

USING COMICS AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPING IMAGE COMPREHENSION AND LITERACY IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

Elena-Maria MICLEA, PhD. Cnd.,

Doctoral School "Education, Reflection, Development"

Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Romania,

lenu_tatar@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The study documents from the perspective of literature review on the concepts of literacy, multimodal text, comics, and image interpretation. The education in our country has implemented a series of reforms emphasizing the training of students, the interest shifting from teaching to learning, with the student at the center of attention as the main actor of the educational act. Major changes were made in education policy, reorganizing both the education system and the national curriculum. A new term we find in the new curricula is multimodal text content, and this rethought content helps to develop literacy.*

Literacy is a new term in the literature and especially in our country, it does not only refer to the ability to read and write, it is much more than that; literacy also includes the skills associated with understanding, interpreting and using written information effectively in different contexts. For primary school students, multimodal text is beneficial because it fulfills several functions simultaneously: informing, persuading, entertaining or educating. Cu ajutorul benzilor desenate se dezvoltă: abilitățile de interpretare a unei imagini, îmbunătățirea gândirii critice, învățarea permanentă, comunicarea eficientă și nu în ultimul rând, adaptabilitatea. Comics are a tool that plays a significant role in the development of imagination, free expression and understanding of images, all of which contribute to the development of literacy by forming critical and competent readers and communicators. Through the interaction between literacy and multimodal text, a deeper and more nuanced understanding of information is promoted, which is essential for active and informed participation in contemporary society.

Key words: *multimodal text, comics, curriculum, literacy, curriculum paradigms, developmental curriculum cycle, learning, images.*

Introduction

This study takes a theoretical approach that reviews the literature by providing key arguments and concepts that support the introduction of

comics as a tool for developing image comprehension in the primary school.

A very important aspect in primary education is the comprehension of text that is read, written or heard. The term used for this is literacy. Literacy is a central concept in education and personal development, referring to the fundamental skills of reading, writing and understanding texts. However, literacy is not limited to these basic skills, but also includes the ability to understand and interpret information in various forms of communication, as well as the ability to use it in everyday life to solve problems or make decisions.

With the help of the multimodal text, the comics that are part of the multimodal text, the following skills are developed: skills that help the learner to interpret a text, to communicate effectively, to improve critical thinking and to adapt more easily in different environments. The multimodal text, the comic strip in our case, is a narrative text in which two or more modes of communication are combined, its purpose being to convey information through written or spoken language, combining images with sounds, gestures and lights. (Sânmișăian F., Dobra S., Halaszi M., Davidoiu - Roman A. - 2017).

In an increasingly complex and digitized world, literacy has evolved to include key competences such as digital literacy (the ability to understand and navigate information in the digital environment), media literacy (the ability to analyse and evaluate media messages) and financial literacy (understanding economic and financial principles). These skills are essential not only for educational success but also for active and informed participation in a globalized society.

The Romanian education system underwent major changes in 2011, when the new Education Law no. 1/2011 was enacted: the preparatory class is part of the primary cycle, and the curriculum is oriented towards the formation of key competences, which are aimed at the achievement and attainment of the key competences that are necessary for a graduate to complete a curricular cycle. These reforms have not remained without consequences, so that new framework curricula have been developed, school syllabuses have been modified and digital and alternative textbooks have been designed by education specialists (Bocoș & Jucan, 2019).

Theoretical framework. Literature review

Comics

Comics are part of multimodal text. Multimodal texts can be found in many different forms: comics, picture books, subtitled movies, posters, ppt presentations, etc. all of which are an integral part of the process of educating pupils and developing literacy. Exposing students to multimodal texts stimulates the development of connections between

written and visual but also between auditory and visual, as the student is challenged to decode what is the meaning of a message that has been conveyed. (Walsh 2010)

For the development of the National Education Act in 2001 there was a serious radiography of the national curriculum as well as curriculum development on the design and impact that the national curriculum has on pupils' education (Vlăsceanu, 2002), however pupils are not exposed to activities that are comic based, there are no provisions for the use of multimodal text.

Even if the use of comics as a didactic tool is not paramount in the Romanian education curriculum, however, comics have had a long and controversial history in the context of education in other countries. Since the 1930's, their use in classrooms and other educational settings has elicited conflicting opinions (Hutchinson, 1949; Muzumdar, 2016; Yang, 2003). Over time, concerns about the content of comics, their impact on children and the educational value they have, have been intensely debated by parents, teachers and society at large (Dorrell et al., 1995). Critics of the medium argue that comics can have negative psychological effects on children through violent depictions (Wertham, 1954; Yang, 2003), lack literary value (Maher, 2018; Nesmith et al., 2011) and can encourage a disinterest in traditional reading (Dorrell et al., 1995; Yang, 2003).

In this article, when we use the term comics, we are referring to the medium itself, not necessarily to a comic book or graphic novel (McCloud, 1993). In the book "Understanding Comics. Invisible Art.", McCloud (1993) defines the medium of comics as "pictorial and other images juxtaposed in deliberate succession, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (p. 9). Based on specific conventions, comics are easily recognizable, having a particular structure through boxes, eggplates, cartons, speech bubbles. (Serafini et al., 2018) Further, when we use the term graphic novel, we will refer to full-length comics, comic books, magazines containing between 20 and 40 pages, and comic strips, which are short sequences of comics that we spread in magazines, newspapers, or worksheets that we use in class, all of which form the framework of the broader comics medium. (Cary 2004) So, we will use the term comic strip in accordance with the above.

Literacy

The term literacy is derived from the English word "literacy" and refers to the ability of individuals to read, write and understand information in a variety of formats, such as written texts, audio materials and digital content. Developing literacy competence is essential for the active and effective participation of individuals in contemporary society.

According to Cambridge's dictionary, literacy is defined as "the ability to write and read" but it is also added that "literacy is a basic skill or knowledge of a subject". (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/literacy>).

Interpreted from a perspective that values the quality of education, literacy is seen as a key skill, but also as a key measure of educating the population (Roser, Ortiz-Ospina, 2018). (Roser, Ortiz-Ospina, 2018)

To measure literacy levels, instruments that measure an individual's skills in reading, writing and understanding information are essential. The instruments currently used are: PISA (Program for Student Assessment), National Assessment Instruments (Assessment Tests for Grades II, IV, VI), Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS), PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment), IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey), Woodcock-Johnson Test. The instruments listed above are used in a variety of educational, social and professional contexts, depending on the level of training, the age of the subjects, the purpose for which it was developed.

1. The PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) test is one of the best-known instruments for measuring literacy. It is conducted by the OECD. PISA tests assess the reading, math and science literacy skills of 15-year-olds in different countries around the world. What characterizes these tests is that they include tasks that measure students' ability to interpret and understand more complex texts, to make different connections and to make correct decisions based on the information provided. OECD (2019).
2. National assessment tools are used in several countries that have developed their own standardized tests to measure literacy. In Romania standardized national assessment tests are used for pupils in grades II, IV and VI. The characteristic of the national assessment tests is that they are aligned according to the requirements of the national curriculum and aim to measure reading, writing and text comprehension skills. (Ministry of National Education, 2020).
3. The Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) is a tool designed to measure the literacy level of adults. These tests look at skills in reading and interpreting documents, problem solving and the use of basic technologies. Characteristic of ALLS is that they include practice tests and quizzes to analyze the application of literacy in real-life situations. (Statistics Canada (2005). The Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/89M0016X>)

4. PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) measures the ability of fourth graders to understand and interpret literary and informational texts. Characteristic of PIRLS is that it assesses reading in an educational context, using both narrative and expository texts (Mullis, I. V. S., & Martin, M. O., 2017).
5. EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment) is a tool designed to assess children's early literacy, particularly in the first grades of primary school. EGRA tests include letter recognition, word reading, text comprehension, and reading speed measurement. (Gove, A., & Wetterberg, A., 2011)
6. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) measures adults' literacy skills in three main domains: prose, document and numeracy. IALS tests assess literacy use in everyday and work-related activities (OECD and Statistics Canada, 2000).
7. The Woodcock-Johnson test is used to assess different dimensions of literacy, including vocabulary, text comprehension and reading speed. It is commonly used in educational psychology to diagnose learning difficulties.

These tools provide a comprehensive picture of the literacy levels of different demographic groups and are used both to diagnose and to design various educational interventions.

Literacy levels

Literacy can be tested from an early age, in the pre-primary period. Thus, we have emergent literacy (from kindergarten to grade I) and informal reading inventory (grades II to IV).

Emergent literacy: definition and importance

Emergent literacy involves the development of fundamental knowledge and skills related to reading and writing beginning at preschool age. The concept of emergent literacy includes activities of using books containing both short texts and suggestive pictures, recognizing letters and sounds, and imitating reading by telling picture stories (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Factors that influence emergent literacy are:

- Home environment: children who are exposed to reading at home are more likely to develop more advanced literacy skills (M. A. Evans, L. Hulak, 2020).
- Social interactions: by participating in group activities and discussions with peers and adults the learning process is activated (Vygotsky, 1978, *Mind in Society*).
- Technology: the use of interactive apps and digital resources can support early literacy (Neumann, 2018).

Informal Reading Inventory: Methodology and role

The Informal Reading Inventory is an essential tool in the assessment and development of reading and comprehension skills in primary school pupils. This tool allows teachers to identify the comprehension and fluency level of each student, facilitating personalized interventions to improve school performance.

According to the "Schools with Glitter" program, revised in May 2003, the Informal Reading Inventory includes texts graded in difficulty from pre-primary (PP) through first grade. These texts are designed to assess both oral reading fluency and comprehension, providing the examining teacher with a clear picture of the skills of the students being tested. (Kovacs M., 2023).

Assessments conducted in this program have shown that there is a strong correlation between text complexity and students' reading rate. Students who read more complex texts demonstrated a higher reading rate, only their comprehension was at an instructional level, thus suggesting to the examining teacher the need for a balance between fluency and comprehension of the text being read (Kovacs M., 2023).

In order to support the development of reading skills, it is essential that teachers use tools such as the Informal Reading Inventory, adapting the materials and teaching strategies used, to the specific needs of each student. In this way an appropriate progression in learning can be ensured as well as a solid foundation of literacy skills.

The informal word inventory can be used for:

- Identifying vocabulary gaps: students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds may have a smaller vocabulary and early interventions can be made with this tool (Hart & Risley, 1995).
- Progress monitoring: regular assessment of subjects helps teachers to adjust their teaching strategies according to students' needs (M.Hu, P.Nation, 2000).

By implementing instructional strategies based on literacy studies, teachers can make a significant contribution to the development of students' language skills, providing a solid foundation for later literacy.

The role of comics in literacy development

Comic strips have been recognized as valuable tools for literacy development because of their unique combination of visual and textual elements. The synergy between the two elements of comics facilitates the comprehension and interpretation of information, offering attractive ways to improve writing and reading skills (Ranker, 2007), stimulate interest in reading (Smetana & Grisham, 2012), help develop narrative and writing skills (Ranker, 2007) and support language learning (Liu, 2004).

Improve reading skills

The comics feature evocative illustrations that are accompanied by short texts, making reading accessible to beginners and those with reading difficulties. Understanding of vocabulary and grammatical structures is supported by the visual contexts provided by the comics, which in this way also help to reinforce fundamental reading skills (Ranker, 2007).

Stimulating interest in reading

Through the thematic diversity and engaging nature of comics, readers can be motivated to love reading by engaging in reading activities. Comics help to develop a positive attitude towards readers through their interesting stories and visual appeal, making comics an effective resource to encourage reading from a very early age (Smetana & Grisham, 2012).

Developing narrative and writing skills

By analyzing and creating comics, students are helped to understand narrative structure, develop storytelling skills and improve their writing skills. Creating comics challenges students to think critically and creatively and to explore different ways of expressing and structuring more complex ideas (Ranker, 2007).

Support language learning

Comic strips provide a visual support to facilitate the retention and comprehension of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions for foreign language learners. Through the illustrative contexts, learners are helped to blend suggestive images with written kimbaj, thus encouraging intuitive learning (Liu, 2004).

Comics thus prove to us that they have potential, they support learning, but above all they contribute to the development of literacy in an interactive and engaging way, providing a valuable resource for education and for the promotion of reading in general.

Conclusions

Comics are important in literacy development because they combine pictures with text, making them more accessible to readers with different literacy levels. The multimodal approach supports comprehension for readers who may have difficulty decoding more complex texts.

Narrative comprehension is improved with comics; thanks to the narrative structure of comics, readers are helped to develop sequencing skills and to recognize cause-effect relationships. Moreover, by using images to convey actions and emotions, additional context is provided, thus improving understanding of complex messages. Students who read comics are better able to analyze narrative and symbolic structures (Woolston J. M., 2014).

Using comics to educate students can promote critical thinking and analysis. Taking the example of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*, we see that graphic novels can include complex themes, symbols and subtexts, which challenges readers to interpret the messages on a much deeper level. Analyzing graphic novels of this kind can encourage critical thinking and debate about particular cultural, social or political themes (Spiegelman A., 2012).

So, we can say that comics are not just a form of entertainment, but a powerful tool in the development of literacy. They improve reading access, narrative comprehension, language skills and critical thinking, thus contributing to the development of competent and confident readers. By integrating them into the instructional-educational process, they provide valuable new opportunities for learning.

By using multimodal texts, teachers can design non-formal activities based not so much on the educational goals as on formative and non-formal knowledge that are characterized by flexibility, while having the quality of optional or optional activities (Roman, A., Coşarbă, E., ERD 2020

In order to put the learner in front of learning situations that lead to the achievement of behavioral changes, the teacher designs learning situations, on several levels: "as situations of interference - a permanent process through which the student is taught to learn and how to learn; as performance reporting through which students are motivated and hierarchized; through the experience of interaction, communication, and practice that are predetermined by the teachers and through the relative stability that shows that the behavioral change produced by learning is lasting". (Roman, A., Balaş, E., 2014)

References

- Bocoş, M., Jucan, D. (2019). *Fundamentele pedagogiei. Teoria și metodologia curriculumului. Repere și instrumente didactice pentru formarea profesorilor*. Pitești: Editura Paralela 45.
- Bocoş, M., Răduţ-Taciu, R. Stan, C. (2018). *Dicţionar praxiologic de pedagogie. Volumul IV: M-O*. Pitești: Editura Cartea Românească Educațional.
- Cary, S. (2004). *Going graphic: Comics at work in the multilingual classroom*. Heinemann Portsmouth, NH.
- Dorrell, L. D., Curtis, D. B., & Rampal, K. R. (1995). Book-worms without books? Students reading comic books in the school house. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 29(2), 223–234.
- Evans M.A., Hulak L., 2020, Learning to read at home: Kindergarten children's report in relation to observed parent behaviour, ScienceDirect <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0885200618301455>

- Gove, A., & Wetterberg, A. (2011). *The Early Grade Reading Assessment: Applications and Interventions to Improve Basic Literacy*. RTI Press, <https://www.rti.org/rti-press-publication/early-grade-reading-assessment-applications-interventions-improve-basic-literacy>
- Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children
- Hu M., Nation P., 2000, Unknown Vocabulary Density and Reading Comprehension, ResearchGate
- Hutchinson, K. H. (1949). An experiment in the use of comics as instructional material. *The Journal of Educational Sociology*, 23(4), 236–245. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2264559>
- Kachorsky, D., Reid, F.S., (2022), Teaching with Comics for the First Time: Traditional Literacy and Non-Traditional Texts in Content Area Classrooms, ResearchGate
- Kovacs M., 2023, Fluența citirii orale și comprehensiunea, Toți copiii citesc, https://toticopiiiцитesc.ro/fluenta-citirii-orale-si-comprehensiunea/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Liu, J. (2004).** "Effects of Comic Strips on L2 Learners' Reading Comprehension." *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(2), 225-243. Cercetarea analizează impactul benzilor desenate asupra înțelegerii lecturii la învățătorii de limbi străine.
- Maher, B. (2018, November 17). Adulting. Real Time with Bill Maher Blog; Real Time with Bill Maher Blog. <https://www.real-time-with-bill-maher-blog.com/index/2018/11/16/adulting>
- Matthew Effects in Reading: Some Consequences of Individual Differences in the Acquisition of Literacy, ResearchGate https://www.researchgate.net/publication/230853161_Matthew_Effects_in_Reading_Some_Consequences_of_Individual_Differences_in_the_Acquisition_of_Literacy
- Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina (2019). Literacy. Published online at [OurWorldInData.org](https://ourworldindata.org) retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/literacy>
- McCloud, Scott, (2019), Să înțelegem benzile desenate. Arta invizibilă, Ed. Grafic
- Narey, M., *Educating the Young Child* (2009)
- Ministerul Educației Naționale (2020). *Ghid pentru evaluarea competențelor fundamentale*. Disponibil la: [edu.ro](https://www.edu.ro)
- Mullis, I. V. S., & Martin, M. O. (2017). *PIRLS 2016 International Results in Reading*., <https://timssandpirls.bc.edu>
- Nesmith, S., Cooper, S., & Schwartz, G. (2011). Exploring graphic novels for elementary science and mathematics. *School Library Research*, 14.
- Neumann, M. M. (2018). The Role of Digital Technologies in Early Childhood Literacy Development. *Computers & Education*

- OECD (2019). *PISA 2018 Assessment and Analytical Framework*. OECD Publishing.
Disponibil la: <https://www.oecd.org/pisa>
- OECD and Statistics Canada (2000). *Literacy in the Information Age: Final Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey*. OECD Publishing, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/89-588-X>
- Ranker, J. (2007).** "Using Comic Books as Read-Alouds: Insights on Reading Instruction from an English as a Second Language Classroom." *The Reading Teacher*, 61(4), 296-305. Studiul examinează utilizarea benzilor desenate în predarea limbii engleze ca a doua limbă și efectele asupra competențelor de citire.
- Roman, A., Coșarbă, E., ERD 2020 Education, Reflection, Development, Eight Edition The motivation of primary school teachers regarding non-formal activities, ResearchGate
- Roman, A., Balaș, E., (2014), Proiectarea situațiilor de învățare, Editura Eikon – Cluj-Napoca
- Sânmihăian F., Dobra S., Halaszi M., Davidoiu – Roman A. Limba și literatura română: clasa a V-a. Editura București: Art, 2017
- Serafini, F., Kachorsky, D., & Reid, S. (2018). Revisiting the multimodal nature of children's literature. *Language Arts*, 95(5), 311–321.
- Smetana, L., & Grisham, D. L. (2012).** "Graphic Novels in the Classroom: Curriculum Design, Implementation, and Reflection." *The Reading Teacher*, 66(2), 115-124. Acest articol explorează integrarea benzilor desenate în curriculum și impactul lor asupra dezvoltării literației.
- Spiegelman A., 2012, Maus. Povestea unui supraviețuitor, Editura ART
- Vlăsceanu, L. (coord.). (2002), Școala la răscruce. Reformă și continuitate în curriculumul învățământului obligatoriu. Studiu de impact, Iași: Polirom
- VYGOTSKY L. S., 1978, Mind in Society The Development of Higher Psychological Processes Michael Cole Vera John-Steiner Sylvia Scribner Ellen Souberman Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England 1978
- Walsh, M. (2010). Multimodal Literacy: What Does It Mean for Classroom Practice? *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 33, 211-239
- Wertham, F. (1954). *Seduction of the innocent*. Rinehart New York. http://www.worldlibrary.org/articles/seduction_of_the_innocent
- Whitehurst, G. J., & Lonigan, C. J. (1998). Child Development and Emergent Literacy. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*
- Woodcock, R. W., McGrew, K. S., & Mather, N. (2001). *Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Cognitive Abilities*. Riverside Publishing.

- Woolston J. M., 2014, *Graphic Novels and Comics in the Classroom: Essays on the Educational Power of Sequential Art* Carrye Kay Syma and Robert G. Weiner, Editors. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013, ResearchGate
- Yang, G. (2003). *Comics in Education: History*. GeneYang.com. <http://www.geneyang.com/comicsedu/history.html>