The power of print reading: comics in the classroom

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Abstract Evidence from neuroscience and psychological studies supporting benefits of print reading over digital reading has recently been discussed in these columns (Perbal 2017 J. Cell Commun. Signal. 11:1–4). In the present commentary, I would like to add my perspective as a Humanities educator, and build upon the idea that print reading results in better comprehension, learning and communication. The argumentation that is presented herein is based on a study performed in a French Comics language class aimed at broadening students' knowledge and experience of graphic novels, and providing them with a cultural representation in the foreign language. The results that are discussed in this commentary indicate that upon reading printed books students created connections for a more meaningful learning experience, leading to personal growth and linguistic development. The impact these graphic novels had on students' learning capacity and relationship to reading was tremendous. The kinesthetic relationship with printed text was deeply enriching and gratifying. The stimulatory effects on their imagination allowed for a more creative reading, and a deeper comprehension, resulting in meaningful communication.

Keywords Comics · Bandes Dessinées · Manga · Graphic novels · Print reading · Digital reading · Reading skills · Meaningful connections · Learning · Communication · Behavior · Cognitive impact

Introduction

What are the benefits of printed texts as opposed to those of digital ones?

In a recent Editorial, B. Perbal presented evidence supporting the cognitive benefits of print reading (Perbal 2017).

Three aspects of the argumentation developed in this article caught my attention: the apparent deeper understanding of content in paper texts, meaning connected to touch and the notion of linear reading.

In the present commentary, I would like to add my perspective as a Humanities educator¹ to support the idea that “print reading appears to better impact comprehension, learning and communication” (Perbal 2017).

I will first describe how students interact with books and their relationship to the text – their initial reactions to the objects, the assignments, their development of literacy, their emotional connection.

I will then discuss an experiment performed with on-line reading and will present the conclusions provided by the students regarding their experience with the digital text as well as the observations noticed during the process.

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¹ As a French lecturer, I have developed new ways of engaging undergraduate students and motivating them to study foreign languages through meaningful interactions, with particular focus on the use of printed comic books to develop reading skills.

Finally, I will share my findings about printed reading in the classroom and thoughts on why paper books develop strong, creative, emotional connections, enhance the foreign language experience, but above all promote the act of reading itself.²

Methodology and objectives

Over the years, students have lost the physical contact with pen and paper, losing the muscle memory associated with language learning. They write essays on the computer, take digital notes during lectures, communicate with their professors via email or online platforms, learn vocabulary by making online flashcards. Yet they are able to communicate very effectively in the foreign language and participate with great success in global programs.

What about reading?

In the 4th semester comics class³ students analyze French *Bandes Dessinées* (BDs) and discuss the importance of the 9th art in French culture. They also read Comic books and Manga, translated in French. Many students who are taking this class have never read a graphic novel,⁴ in English, or in their native language, and even less so in French, their foreign language of choice. Many of them even admit not enjoying reading at all.⁵

In addition to contemplating the cultural importance of the series *Astérix*⁶ in French society or exploring the representation of World War II in French BDs (Derrien and Plumail 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014) students are given the opportunity

to take home 8 books a semester out of the 40 some books from the *Selection Officielle d'Angoulême*,⁷ either written in or translated into French. The objective is to expose them to different types of graphic novels to broaden their knowledge and experience of the medium, in addition to providing a cultural representation in the foreign language. Students are thus exposed to various styles of writings, a wide range of vocabulary and structures, and sophisticated story telling techniques.

Students are being asked to read books of their choice throughout the semester and write a two to three page reaction paper for each, in French.

Observations

Interaction with printed books

On the first day of class, the students are mesmerized by the selection of graphic novels brought to class.⁸

The first week, students are to choose one book to read and analyze – they shyly come up to the desk and each student respectfully waits in line for his or her turn. They need to be told to move around, to pick up the books, to look at different choices. They are waiting for permission to venture and flip through volumes.

It is interesting to hypothesize on the intellectual process behind their choice. It is very noticeable that some students decide solely based on the cover, others on the style of art, the thickness, the size, the layout of the images on the page, the font, the quantity of text, the colors, the characters, the title, or sometimes a combination of criteria.

By the end of the semester students are no longer respectful and patient and slow at getting up from their chairs. Instead, they literally run to the desk to choose their last book for the semester.⁹

Why do students ultimately develop a passion for books? What makes it so special to have the book in hand? What is the impact of reading these graphic novels on their education and the learning of the foreign language?

² Part of this study was presented in May 2017, at the Enriching Scholarship Conference, at the University of Michigan (<http://ttc.iss.lsa.umich.edu/ttc/sessions/closing-keynote-panel-emerging-landscapes-a-cross-disciplinary-conversation-with-u-m-faculty-members/>), <https://ttc.iss.lsa.umich.edu/ttc/sessions/social-media-in-language-instruction/>), in March 2017 at the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, in Chicago (<http://www.csctfl.org/>), http://www.csctfl.org/documents/2017%20Program_27.pdf), in October 2016 at the MidWest Association for Language Learning & Technology Conference, at the University of Michigan (<http://mwallt.org/page-1714798>), and in June 2015 at the Kids Read Comics Educator's Conference, at the University of Michigan (<http://mlatcomics.com/krc/cccc>).

³ At the University of Michigan, in the Romance Languages Department, our language classrooms are composed of 18 students per class and we meet four hours a week, for 15 weeks. The instruction is done entirely in the foreign language enabling students to develop all skills – speaking, listening, writing, reading and cultural awareness. Students need to take four semesters of language to fulfill their language requirement.

⁴ I will use the term “Graphic novel” to refer to *Bandes Dessinées*, Comics and Manga.

⁵ “Entering this class without a passion for reading books let alone comics, my expectations weren't very high.” wrote a student on an evaluation.

⁶ There are 37 volumes in the series *Astérix* (Gosciny and Uderzo: 24 volumes published by Dargaud, Uderzo: 10 volumes published by Albert René, Ferri and Conrad: 2 volumes published by Hachette, plus one to be released in October 2017).

⁷ Each year about 40 graphic novels from all over the world are selected to be part of the *Selection Officielle* (42 books were selected in 2017) at the *Festival International de la Bande Dessinée*, in Angoulême, France, to compete for several prestigious prizes. http://www.bdangouleme.com/1027.selection-officielle?id_selection=34. The selection brings a large spectrum of content and themes. Some graphic novels are more action-based; others are historical fictions, biographies, and romances with character development, science fiction, cartoonish humor and more.

⁸ For the past 5 years, I have purchased the entire collection of the *Sélection Officielle d'Angoulême* for the French Comics class.

⁹ “Are we going to read another one after this one?”, “Can we get two this week?” many of them ask, as they are very meticulously choosing their final prize.

First assignments

At first students are a bit unsure of their ability to read a full graphic novel written in French. In their first journal, a couple of weeks into the semester, they comment mostly on the art, the images, the layout, and the style. It is obvious that some students do not read the words in their first book and use the images to create the storyline and make connections. The novelty aspects due to the presence of speech bubbles, special typography, succinct language full of imagery and prone to interpretation, and the uncertainty of certain words or cultural references are intimidating to students.

Reading skills improvement

As the semester progresses students become more confident in their language skills and become more adventurous. They take the initiative to look up words in the dictionary to better understand the story,¹⁰ inquire on how to obtain the other volumes of their series if they chose one of several volumes, search for information on the author or the artist to better interpret certain stylistic or plot choices. None of these investigations are required by the assignments. Students take on these responsibilities because they become interested and invested in the material. The book they chose for that week is not longer an assignment but has become an extension of who they are. They go above and beyond the expectations of the course because they are personally engaged, they want to relate and create connections for a more meaningful learning experience.¹¹

Journal entries, all written in the foreign language, become more interesting, more personal, but most of all longer. The two to three pages required often become four to five – students develop the desire to share their experiences in more depth and to explore their texts in multiple directions.

Some students share that interacting with these books throughout the semester revealed in them an interest for reading. They hope to continue reading graphic novels in the future - “I have [...] continued reading *bande dessinées* at work...!” shared a student.

As a result many of them ask where they can find or purchase graphic novels - they want to acquire them and re-read them, or read the sequel or prequel, or buy a book by the same

¹⁰ “The comic format really helped me to expand my vocabulary and analyze foreign language text in a new way, more in-depth way.” wrote a student on an evaluation.

¹¹ The importance to students of the personalized aspect of the course transpires in their comments on evaluations: “I felt inspired and motivated by the creative, personalized course material”; “For me, one of the most enjoyable aspects of this course was that [...] we were encouraged to explore our interests. This meant that we could make more personal connections to French culture”; “Reading the books and writing about them was my favorite part of the course because it was a combination of creative expression and French literature.”; “Loved the individualized nature of the class!”

author or the same artist. « *Je suis très triste que cette BD soit la dernière. Maintenant je veux lire toutes les BD d'Angoulême!* »¹² a student wrote in her final journal.

Every semester it is amazing to notice how students find ways to appropriate themselves these books and make the texts theirs. It is fascinating to witness how students, through the reading of graphic novels, grow and develop linguistically, acquire confidence in the foreign language and find in themselves the abilities to interpret and analyze language and art.

On-line reading

Description

In order to explore learning outcomes in the context of the current technology-based trends, the use of online texts appeared as a logical choice.

Students were requested to read and analyzed one volume of the *Poker* series (Derrien and Van Liemt 2011), chosen for its visual attraction and relative easiness of language, from the French website izneo.fr.¹³

Interaction with the on-line text

Students were enthusiastic and welcomed the opportunity to read a BD online, on their devices.

They were given the choice to use their tablets, their phones, or their computers, and had to bring the screens to class for discussions and activities.

Every student decided to use their tablets for what they considered a better experience: screen not too small, so no need to constantly zoom in and out on the page to read the speech bubbles; portable, not too heavy and less cumbersome than a full size laptop.

Most students chose to have one page on their screens rather than the two-page layout option, again for comprehension purposes and better visibility. Interestingly enough, this layout did not resemble that of a paper book, which necessarily opens on two pages, so students were not interested in reproducing their experience when reading a printed book – they were experiencing something new.¹⁴

Students had several options for turning pages: they could click on/touch the arrow on the side of their screens, choose a

¹² “I am very sad this BD is the last one. Now I would like to read all the BDs from the Angoulême selection.”

¹³ www.izneo.fr is a popular resource for readers of all ages interested in reading digital BDs, Comics and Manga.

¹⁴ These choices may be due to the fact that students were reading in a foreign language or because of the visuals – students wanted perhaps to fully appreciate the art. Whether they would have made the same decisions had it been only text and/or written in their native languages remains an open question to address.

page number at the top of the page, or swipe. The third option was the most popular.

Positive personal experience

Having all these options gave students the illusion they had choices and control over their reading, which reinforced a sentiment of ownership: they could make decisions and potentially have a personalized experience on their devices.

In addition, the flexibility provided by the multiple platforms available and the variety in reading approaches made it easy for students to read their texts, anywhere and anytime.

Finally, students commented that the visual experience was pleasant – colors were appealing, images crisp, fonts legible, structural organization of the page meaningful – and familiar – similar to video games, movies, photographs. This familiarity lowered their anxiety level often associated with language learning and allowed for a more relaxed approach to assignments and in-class activities.

The reading process

Each page on the device was a surprise – when students clicked for the next page to appear, a whole new world of images, colors, movement and text would appear and activate their imagination. The visual novelty captured their attention and motivated them to continue on with the reading. Once the brain was stimulated, the eyes would then pay attention to the text and students would read in detail each bubble in order to associate their visual understanding with the actual storyline.

The excitement of the discovery was very appealing to the students, “to the young social media crowd whose constant browsing is about focusing on what is new” (Carr 2010).

Students did not skim and scan the text, or read each page quickly to get a general idea of the story, or read out of order. Very interestingly enough, most of them “read” through the graphic novel without paying attention to the words, first, trying to get an overall understanding of the plot mostly via the images, the art, the organization of the details on the page – visual clues. Their second “reading” of the graphic novel involved actual word decoding and text interpretation, which required linear reading. Students shared that, in order for them to follow the story line, they had to read page after page, following the logical order of writing, hence engaging in a linear experience on their device, less personalized.

In the end some students struggled with the deep understanding of the digital text. The overall experience they had when using their devices was pleasant, exciting, and motivating, but their reading skills did not improve as much as expected. Interestingly enough, some students were not reading carefully and were “skipping” – either consciously or unconsciously – important dialogues or situations, probably because

of a lack of focus or attentiveness to certain words or speech bubbles.¹⁵ Students’ interest in graphic novels did increase due to the discovery of an appealing medium but these adults didn’t seem passionately involved in reading. Their fascination seemed superficial and ephemeral.

Impact of printed texts on comprehension, learning, and communication

Printed graphic novels have a much stronger impact on students’ learning experiences.

Student self-evaluations of skills

When students were asked at the end of the semester to evaluate their linguistic strengths, writing came in first, closely followed by reading, then came speaking/listening. When asked if they felt comfortable taking risks in the foreign language 17 out of 18 students answered yes, compared to 10 at the beginning of the semester. These numbers are extremely encouraging considering that most students are taking the class to finish their university language requirement, not for personal interest.¹⁶

Touch and visuals

Ultimately, the kinesthetic experience associated with reading a paper book was far more enriching and gratifying to students than the online experience.

Students discovered the importance of the art in graphic novels via the various types of stylistic choices they were being exposed to on paper, through touch – the thickness and glossiness of the paper itself – and visuals – the artists’ preferences in coloring and inking – intensity, preciseness of the lines, use of contours, amount of sharpness. Both were an important part in their development as readers and their growing appreciation of the medium. “Printed books and articles fulfill the need for touching, turning the pages, perception of the letters as physical objects” (Perbal 2017).

¹⁵ Nowadays students read their homework assignments online. It is very interesting to note that about 30% of students systematically miss some information if they do not print out the homework sheets. When reading on the screen they quickly browse through the information. “I didn’t notice the page number because I didn’t scroll far enough to the side”, “the image didn’t fit on my screen so I couldn’t tell for which day it was due”, “there was too much information so I couldn’t tell what I had to turn in” are recurring comments. Despite the use of color-coding to address visual learners, the students’ choices to read the documents on their phones do not enable them to focus on the details.

¹⁶ Only 8 students out of 18 will continue with French beyond the required 4th semester, and 11 students said they were taking the class only to fulfill their language requirement.

Spatial orientation

It was difficult for students to get a sense of where they were in the story when they read the online version. Since they were reading sections of the graphic novel at a time, the task for them to appropriately place the chapters within the context was a noticeable challenge, due to the abstract nature of the pages. It was difficult for them to conceptualize the story as a whole based on the digital layout, despite the display of page numbers on their screens and visual aids, which is in agreement with the idea that “print [gives] the students a sense of where they [are] in the book.”¹⁷

Maybe this trend will disappear as younger generations of online readers develop different types of skills and conceptualize new spatial orientation models.

It is interesting to note that in addition to the text, students had visual clues to guide them through the story, since they were reading graphic novels. The sequences of images, the characters’ expressions, the onomatopoeias, the color-coded emotions, were not enough for students to get situated in the story.

Creativity and imagination, emotions and connections

Reading a paper graphic novel allows for more creativity and imagination than a text on an electronic device, thus enabling a greater emotional connection to the text, ensuring a stronger comprehension.

Just as with the digital book, as the hand turns the page, the reader’s eyes can joyfully capture the content of the two pages, with a quick glance, in order to excite the brain and promote the desire for a deeper understanding of the storyline. But in addition to this visual stimulation, when reading a paper book, the reader has the liberty of discovering the book in any order they wish. Some students look at the end of a book first, flipping backward through the pages, discovering certain scenes for pure pleasure, flipping forward to get a glimpse at other details, before engaging in the actual reading of the text. This appropriation of the object allows for a personalized experience and creates a special bonding between the reader and the writer or the artist.

One could argue that the same series of events might occur on a device as well, that the online reader has the same liberty, but the very own nature of the digital page does not allow for that same experience. As discussed above, students do not engage in such a type of reading because they do not know how to spatially position themselves within the story as they are browsing. Such a behavior creates chaos and misunderstanding.

Is this lack of orientation purely due to the fact that students are dealing with a foreign language or is it directly linked to the use of an online text? The presence of images in graphic

novels, supporting the storyline, suggests that it is more about cognitive abilities than the experience itself.

Reading comprehension

Touch, visuals, spatial orientation, creativity, imagination, emotions and connections, all have a tremendous impact on reading comprehension and the improvement of reading skills.

The book format allows for a better comprehension of the plot. “One researcher from Stanford pointed out that the more you acclimate yourself to the technology and the constant flow of information that comes through it, it seems that you become less able to figure out what’s important to focus on. Instead, your mind gets attracted just to what’s new rather than what’s important.”¹⁸ The constant repositioning within the storyline and creation of imaginary connections between the images, the words, and the pages help the reader to effectively take part in the development of the story, to anticipate meaning, to engage in active reading, and thus to gain a high level of understanding of the text.

Feeling and expressing emotions are crucial to language learning. Students create a deep connection with these stories and books, and consequently will remember the journey regardless of their appreciation of the graphic novels because they were able to create a meaningful personal experience with the text and the object itself.¹⁹

Conclusion

Thanks to this new approach of teaching with graphic novels, students developed a specific relationship to the printed text, an increased interest in reading, and an emotional attachment to the object itself.

Every semester, in addition to the collection of books that are provided, students purchase the two required graphic novels: 1. *Astérix le Gaulois* (Gosciny and Uderzo 1961), 2. one volume of the *Résistances* series (Derrien and Plumail 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014). They feel a sense of pride for having these graphic novels in print – “I love having my very own BD to keep from this course.” wrote a student on an evaluation.

Students developed, indeed, a special connection to the books. They wanted to touch and feel them, they were intrigued by their shapes and sizes, commented on the number of pages as they were choosing, reacted to the organic quality of the paper. It was their first step towards the understanding

¹⁸ N. Carr (2010) cited in C. Gregoire, The Huffington Post – Science (10/09/2015). http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/internet-changing-brain-nicholas-carr_us_5614037de4b0368a1a613e96

¹⁹ “One study out of Columbia University [...] seemed to show that the more distracted you are — the more your train of thought is interrupted — the less able you are to experience empathy. So distractions could make it more difficult for us to experience deep emotions.” N. Carr (2010).

¹⁷ N. Baron (2016) cited in B. Perbal (2017).

of the text. On a screen, all covers are the same, all shapes are the same; the thickness of the volume is invisible.

This close relationship with the books themselves encouraged students to explore the material in various and personal ways, allowing for creative non-linear reading, giving them the confidence needed to both apprehend the foreign language and content, and achieve deeper understanding of the texts.

The power of the printed texts and the impact these graphic novels have both on students' education and their relationship to reading, are tremendous.

These books are a tangible proof of what they can read, of their level of understanding of content, and thus of their progress in the foreign language. It is a testament to their learning and their successes in overcoming their fears. It gives them a sense of accomplishment.

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