Graphic Novels

An effective tool for fostering reading competencies in the heterogeneous EFL classroom

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1 Introduction

When searching for literature concerning the "diverse", "inclusive" or "heterogeneous" classroom, many results can be found. However, these adjectives often contain a more complex understanding than the one which will be presented in this paper. I want to concentrate on the heterogeneous classroom consisting of students whose experiences with literature differ to a great extant. There might be students who have not read a whole book in their entire life and regarding their future plans, do not see the need of doing so; on the other hand, some students might be able and willing to achieve a higher graduation based on literacy skills. A class can be heterogeneous due to several aspects, such as intelligence, linguistic talent, biographical background, learner type and learning strategies (Thaler 2012: 129). Internal differentiation aims at encouraging each individual to develop communicative competences such as reading competences.

In this paper only current literature has been used to examine the advantages of graphic novels in the EFL classroom. The insights will be supported by results of a study comparing a graphic novel and a traditional novel in L2, a significant and almost unexplored research field. Based on my own experience as a teacher in a 10th grade, I am convinced of the motivational effect achieved by graphic novels. Learners who are familiar with literature will appreciate the variety of the format and are likely to enjoy the entertaining and mind-engaging aspect, whereas reluctant readers profit from a simplified introduction to literary elements and the positive influence on their self-concept as readers. Besides the definition of relevant terms and references to the compliance with the curriculum, reasons for increased intrinsic motivation, advantages for different learner types, as well as supported reading strategies will be presented. The implementation of graphic novels fits not only educational standards, but also the changed reading habits of a generation grown up with new media. Reading competences, language learning and literal and visual literacy can be improved with graphic novels.

2 Reading in the EFL classroom

Before explaining why reading competencies can be improved with graphic novels, a definition of several terms is required, beginning with the word "reading". Nuttall describes this activity as a "transfer of meaning from mind to mind: the transfer of a

message from writer to reader" (Nuttall 2005: 3). The process of reading is a cognitive, and also linguistic process, involving skills, strategies and the reader's prior knowledge (Grabe & Stoller 2011: 9). Furthermore, it is stated that these processes vary "with the second language proficiency of the reader" (Grabe & Stoller 2011: 4).

The term competence can be defined as a combination of knowledge and abilities, something that can be gained and will be internalized. Due to competencies, one achieves an understanding of concepts which are helpful in unfamiliar situations. In the school environment, a division is made into general and subject-based competences, which include the four communication competences listening, speaking, writing and reading. A competent reader in the EFL classroom combines the adoption of several reading strategies to be able to read, understand, absorb and interpret different formats of texts. The extraction of key information leading to the ability of drawing conclusions, as well as the interpretation of these information according to historical, cultural and social contexts results in proficient reading competencies.

Finally, there is one term left being undefined: "No matter how one defines reading, the common ground of all definitions is the existence of a text" (Basol & Sarigul 2013: 1622). But what is a text? The common idea of a text, a traditional text, is based on printed words on pages. However, this perception is changing. Nowadays, constantly more studies "focus on finding a way on improving reading comprehension skills […] by using alternative texts" (ibid.). The need of a revised text perception became necessary because of the influence of new communication technologies, such as film. Eisner argues that with its "limited demand on a viewer's cognitive skills, film makes the time-consuming burden of learning to decode and digest words seem obsolete. […] [Readers] grow impatient with long text passages because they have become used to acquiring […] information quickly and with little effort" (Eisner 2008: xvi f.). Since reading is essential, also for the purpose of learning a language (Nuttall 2005: 171), it is worth developing new strategies fitting the requirements of a new reading generation. Eisner recommends a combination of imagery and conventional text to keep students motivated to read: "As we know, complex concepts become more easily digested when reduced to imagery. […] A partnership of words with imagery becomes the logical permutation." (Eisner 2008: xvi f.). These insights are by no means contradictory to the core curricula and can therefore be easily adopted in the EFL classroom. It is said that students need to be able to read, understand

and interpret different text formats and media, making use of varying reading strategies. Moreover, authentic texts are preferable (HKM 2011: 10).

3   Defining Graphic Novels as appropriate texts for schools

Picture stories have a long history starting with cave paintings and stained glasses, followed by book illustrations and picture books for children, till the heyday was finally reached in the era of comic books. Comics were, however, dismissed to be mindless entertainment for children without containing any advantages for the classroom. The derived graphic novel changed the image based on raised standards concerning the subjects and therefore the average age of readers rose, as well. These so-called "adult subjects" now dealt with autobiographies, social protest, reality-based human relationships and history (Eisner 2008: xvi). Although Eisner calls it a comic, the following definition can be adopted for graphic novels, too: It is a "form of sequential art [...] in which images and text are arranged to tell a story." (ibid.: xvii).

The field of tension between text and image is the crucial characteristic of graphic novels and the reason why this format can be seen as an incomparable tool in the EFL classroom. Eisner points out that there is a "different cognitive process between reading words and pictures. But in any event, the image and the dialogue give meaning to each other" (ibid.: 59). This "vital element" is especially preferable for the young generation who grew up with television, computers, smartphones and the like and to whom it seems natural to process verbal and visual information on several levels at once (ibid.: xvi). Incidentally, visual literacy is being increased, too, by teaching graphic novels. Many researches claim that this competence is essential nowadays and should be more integrated in the curriculum (see Downey 2009 or Maughan 2016).

Graphic novels are also suitable for the use in the EFL classroom according to Nuttall's criteria for book selection (see Nuttall 2005: 170). Since the reading duration is comparably short, more time can be spent on pre-, while- and post-reading tasks, which increases the exploitability. A text is being exploited, "when you use it to develop interpretive strategies that can be applied to other texts" (ibid.: 172). Additionally, readability is given due to an authentic and usually simple language. The sentence length and complexity is manageable, what makes it easy for the teacher to introduce new grammatical forms, such as tenses or structural words (ibid.: 175). The implementation

of graphic novels is especially reasonable as an entry point or a bridge to other literacy experiences (Gavigan 2010: 118). It can, but does not have to be used as a beginning before working with longer, traditional texts (Maughan 2016: 28).

3.1   Comparing Graphic Novels to Traditional Literature

Traditional literature or conventional texts are known to be long, only consisting of words and highly educational. In their English class, students need to learn basic literary elements and stylistic devices and that is usually taught by using traditional literature. However, there are many skills needed before being able to recognize specific literary elements. First of all, there is the linguistic barrier which impedes the access for struggling readers. Secondly, there might be less literate students whose biographical background hinders them from detecting stylistic devices easily.

When comparing these two text formats, the graphic novel's great amount of illustrations and smaller quantity of words is predominant. The contents do not necessarily differ. However, one cannot be valued more highly than the other. Graphic novels serve two advantages for the EFL classroom: Besides an entertaining and motivational effect which can positively influence a reluctant reader's self-concept as a reader (Gavigan 2010: 111) and is being discussed in the next chapter, graphic novels function as the perfect tool to introduce literary elements and visual literacy. Basic literary elements are plot, setting, characters, scenery, premise or conflict, for example. Moreover, students need to be able to identify stylistic devices such as flashback, symbolism, foreshadowing, simile, metaphor or exaggeration (Downey 2009: 183 and Maughan 2016: 30 ff.). These elements are to be found in both text formats; however, the illustrations of graphic novels facilitate the examination to a great extant. Öz and Efecioğlu argue that "illustrations are far better in showing hints and clues than words" (Öz & Efecioğlu 2015: 77). A flashback, for example, could be visualized by using faded colors or a significant frame. The reader does not have to concentrate on hints somewhere in a text, but gets to know about the change of setting immediately. The teacher can ask for this element and introduce the new term. Later on, when reading a traditional piece of literature, the student will be sensitized for such devices and probably have the example in front of his or her inner eye. Due to the smaller quantity of text, a graphic novel will

never replace long texts regarding reading endurance or speed. Nevertheless, it serves as a useful introductory tool, since many similar features are being shared.

3.2   Motivation

Examining reading motivation is a large research field. In this chapter, only a few important aspects of intrinsic motivation will be analyzed in regard to the use of graphic novels. The distribution into "four perspectives of intrinsic motivation which are *competence*, *curiosity*, *autonomy* and *internalized motivation* (Carr, 2004; Harmer, 2001; Rubin, 1975)" (Öz & Efecioğlu 2015: 77) is valuable in that context. Especially the motivational effect of the feeling of competence and autonomy are described by many researchers and will therefore be presented in the following.

In general, it can be stated that the impression of being competent is achieved due to higher chances of success or a sense of achievement. However, a feeling of pride cannot be reached if the challenges were not demanding enough. Therefore, the teacher has to provide material whose requirements and possible successes are balanced. After having read the entire novel, the identification with an able reader is likely to be strengthened (see Karp 2013: 16), or to put it in Gavigan's words, their "self-concept as a reader" is positively influenced (Gavigan 2010: 111). Nevertheless, many small steps are needed to trigger the students' intrinsic motivation to reach this goal.

First of all, a graphic novel does not discourage the student, because he or she is not facing a big block of text. The images signal an easy access to information and encourage even those, who usually struggle with texts. If they start working with literature with this positive attitude, the first step is already taken. Particularly weaker students realize that they "may find clues in the pictures that help demystify the text and increase comprehension" (Cary 2004: 3, as cited by Öz & Efecioğlu 2015: 77). Profiting from the images' support lasts on even while reading. As graphic novels contain less words than conventional texts, the number of potentially unknown words decreases. It is often the limited vocabulary that discourages students (Cimermanová 2015: 2453). Finally, it is the opportunity to read about contents appropriate for their age that conveys the impression of competence, although the learners lack linguistic skills to understand conventional authentic material (Maughan 2016: 22).

Besides competence, autonomy, as mentioned before, is also a major factor to raise intrinsic motivation. The crucial feature, again, are the illustrations that make learners feel more independent. They can easily gain basic comprehension without making use of external assistance, such as dictionaries, the teacher or classmates. Even if they lack literacy skills in their mother tongue, there is still a chance to follow the lesson. Hempel refers to the students' familiarity with visualizations nowadays and argues that the implementation of images serves as a "frame and setting for discovering new lexical, syntactical, and phonological items" (Hempel 2015: 69). "This feeling of independency and autonomy is crucial to educational effectiveness and empowers learners, providing them with the necessary impetus to master the language on their own" (Öz & Efecioğlu 2015: 78). This sentence sums up the given argumentation, although it is doubtful in how far learners are actually able to "master the language [completely] on their own" (ibid.). At least, they might feel independent and that motivational effect is worthwhile.

Of course, there are numerous other factors increasing motivation besides competence and autonomy. One also for graphic novels quite specific aspect is the kind of language which raises interest. Despite some additional information given within the captions, most of the written text is arranged in dialogues. Since this form of narration is meant to reflect realistic communication, the "language lies about halfway between real spoken English and 'written' English" (Cimermanová 2015: 2453). The emphasis on spoken language leads to personal involvement and therefore increases the students' interest. The fact that being interested in a topic is crucial for intrinsic motivation is well-known and does not just relate to graphic novels (Nuttall 2005: 170). To conclude, I want to underline – also with respect to my own experience with students – that graphic novels are authentic texts that are not written for the usage in the EFL classroom. These texts have not been simplified or prepared by publishers for the use in schools. Students do notice that and feel proud to be able to read material a native speaker in the same age would read, as well (see Nuttal 2005: 177).

3.3   Addressed Learner Types

A heterogeneous class does not just include learners with differing proficiency levels, but also different learner types. The advantage of graphic novels are the numerous elements, which can be referred to when designing tasks for the class. By doing so, each

individual should be able to score with his or her strengths. Öz and Efecioğlu name six learning styles: the auditory learner, the visual learner, the tactile learner, the kinesthetic learner, the group learner and the individual learner (Öz & Efecioğlu 2015: 79). It is self-evident that compared to conventional texts, especially visual learners are likely to profit from the implementation of graphic novels. Images serve as a concrete help to comprehend the given context, an environment, feelings or emotions, especially when students can't connect to words (Maughan 2016: 26 ff.). Nonetheless, even when comprehension is not an issue, the illustrations intensify the understanding of cognitive and literary concepts (Downey 2009: 183).

Since teachers do not need to spend a lot of time getting students to overcome literary barriers, more time can be invested in tasks which allow a transformation of the printed material into another form of communication. The tactile learner benefits from this opportunity. He or she can, for instance, draw a comic strip, build small models of scenes or the setting, act out particular scenes or prepare interviews or role plays (Öz & Efecioğlu 2015: 79). Depending on how students read the novel, on their own or with the characters divided among their class mates, it is not just the creative tasks, but also the reading process which supports group or individual learners. According to Downey, graphic novels profit from "the realization that there are different ways of learning", as well as students profit from the opportunities graphic novels offer (Downey 2009: 186).

3.4   Supported Reading Strategies

Although it always depends on the specific graphic novel, it can be stated that some reading strategies can be supported easily with this format. Before going on by listing examples, it is necessary at this point to clarify the terms skill and strategy. According to Grabe and Stoller, the main difference is the possibility to reflect strategies, whereas skills are applied intentionally (Grabe & Stoller 2011: 10). Moreover, "skills represent linguistic processing abilities […] [and] are seen as general learning outcomes of goal-driven tasks" (ibid.: 8). Although this distinction cannot always be drawn precisely, reading strategies in general are "under conscious control of the reader" (ibid.: 8 f.) and can therefore be communicated directly to give students a tool to improve their work with longer texts later on.

The benefits of being a good guesser should never be underestimated, no matter if it is about vocabulary, stylistic devices or the plot (see Hempel 2015, Grabe & Stoller 2011 or Cimermanová 2015). A "good language learner may be a good guesser, that is, he gathers information in an efficient manner so it can be easily retrieved and […] he may actively look for clues" (Rubin 1975: 43, as cited by Öz & Efecioğlu 2015: 77). With graphic novels, "looking for clues" can be taken literally and is much easier, especially for beginning readers. Cimermanová names three reading strategies: cognitive, affective and compensation. Guessing in this context is seen as a compensation strategy (Cimermanová 2015: 2453). Grabe and Stoller on the other hand call it a combination of the strategies scanning and skimming to search for simple information (Grabe & Stoller 2011: 7). What I think is important to communicate is the seriousness of this strategy. No matter if you call it compensation or a "simple" combination of other strategies, students are not meant to feel as if this technique only comes into action when they are in despair because they have no clue. By guessing, predictions, inferences and assumptions are to be built and rebuilt while reading.

Moreover, students need effective strategies to overcome difficulties raised by unknown vocabulary. Graphic novels show a good readability, because they usually do not contain too many new items. Therefore, unfamiliar words can be understood due to the scaffolding effect of the visual context clues. This form of extensive reading is only possible, when a small proportion of new words according to Nuttall, this would be about one percent is given (Nuttall 2005: 175). It is recommended to read graphic novels about contents students are already familiar with, because then topic-related vocabulary is learned and remembered easily. Nuttall argues that "many words are assimilated with little conscious effort" (ibid.: 177) when they appear in well-understood and varying contexts (ibid.: 175 ff.). The teacher can exercise this with the students by asking them to create word networks based on the illustrations using simple unknown words to begin with. With some practice, scaffolding will be internalized.

"The overall goal is not to remember most of the specific details but to have a good grasp of the main ideas and supporting ideas, and to relate those main ideas to background knowledge as appropriate" (ibid.: 6). What is being described in this sentence, is the concept of extensive reading for general comprehension. To achieve this, a "balanced combination of text-model comprehension and situation-model interpretation" is necessary (ibid.: 23). With graphic novels, it is feasible for students to create a situation

model which consists of information found in the novel combined with their background knowledge, given that the novel's content is appropriate. New information can easily be interpreted on the basis of that model. With traditional texts, it may be the case that students do not have adequate background information or only few linguistic resources (ibid.: 24). Graphic novels can overcome these difficulties because of the short dialogues which prevent from facing linguistic deficiencies. Additionally, background information can mostly be extracted from the illustrations. A situation model can be created, since images reflect an atmosphere, show expressions or the like. Students will recognize visual elements based on their experience with media in their everyday lives. This combination of text and image leads us to the Dual-Coding-Model, which "has been growing in popularity among researchers in the last decade" (ibid.: 29). The emphasis is put on the reinforcement of the two cognitive processing systems represented due to verbal and visual information (ibid.: 30).

Lastly, there is one strategy that can be trained down in order to improve self-confidence. It is very common to translate unknown words or even passages into L1, however, students should be aware of the danger of translation. The detour of including another language leads to a slowdown of the reading process and can be replaced by the implementation of images. Krashen designed the Comprehension Hypothesis and analyzed in how far the student's first language effects language learning. The results show that pictures and realia improve comprehension the same way the first language does (Krashen 2004, as cited by Öz & Efecioğlu 2015: 77). A positive side effect of avoiding a second language is increased fairness also for those students who have a different cultural background than the rest of the class.

It is frustrating when information is processed too slowly, so the beginning of a sentence has already been forgotten before having finished it. In this case, the speed of processing needs to be increased (Grabe & Stoller 2011: 14). Illustrations help to accelerate the process and avoid frustration. All in all, graphic novels are the ideal tool for improving speed of processing and practicing the activation of schemata. Extensive reading can be practiced with techniques such as skimming and scanning; guessing and making inferences is also simplified. Students will especially profit from mastering these strategies when reading longer texts.

4 Presentation of a study: Teaching Shakespeare's "Macbeth" with a Graphic Novel compared to teaching the traditional version

In order to connect the theoretical insights to an authentic classroom situation, Öz and Efecioğlu, two researchers from Hacettepe University and TED University in Ankara, Turkey, designed a study to "investigate the role of graphic novels in teaching English as a foreign language" (Öz & Efecioğlu 2015: 76). They aimed at finding more sincere explanations of the students' attitudes towards and benefits of a graphic novel compared to conventional texts (ibid.: 81). Some of their research questions were: "What are the students' perceptions of the role of graphic novels […] in foreign language teaching? […] Is there a significant difference between experimental and control groups' performance in reading graphic novels? […] Do the groups differ significantly in terms of a) critical thinking skills and literary devices, (b) vocabulary learning skills, and (c) reading and writing skills?" (ibid.: 80).

This study is of significant interest, since there have not been any comparable investigations yet. Öz and Efecioğlu mention a research gap between empirical research done on reading, especially on graphic novels, for L1 and L2 learners (ibid.: 79f.). However, there are some qualitative studies, which need to be named, as well. In 2010, for instance, Karen Gavigan published a paper on a study with struggling, male adolescent readers (Gavigan 2010). Nevertheless, the study which will be presented in the following, shows one outstanding feature: Öz and Efecioğlu chose to compare a control group to an experimental group. Both worked with the same content, namely Shakespeare's "Macbeth", and even got the same pre-, while- and post-reading tasks. The control group obtained the conventional text, whereas a graphic novel was given to the experimental group. Due to this comparison, the study can be referred to as an epidemiological study.

Both groups, more precisely two classes with 56 10th grade students in total visiting the TED Ankara College Foundation Private High School, were taught the literature over a period of five weeks whilst their usual English class. The study used a mixed method combining qualitative and quantitative research. Data was collected during the study with a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview and an achievement test. The questionnaire consisted of 37 five point Likert items which asked for the participants' reading preferences, habits and familiarity with graphic novels. Parallel, the interviews took place to find out more about the students' impression of reading the graphic novel "Macbeth",

and whether they wish to experience similar classes in the future ((Öz & Efecioğlu 2015: 80f.). In the post-test they were asked ten questions concerning specific aspects of the play, such as knowledge of symbolic meaning and setting, understanding of foreshadowing, inference, quotations and concept, as well as vocabulary and comprehension skills, compare/contrast skills and finally cause and effect skills.

The descriptive analysis, as already presented in chapter 2, revealed that the students' attitude towards reading in English is positive and that they consider literature to be useful in regards of shaping their critical awareness. However, only few of them – 23.18%, to be precise – were familiar with the genre of graphic novels or have read a comic before. The majority has not read anything comparable before, although their perception was quite positive (ibid.: 82). This fits my own experience as a teacher and contradicts what can be read in many scientific papers[1], what I want to criticize at this point. The students' familiarity with comics is often been used in papers as a major argument for graphic novels being motivational, but as discussed earlier, this motivational characteristic is based on other factors. The data proving children's experiences with comics might be not up to date anymore.

Besides their positive attitude towards graphic novels, the descriptive data also showed that nearly 70% of the participants shared the opinion of graphic novels helping them to remember the content and specific details of the story (ibid.). This advantage can also be proven within the qualitative part of the study (ibid.: 84). All in all, they "enjoyed reading the graphic novel version of Macbeth, believed in its advantages and were willing to experience a graphic novel again" (ibid.). All of the relevant results of the study are summarized below: Graphic novels…

- "played a significant role in understanding 1) literature such as symbol, setting and foreshadowing, 2) inference, and 3) vocabulary"
- "did not play a significant role in empowering reading and writing skills"
- increased "reading motivation by stimulating visual reading"
- "increased participation in the reading classes as the students were more involved in literature discussions and able to function independently during the reading".
- "The results showed the undeniable role of the graphic novel in vocabulary learning"

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[1] e.g. see Gavigan 2010

- "Although the effects of the traditional way of teaching prose and using literary texts cannot be surely denied, the introduction of graphic novel and its implementation has brought an undebatable effect as well" (ibid.: 85 ff.)

Öz and Efecioğlu also give an explanation, why the control group might have had lower scores in some parts of the study. They claim that this "happened just because the students were reluctant in reading the plain text of the play" (ibid.). This underlines the motivational effect of variety of text formats or even the use of visualized texts. Besides increased reading motivation, Gavigan's study shows similar results in terms of knowledge of vocabulary and reading comprehension. Her findings support the use of graphic novels, especially with struggling, male adolescent readers (Gavigan 2010: 128).

Although the presented study could give an alternative approach to teaching literature in the EFL classroom and adopt the findings from theory successfully, the results can only be assessed as non-representative insights. It can be assumed that the participants shared a similar biographical background concerning their literacy, since they visit a private High School. However, Öz and Efecioğlu were also aware of these constraints and therefore suggested further studies in state schools with students showing less proficiency in English. Additionally, another type of graphic novel can be used, since "Macbeth's level was very challenging as it was exposed in Shakespearean language" (Öz & Efecioğlu 2015: 87). These adaptations could provide even more useful insights, especially for the usage of graphic novels in heterogeneous classrooms.

5 Conclusion

Graphic novels meet the requirements of the heterogeneous EFL classroom, because they bridge the gap between student's cognitive and linguistic skills. Due to this, students get the chance to show their competence and can work autonomously, which leads to more intrinsic motivation. Moreover, the authenticity of the text format is convincing and engages students. Specific reading strategies can be practiced and transferred to a more challenging text form. Examples would be guessing and extensive reading, but also scaffolding is essential to become a fluent reader. Studies prove that it is easier for readers to stay focused when reading graphic novels, even if unknown vocabulary occurs. Words are learned more easily, because of the visualization. The use of this format is especially

beneficial for heterogeneous classes, since reluctant readers can be motivated and experienced readers enjoy more variety and a fresh perspective. Complex topics are made more accessible for learners of all proficiency levels and with different strengths. Finally, the advantage of combining literal and visual literacy is significant. The change of communication technology influences the younger generation's reading habits and familiarizes them with the linkage of visual and linguistic processes. All in all, graphic novels offer a multitude of options for fostering language learning and reading competencies. As long as the teacher makes a conscious choice of teaching goals, all students will have the chance to become engaged in reading activities and increase their self-concept as readers.

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