The value of targeted comic book readers

Kay Hammond and Katherine Danaher

A limitation of extensive reading programmes is the time required for progress in vocabulary acquisition. This paper reports on a qualitative exploration of student perceptions of the value of non-compulsory comic books in E S L elementary and upper-intermediate level courses at a tertiary institution. We aimed to develop supplementary materials that students would find valuable, use, and enjoy without requiring classroom time. The results suggest the learners' views on the value of comic books and recordings can be broadly categorized into five themes: (1) helpful story characteristics, (2) perceived performance enhancement, (3) use of learning strategies, (4) enjoyment, and (5) areas for improvement. An interesting finding was the variety of uses to which the learners put the resources, in particular sharing them with their families. This study points to the importance of responding to learners' specific contexts and to creative ways English learners undertake autonomous learning when provided with appropriate resources.

Introduction

Reading outside the classroom offers greater exposure to language than is possible in class time alone, with research indicating substantial gains in proficiency and motivation through extensive reading programmes (Day and Bamford 1998). However, according to Nation (2009), a major limitation of such programmes is the time required to make progress in vocabulary acquisition, because the relatively low frequency of lexical item occurrence makes it time consuming to achieve the repeated encounters that promote vocabulary acquisition. Thornbury (2002) suggests that a minimum of seven spaced encounters is beneficial. Teachers may find themselves looking for alternative materials that could also achieve the benefits of extensive reading without the limitations of time.

Lack of engagement with extensive reading due to lack of time has been an issue noticed amongst adult refugees and migrants studying general English at Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand. This group of learners has a strong motivation for learning English, but limited contact with the language outside the classroom, due to difficulty with finding employment and with integration into the wider New Zealand society. Furthermore, these learners have multiple commitments, such as families and jobs within their own speech communities, which limit the time available to spend on reading extensively outside the classroom. As a result, the learners themselves, as well as their teachers, report difficulties in acquiring the vocabulary necessary to enter mainstream study or to gain

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skilled employment. Therefore, there is a need to develop an appealing resource to address time limitations by offering frequent exposure to target words in a shorter format. A form of comic book is a possible solution.

A number of researchers have pointed out rationales for using picture books in English language teaching. Linking images with words offers both visual and verbal channels for memory (Milton 2008). Sheu (2008) found that EFL teachers perceived linguistic value, story value, and picture value in English picture story books used with children. However, researchers report gaps between how teachers and students perceive the value of learning tasks. Stewart (2007) comments that many teachers evaluate tasks based on their own observations but are unaware of how students perceive them.

This article undertakes a qualitative exploration of student perceptions of the value of non-compulsory comic books in ESL elementary and upper-intermediate level courses. Our aim was to develop supplementary materials based on targeted, course-related vocabulary that students would perceive as valuable, use, and enjoy without taking up additional classroom time.

Methods

We wrote targeted readers for elementary and upper-intermediate learners studying a Certificate in English or Diploma in English. The themes, topics, and vocabulary reflected and supported their course syllabus and used substantial repetition of the target vocabulary. This generally consisted of 15–30 single lexical items or semi-fixed phrases per targeted reader. The target vocabulary was listed inside the front cover of the readers. The readers were illustrated with cartoons by the first author and presented in a B5 booklet form between 20 and 28 pages long. The average word length was 980 for upper-intermediate and 930 for elementary stories. Altogether, 7 booklets were given to the upper-intermediate learners, and 11 booklets were given to the elementary learners (one for every unit of the course). The upper-intermediate stories repeated an average of 13 target words on average approximately 5 times each, while the elementary stories repeated an average of 24 target words or phrases approximately 4 times each. The recommended seven repetitions were not always possible as the stories needed to be short enough to be completed in one sitting. Example pages from an elementary story and an upper-intermediate story are shown in Appendix 1 as Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

The level of the readers was 'i minus 1', as suggested by Day and Bamford (op. cit.). The learners' current level of acquisition is represented by 'i', with 'i minus 1' referring to vocabulary and structures that are already acquired and therefore not distracting from the target input. Thus, in this study, the target words were the challenging aspect while the supporting grammar was easily within the students' ability. The readers were illustrated with cartoon drawings that supported the meaning of the text. These characteristics aimed to provide meaning-focused input and maximize automaticity in the development of sight vocabulary.

Each story was recorded by the authors using Audacity, which is free recording and audio editing software. The speed of delivery was graded to the level of the learners. Recordings were stored on an online learning platform (Blackboard) or burned to CD, which was available in the library.

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The learners were adult refugees and migrants from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, South America, India, Bangladesh, Eastern Europe, and the Pacific, studying general English courses at elementary and upper-intermediate levels. The courses involved 16–17 contact hours per week for 16 weeks, with an expectation that learners would also do 18 hours per week of autonomous study to support their learning. The study took place over two semesters. In the first semester, teachers distributed targeted readers to the learners at the end of each unit of work. Learners were given a questionnaire to determine their responses to the readers, and three focus groups were held with a total of 33 upper-intermediate learners (communication difficulties prevented elementary focus groups). In the second semester, the readers were distributed to learners at the beginning of every unit of work because feedback from the first semester indicated that learners preferred this.

Since the questionnaire responses from Semester 1 provided little useful information, in Semester 2 only small group or individual, semi-structured interviews were held with both upper-intermediate (five interviews involving ten learners) and elementary learners (eight interviews involving thirteen learners, with funding making it possible to employ a Chinese interpreter since the majority of participants were Chinese). The age range of the upper-intermediate learners was from 21 to 41 (average = 36), with one man and nine women. The age range of the elementary learners was from 30 to 72 (average = 52), with four men and nine women (see Appendix 2 for interview questions). The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder, transcribed (excluding non-English language utterances), and checked by the interviewer for accuracy as most of the participants had strong accents.

A data-driven code was developed, based on the procedure described by Boyatzis (1998). In a data-driven code, themes are not decided in advance but instead allowed to emerge from the data. The first author performed a thematic analysis of the transcripts by summarizing each comment from a randomly selected sample of transcripts, then looking for common elements in order to group the comments by theme. She then assigned a code to each theme. Using this initial set of codes, each author independently coded the same transcripts to calculate interrater reliability using percentage agreement (i.e. the number of times both authors agreed divided by the total instances of coding). Disagreements in interpretation were resolved through discussion of the data, leading to revision of the codes and themes into five main categories (described in the following section), until at least 80 per cent agreement was reached. After this, the remaining transcripts were coded without further revision.

Findings and discussion

The interview results suggest that the learners' views on the value of comic books as supplementary material can be broadly categorized into five themes:

1 helpful story characteristics
2 perceived performance enhancement
3 use of learning strategies
4 enjoyment
5 areas for improvement.

In the quotations, student level is indicated by the letters E and UI for elementary and upper-intermediate, respectively, and each participant was allocated a number. The letters FG indicate responses from a focus group in the first semester, with the page number indicating the page in the interview transcript.

Helpful story characteristics

Helpful story characteristics were characteristics of the booklets themselves or of the context in which they were presented that were seen as helpful, for example pictures, story length, and receiving the booklets at the start of the unit. Sub-themes were book content and the link with class work.

Content
Learners mentioned the content of the stories was helpful in terms of:

- level of difficulty
- story length
- repeated and contextualized vocabulary
- a word list on the inside cover
- simple grammar
- pictures
- story characters
- how the stories related to real life.

The sound recordings were seen as helpful because of

- the speed of delivery
- the quality (clarity, intonation, use of emotion, and local accent)
- the familiarity of the voices (some of the voices were those of their teachers).

Astorga (1999: 213) points out that illustrations in stories 'facilitate the decoding process by making the language of the story not only meaningful but also memorable'.

Okay, she said that the picture help her to understand the story and help her to remember the story. (E1: 4, interpreter)

According to Nation (2001), learners' realization that a word fills a gap in their knowledge of the language leads to 'noticing', which fosters learning. It appears that learning from targeted readers may occur because the topics and vocabulary are perceived by the learners to be of direct relevance to them. The following extract shows how one learner noticed the relevance of the story vocabulary to her real life.

. . . she said some of the words is great helpful in real life. She said some words about the hospital [. . .] some words are used when I was in the hospital. (E13: 5–6, interpreter)

As the following extract shows, it seems that grading the level of the readers to 'i minus 1' resulted in a focus on acquisition of vocabulary, rather than the distraction of learning other new linguistic elements.

He said that from a point of view this is very simple grammar so is no problem for him to following the story and at the same time he can spend times on new vocabulary. So this is great help. (E3: 5, interpreter)

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Link with class work

Learners saw the link with class work as helpful in terms of: the same vocabulary or grammar appearing as in their classes, receiving the books at the start of their unit of study, receiving the books in class, being able to keep the books, and not having formal tests or pressure to study the books.

> And the sentences, the grammar, especially the grammar, just what they learned in the classes. [. . .] It's a great help. (E13: 1, interpreter)

> . . . know some words so when your class time or you know when teacher say the words you go, ah, I know those words from the story. (UI6: 5)

Krashen (1993) is a strong advocate of reading as a way of developing advanced grammar and vocabulary, and this study indicates that the learners perceived this to be the case with the targeted readers, despite the lack of explicit instruction on the texts. The provision of meaning-focused input has resulted in reinforcement of classroom learning, which has been noticed and appreciated by the learners.

Perceived performance enhancement

This theme was defined as an improvement in cognitive function or emotional state, leading to perceived performance enhancement, for example improvements in memory, listening, or confidence. Perceived performance enhancement can be divided into two sub-themes of cognitive aspects and emotional aspects.

Cognitive aspects

These included improvements in:

- reading by recognizing and using vocabulary
- understanding alternative meanings of words
- writing
- grammar
- spelling
- listening
- pronunciation.

Hyland (2003) states that extensive reading, as well as providing knowledge of vocabulary, also furnishes knowledge of organizational patterns of language, which is invaluable during the writing process. The following extracts show how learners saw the written stories assisting their reading and writing skills.

> So sometimes I don't know choose which meaning make a sentence. In the book you use this so I make a similar sentence. (UI8: 8)

> Yeah, helps spelling. My spelling very bad. I like repeat read, read all and also you know some words I know the words, I know their meaning words but I don't know make sentence. [. . .] So I like story help me, oh that words put in this sentence, [. . .], but also some words can use different way. One words you have many meaning, not just one meaning in English, yeah. So the one words can use this sentence and another time another story I'll use that time. (UI6: 1)

This study seems to indicate that learners actively look for models in the stories to assist them with the productive formulation of language in

writing. The following extracts show how learners also found the audio recordings valuable for developing pronunciation.

> So help me pronunciation. Help me, yeah. When you sometime you so fast like news, you can't remember, you can't copy, but this [recording] can help me copy. (UI: 7)

> When you are talking the accent is always going to our mother tongue, our first languages. So that book on Blackboard it help us to just to imitate this word and to be common for everybody here in New Zealand. So it's good and helpful for us. (UI3: 5)

Day and Bamford (op. cit.) found that the inclusion of audio input in extensive reading gave learners a greater understanding of language rhythm. Some learners in this study took it a step further by choosing to practise intensively with the recordings, perceiving a benefit from listening and copying. With many of them from Confucian heritage cultures, imitation is a learning strategy that is familiar and comfortable to them, so it appears that one of the strengths of this mode of provision is that learners are able to adapt it to suit their individual learning styles. Furthermore, there appears to be a high level of motivation amongst this group of learners to integrate with their new society, so locally produced sound recordings are perceived to be relevant and useful.

Emotional aspects
Learners also noticed improvement in their feelings of confidence, motivation, and relaxation, which were associated with perceptions of enhanced performance.

> When we can understand whole of this book, very confidence inside, that's okay you know. If hard and we can't understand and we must back again and read and back, you know make us tired and I said I don't like studying English more. But that's [comic book] okay. Make us confident. (UI5: 9)

This quote seems to point to the importance of comprehensible input to engender the psychological conditions that maximize learning. Not only is the level of the material a factor but also the fact that the learners are in control of the material and can work with it in their own way and at their own pace.

Use of learning strategies

Use of learning strategies was defined as learners using a study skill with the story, such as making notes or listening and repeating. This theme can be divided into three sub-themes of:

1 listening, reading, and speaking strategies
2 general studying
3 interaction with family.

Listening, reading, and speaking strategies
Learners reported the use of listening, reading, and speaking strategies by themselves either as a single focus or in combination with each other. Strategies included:

- listening or re-listening
- listening while doing other tasks
- reading or rereading

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- reading then listening
- speaking practice strategies such as listen and repeat.

The learners in this study used the targeted readers in a range of ways. Not only did they pay focused attention during reading or listening practice but they also used the materials as a background while they were performing other tasks.

> When we cook, when we house working we listen. (FG2: 6)

> Yeah, if night time she said that she will lay on the bed and listen to the CD but in the daytime she said sometimes I reading and listening at the same time. (E13: 2, interpreter)

Although this form of input is not seen as particularly effective (Thornbury op. cit.), the learners in this study perceived it to be an important study strategy. The value of this strategy may lie more in the confidence it gives learners.

General studying
This sub-theme included student reports of using the dictionary, making notes, and spending time on the story.

> I read first, I guessed the meaning and I looked to dictionary. I do all the words, understand their meaning, I go back to read to see if they're the same. (UI3: 5)

> And also she said that the story, the content, and the pictures both are very funny and interesting. So that's why she can spend a lot of time on a story. (E13: 6, interpreter)

This study was undertaken because of reports from learners that they did not have time to acquire the necessary vocabulary for their purposes, so the finding that learners are spending time on these targeted readers is an interesting one. Motivation seems to play an important part in the perceived availability of time, and from our study it appears that motivation is linked to interest and perceived usefulness.

Interaction with family
A number of learners mentioned how they interacted with their children when using the stories. Interactions occurred with children between the ages of 6 and 12. The interactions included enjoying the story together, reading the story to the child, receiving help from the child such as speaking corrections or explanation of the story, and acting out the story together. The following comments describe these interactions:

> Sometimes she ask me about the story, yes, so she always check the 'Mum, do you understand exactly what they're saying?' so yes. So sometimes I have some question about the book I can discuss with my child [. . .] Sometimes she point out my ugly, I mean awkward collocations for my English [. . .] Sometimes she helps me out like this just one, we are pretending she's this [character], I'm this [character], so we just having, sharing the conversation. (UI4: 7–8)

> Sometimes my daughter is help me, yeah, reading for me. (E7: 2)

> . . . he told me the story [. . .] he really like reading the story, better than me [. . .] Sometimes I didn't understand the meaning but my son he could

actually understand the meaning because he was born in New Zealand, so good at. (UI2: 2)

Sfard (1998) describes a participation metaphor of learning, where the goal of learning is community building, and learners become participants in that community. This metaphor seems particularly appropriate to describe the sharing of the targeted readers with learners' families. In the sharing process, the learners and their children become apprentices or participants in a community, which increases communication within the family and provides a valuable adjunct to classroom instruction.

Enjoyment

Learners sometimes mentioned something physically or emotionally pleasant about the stories that they did not relate to being specifically helpful to language learning. These included finding the stories interesting or funny, enjoying the pictures, characters, sound effects, and being eager to know what happens in the end.

> I think the story is funny and interesting. Also the pictures are so cute. (FG2: 1)

> The second unit, when the teacher give to me, oh very exciting, I need to know, and after that I confident about this one then I finish this book and I like to borrow another book for reading because usually my language I like to reading. (UI4: 10)

According to Gardner (1985), a favourable attitude towards a particular activity is one of the four components of motivation, which is an important factor in L2 acquisition (Norris-Holt 2001). The learners' enjoyment of the targeted readers is in contrast to their reported opinions of their attitudes to English study in general, where they use language such as 'difficult', 'lazy', 'scared how to read', 'worried', and 'cannot understand'. Although no direct link has been made here to learners' language acquisition, Krashen (op. cit.) would argue that the affective filter is weaker when learners are relaxed and enjoying the activity of reading or listening.

Areas for improvement

These were specific changes suggested to make the stories more enjoyable or likely to enhance learning. These are grouped into sub-themes of linking to class learning and changing the content.

Link to class learning
Some learners suggested they would have liked follow-up exercises with the stories such as writing about what happened and personal reactions. According to Nation (2001), generative use of vocabulary has a positive effect on the quality of mental processing, so designing activities that deepen learners' interaction with the texts and the language could substantially increase the benefit they gain.

Changing the content
Changes suggested for the content included: individual preferences for story genre and characters and closer links to real-life themes.

Implications for teachers
While these comic book readers have been well received by teachers and learners, they were relatively time consuming to produce. Many teachers may feel they do not have the resources to create such comic books themselves.

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However, during their own materials production and within communities of practice, they can network to create such stories collaboratively. For example, one or two teachers may write a story and ask a learner to illustrate it, and share stories developed in this way within their community of practice. Furthermore, in the course of tailoring materials to respond to learner needs, teachers can be mindful of the principles found to be valuable in this study, such as the use of illustrations and the repetition of targeted vocabulary.

Summary

Overall, the learners perceived the targeted comic book readers as valuable and enjoyable. The illustrations played a major part in their enjoyment and understanding. The main aspects that appeared to be useful were the level of difficulty and the repeated target vocabulary that matched the vocabulary taught in the courses and which was relevant to their needs. The readers were beneficial as a model for understanding and using vocabulary in context. The recordings were useful for improving listening and as a pronunciation model. An interesting finding of the study was the variety of uses to which the learners put the resources, in particular sharing them with their families. Suggested improvements were for an even stronger link to classroom learning and greater focus on everyday themes. This study points to the importance of responding to learners' specific contexts and to the creative ways in which English learners undertake autonomous learning when provided with appropriate resources.

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Appendix 1

Peter attempts to impress his new girlfriend with his cooking, not realizing she is vegetarian. (Target words italicized.)

On Saturday, Peter went to the fish shop to buy some nice fresh fish. He went to the butcher to buy some *pork*, some *lamb*, some *beef mince* and a *chicken*.

Peter cooked all day. He cooked the roast *lamb* and the roast *chicken* in the oven. He cooked the *pork* in a frying pan on the stove. He cooked the *beef mince* in a pot on the stove, with *some onions* and *carrots*. He cooked the fish in a frying pan on the stove.

FIGURE A1
Example page from the elementary
story 'The first date'

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Mik and Mek attempt to give their flightless friends the power to fly. (Target words italicized.)

Soon the *ideal* wings were ready. Mik and Mek opened their shop again. They called it '*Ideal* Moa Wings'. Mik called to the Moa, 'Come and get your *Ideal* Moa Wings made from *genuine* flying bird feathers!'

The *response* was *huge*. All the *clients* who wanted to *improve* their lives returned. Because Mik and Mek had an *obligation* to correct their *mistake*, they gave out the new *ideal* wings for free.
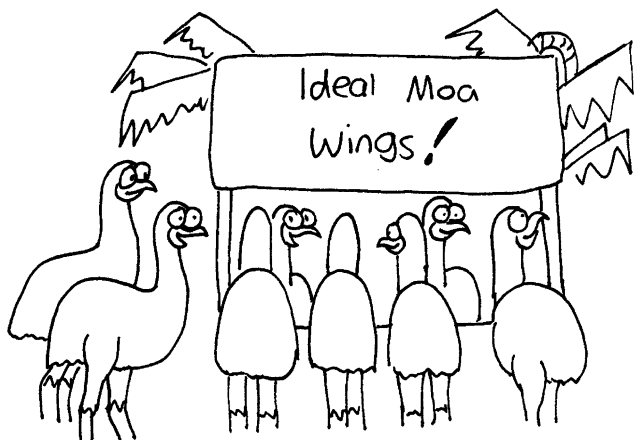

FIGURE A2
Example page from the upper-intermediate story 'Mik and Mek Moa and the genuine Moa wings'

Appendix 2
Interview questions

1   What did you like about the stories?
    (Can prompt if students do not say much: story, length, difficulty,
    pictures, timing (start of unit), etc.)

2   What did you not like about the stories?
    (Can prompt if students do not say much: story, length, difficulty,
    pictures, timing (start of unit), want extra activities, etc.)

3   Do you have any suggestions for how we can improve the stories?

4   What effect did the stories have on your vocabulary learning?

5   What effect have the stories had on your motivation to study English?

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