Christian Ludwig, Frank Erik Pointner (eds.)

Teaching Comics

in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Foreword

Every now and then a book (or collection of articles) comes along that makes you wonder why it didn't exist before. *Teaching Comics in the Foreign Language Classroom* is just such a title.

Comics have come a long way in the last decades, changing from pure entertainment for (mostly) young boys in the 1930s, for example, to the sophistication of the modern graphic novel, a literary genre in its own right. And like so many other genres and sources, modern comics can be an exhilarating source of wonder and motivation for learners of English.

The collection of articles assembled and edited by Christian Ludwig and Frank Erik Pointner (including one each by themselves) show in felicitous detail why graphic novels/comics are such a rich resource of visual representation and text – and how they are revealing about the use of language, about gender and ethnicity, and about how they provoke intercultural and transcultural understanding. There are articles here about how literature (i.e. Edgar Allan Poe and Shakespeare) have been rendered as graphic novels; the value of graphic representations of topics such as biology and biography (in the case of Nelson Mandela); and, above all, how teachers and learners can make use of comics for imaginative, motivating and effective language learning – whether for primary level, at secondary school, or as an element in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) lessons.

And so all I can do is congratulate Christian and Frank Erik (and all the other contributors) for a collection that should be on the shelves of teachers everywhere. English lessons just got more exciting!

Cambridge, May 2013

Jeremy Harmer

Preface

Recently, comics have begun to play a more and more important role in academic circles, a development which has manifested itself in their inclusion in university curricula, as well as their selection as topics of Bachelor and Master theses, academic conferences and a wide variety of scholarly books. Last but not least, a growing number of topic-related research groups have emerged over the last few years. Unfortunately, primary and secondary education are still lagging behind when it comes to dealing with this new medium. However, since it is to be expected that the current 'iconic turn' will give more and more importance to the use of images in the professional world in general and in language learning in particular, comics will play an important part in these areas in the future. Consequently, there seems to be a demand for a book to assist teachers in improving the visual literacy of learners when dealing with graphic fiction, as well as discussing comics in their own right. This volume caters for that need by combining a wide variety of essays of an introductory and a more specialised nature. We would not have been able to put this book together without the help of Dr. Steve Maksymiuk, who did a magnificent job in proofreading this volume and Dennis Weißenfels who gave it its current shape. We also would like to thank Dr. Oliver Locker-Grütjen and the 'Science Support Center' of the University of Duisburg-Essen for the generous financial support of our project. Last but not least our special thanks go to Dr. Erwin Otto of the *Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier* for including the book in his programme.

Essen, May 2013

Christian Ludwig, Frank Erik Pointner

Christian Ludwig / Frank Erik Pointner

Introduction

Since the mid-1980s comics have transcended the image of being a cheap form of entertainment for young boys who lose themselves in the world of superhero comics. This image persisted for the first 50 years comics existed. Today, as far as their literary, aesthetic and intellectual qualities are concerned, comics stand on equal footing with other modern media such as film and the internet. In addition, one could even argue that comics take the best of all worlds, as "comic narration blends and modifies features shared by other art forms – especially literature, painting, photography and film" (Versaci 2007: 13). However, this 'hybridity', i.e. the mixture of several modes of expression, which Versaci ascribes to the comic, has often been adduced to derogate the medium which is said to do everything, yet nothing right. Even if this were the case – hopefully this book will prove that it is not – the same argument should make guardians of culture disparage other hybrid media such as opera and ballet, to name but two. A general depreciation of comics ignores the fact that they have grown up. Thus, the common denomination 'graphic novel' for "a long comic book that needs a bookmark and has to be re-read", to quote Art Spiegelman (2011), caters for the growing number of enthusiasts who attest graphic fiction a quality which need not fear comparison with traditional narrative literary genres, especially the novel. Steve Duin, co-author of *Comics: Between the Panels* (1998), a history of comics, even anticipates the introduction of degrees in graphic fiction in higher education. As he says about Lemire's graphic trilogy *Essex County*:

> When Princeton and Duke are offering graduate degrees in the graphic novel 20 years from now, a lot of students will be writing their Masters' theses on Lemire's ESSEX COUNTY trilogy. (Duin 2009: n.p.)

While Duin may go a bit far in anticipating entire degree programmes focusing on graphic novels and comics, there is no denial that graphic media have gained more and more recognition among academic scholars world-wide (although Europe, with the notable exception of the French speaking countries, still seems to be lagging behind) and constitute a significant part of contemporary literary and cultural studies and, of course, comic studies. Unfortunately, schools are still a bit reluctant as far as the use of graphic fiction is concerned. This book is meant to contribute to closing the gap that still exists between schools and universities when it comes to taking account of one of the most popular cultural manifestations by concentrating on the use of comics in diverse learning and teaching scenarios at primary as well as at secondary levels.

We will start off with a more general overview of current approaches to EFL methodology by **Bernd Rüschoff**, putting emphasis on the use of graphic fiction in the modern foreign language classroom. By focusing on current paradigms of second language acquisition, it will take a closer look at comics as authentic material and how they can

be employed in the context of output and competence orientation as well as inter- and transcultural learning.

These preliminary remarks will be complemented by an essay on the teaching of comics by **Frank Erik Pointner**. Taking a diachronic view, this essay concentrates on the idiosyncratic 'language' comics have developed since they first came into existence in the 1930s, a language that teachers and students have to be able to decode in order to take full benefit out of the articles that are going to follow. *Comics in Young Learners' English Lessons* by **Katja Heim** focuses on the storytelling techniques in picture books and comics and is thus especially suitable for the teaching of English to young learners who will be particularly drawn to the creative work inspired by the use of comics and picture books.

In his essay *The Benefits of Comics for Language Learning at the Lower Secondary Level: A Practical Approach*, **Dominik Rumlich** emphasises the role of comics in the context of multimedia learning. He shows how students may profit from the fact that they have to be cognitively more involved when reading comics due to their combination of words and pictures. Key concepts in this article are mnemonic devices, closure, onomatopoetic language, gaps, colloquial language and direct speech.

Recently more and more literary pieces have been adapted to the comic book format. They will be the focus of two essays concerning themselves with the application of graphic fiction to the teaching of literature. **Sandra Eva Boschenhoff** starts off with more general reflections on transmedial adaptations from literature to comics, showing how comic books have to alter plots and literary devices in order to close the gap that exists between the narratology of prose texts and graphic fiction. Her insights will be given substance by analysing some of the major short stories by Edgar Allan Poe and their respective comic adaptations.

Since William Shakespeare is still the most important representative of English letters in secondary education, a whole essay will be devoted to comic adaptations of his plays, of which a growing number exist. **Pascal Fischer** will concentrate on what is still the most frequently discussed play of all times, tackling various comic adaptations of *Hamlet* and how they may be used in the classroom. Turning from literary to cultural studies, **Maria Eisenmann** treats more recent American history by concerning herself with the events of September 11, 2001. Interestingly, comics were the first medium to respond to these terrorist attacks which more than anything shaped American consciousness in the last decade. These comics, of which a whole variety is extant, constitute a treasure trove for every teacher and student dealing with issues concerning 9/11, such as the event itself, its role in the construction of American identities, its impact on world peace and the living together of different ethnicities and religions.

The construction of identities, whether shaped by gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or nationality, has become such an important issue in cultural studies that it seemed appropriate to devote a whole essay to this subject. It is here that the strength of com-

ics as compared to prose texts becomes most apparent. Thus, **Christian Ludwig** shows how the analysis of the visual representations of identities in their context can further the success of inter- and transcultural learning. Ethnicity also plays a very important role in the essay on Nelson Mandela's graphic biography. Starting with general considerations concerning the (bio)graphic(al) novel **Claudia Drawe** concentrates on *Nelson Mandela. The Authorised Comic Book*. Not only does she recapitulate the most important developments in South Africa from the civil rights movement to the abolition of the apartheid system, she also elucidates how this graphic novel may advance the teaching of South African history in particular and new English literatures and cultures in general.

Recently, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) has become one of the catch phrases in foreign language methodology. In the application of this concept, non-native speakers are taught subjects such as biology, history and geography in English. It is easy to see that the integration of graphic novels into CLIL-classes is a most promising endeavour, of which the essay by **Julian Sudhoff** is a case in point. Thus he demonstrates how two comic books, one concerning genetic engineering, the other the Lebanese War, may be made useful in biology and history lessons, respectively.

Of course, we are aware of the fact that the essays may only cover a very small part of the terrain one might want to explore. For the most part, this book is only able to tackle certain issues in an exemplary fashion. However, we are certain that teachers can 'take it from here', and we hope that we may have succeeded in giving you food for thought on the integration of graphic novels into your lessons.

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