renowned for being direct and easy as they can improve communication messages. At the same time, humor becomes *sine qua non* for cartoons and graphic humor, as a cartoon basically presents a joke in a graphic representation (Samson & Huber 2004). [15] The difference here lies in the contrast between the graphic material and the verbal context, which is revealed by relevant academic literature as being preferred by general public over mainstream news.

Graphic humor in classroom contexts

The iconic element, as mentioned by Bambara (2013) [16], allows, the reading as well as the global understanding of the gestural messages, the movement, and therefore has a positive influence in the textual comprehension of the textual input. The specific bounds between language and image, facilitate the process of the students reading and observing the lexical units in communicative situations imbedded in cultural settings.

In the case of the textual elements, it is not only reinforced by the image itself, but by the communicative situation as a whole. The main advantage of humor graphic presentation, is that, besides being included in the dialog bubbles, thought bubbles or narrative boxes, it is also contextualized in a concrete and specific humoristic genre. For Carbajal & Rey (2013) [17], SLT-contextualized humor in graphic humor plays an important role in order to strengthen the socio-cultural competence of the students in an academic context. Regarding the importance of intercultural competencies embedded in graphic humor, Miquel & Sans (2004), refer to three different types of culture: on the one hand, we have *Culture* (with a capital letter), in which the culture is illustrated by notable manifestations like the arts, music, history and literature. On the other hand, we have *culture* (in lower case), which refers to values and social customs related mostly to popular culture, and in the last place, we have *culture* (with k), that represents low-lying culture, alternative sources of culture, subculture and marginalized culture.

For Montes Castillo (2021) [18], the concept of *Kulture* (German concept), refers to the cultural aspects associated with the target language, that include not only the language itself, but also the values, the traditions, beliefs, social practices, history, and cultural artifacts of the community that speaks the language.

When learning a second language, understanding *Kulture*, is crucial because it influences how language is used, interpreted, and understood. It also involves grasping the underlying social conventions, etiquette, idiomatic expressions, and context-specific meanings that are essential for effective communication.

Didactic approaches including significant graphic materials require specific training, which includes a set of previous knowledge and skills on the teachers' part. With the objective of developing visual competences in SLT we can list a number of relevant aspects:

- Value different types of narration.
- Appreciate contemporary themes, as well as some others that it might not be, but they could have some validity and can be applied to SLT.
- To utilize the theme of comic strips to reinforce reading comprehension, oral interaction, written expression, and oral expression.
- To develop abilities that involve imagination and creativity.

The comic primarily conveys a story through a series of sequential panels. In each specific panel, a particular situation or action is illustrated, which encompasses a space, a place, and a time, creating a spatial-temporal logic. As the progression of the panels advances, comic artists may skip various scenes or omit others, which the human mind tends to complete reflexively. This way of skipping scenes or creating a narrative jump constitutes an ellipsis, which is a subtle way to advance quickly through a plot and is used in other genres such as literature. According to Littlewood (1981) [19], there are some procedures that teachers should consider when designing and organizing didactic materials, which can in turn enhance communicative competencies in the SLT classroom for students:

- Adopt a less controlling role fostering a positive classroom environment.
- Provide opportunities for collaboration among students, encourage teamwork, sharing, and participation in class.
- Promote an environment of equality between students and teachers.
- Avoid repetitive and constant correction by the teacher, treating errors as a natural part of the language learning process.
- Encourage the integration of the target language into the students' own personalities, helping them identify with different situations.

According to Arnold (2000), the connection between visual representations and images is of particular importance. Images carry a significant emotional and symbolic load and play a crucial role in the development of our personality. Thus, the use of graphic humor in the SLT classroom can strengthen these personal connections between the speaker and the target language. In order for foreign language learners to effectively infer humor from comic strips and other humor-based materials, teachers need to cultivate attitudes conducive to humor in their teaching methods and didactic materials.

Conclusion

The integration of graphic humor, particularly comic vignettes, into foreign language teaching (FLT) offers a dynamic and multifaceted approach to enhancing communicative competencies in language learners. By combining visual and verbal elements, comic strips and other forms of graphic humor provide a unique avenue for engaging students, making complex linguistic and cultural concepts more accessible and relatable. This method not only captures students' interest but also fosters an emotional connection to the material, which is critical in the language acquisition process.

The theoretical frameworks discussed, including Krashen's Affective Filter Theory and the CEFR's concept of existential competence, underscore the importance of considering emotional and personal factors in language learning. These insights, coupled with the semiotic analysis of humor, highlight how the

interplay between imagery and text can stimulate cognitive processes that traditional methods may not fully engage.

Furthermore, the use of comics in the classroom can address sensitive or challenging topics in a manner that is both engaging and non-threatening, thus broadening the scope of language instruction. The development of visual literacy and the inclusion of culturally relevant material also play a significant role in preparing students for real-world communication in a globalized society.

However, the effective implementation of graphic humor in FLT requires specific teacher training and a shift towards a more collaborative and student-centered classroom environment. By embracing these innovative teaching strategies, educators can create more inclusive and stimulating learning experiences that resonate with students on multiple levels. As it resonates with Castillo (2021) [20], one of the important components of language learning for students would be the capacity to identify how, when and how to make use of the target language. In this case, if the teacher fails to provide the cultural perspectives, the students would clearly miss some cultural aspects of great value. The immense amount of information about any given society that is passed through cultural situations, not only provides some language knowledge, but a number of traditions, values, and cultural practices from any specific linguistic community.

In conclusion, the incorporation of comic-based materials in language education represents a promising pedagogical tool that not only enriches the learning experience but also contributes to the overall development of communicative competence. As education continues to evolve, it is imperative that educators explore and integrate such creative approaches to ensure that language learning remains relevant, effective, and engaging for all students.

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*Image 1. Ricardo Liniers Siri, Macanudo (2016). Macanudo comes to Cartoon Network. La Vereta. 08.12.2016.
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