

11 *Comic book culture and second language learners*

Bonny Norton
Karen Vanderheyden

Extract 1: Karen and Joong-ha, an English language learner

- Karen: When did you come to Canada?
Joong-ha: Two years ago.
Karen: Did you speak English in Korea?
Joong-ha: No.
Karen: So you've learned all your English in the last two years?
Joong-ha: Yes.
Karen: That's amazing. That's fantastic. Has it been easy for you to learn English?
Joong-ha: No.
Karen: What has helped you to learn English?
Joong-ha: Reading comics.
Karen: Seriously?
Joong-ha: Yeah, I read a comic every day. I read Calvin and Hobbes and Archies and adventure things.

Extract 2: Karen and Dylan, a native speaker of English

- Karen: I want to find out one more thing. You've got ESL [English as a second language] kids and a lot of them hang out with their own group of friends. Then you've got English-speaking friends and they hang out together. Is popular culture like Archie a good way of bringing kids together?
Dylan: Well, yes because I know that one reason most of the kids with English problems and kids with good English don't relate is because the English kids seem to think that either they are stupid because they can't speak English which is totally a misconception or they're not like them and they're kind of pushed away by that.
Karen: So that's what you think, that it's a good way 'cause they can talk to each other?
Dylan: 'Cause it would give them something to realize that these kids like some things that they like, that they are kids who like things that other kids like, which is a way of bringing them together.

202 *Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden*

Introductions

Joong-ha, who is eleven, and Dylan, who is twelve, both attend a Vancouver school in which many of the students speak English as a second, third, or fourth language. While Joong-ha, from Korea, describes the remarkable achievement he has made in English language learning, Canadian-born Dylan reflects on the complex relationship between these newcomers, defined by Dylan as “kids with English problems,” and their anglophone peers. Although Dylan recognizes that “it’s a total misconception” to think that people who don’t speak English are “stupid,” his comment highlights the struggles for acceptance and respect that many young language learners face in English-dominant schools in North America and beyond (see, for example, Duff, 2002; McKay & Wong, 1996; Miller, 2003; Tosi & Leung, 1999). He notes further that friendship groups among anglophones are developed among students who are “like them” and share similar interests. What both boys have in common is their positive evaluation of comic books. While Joong-ha finds them useful for the purpose of language learning, Dylan notes that they serve as a common interest among English language learners and native speakers.

Joong-ha and Dylan are both participating in a study on a topic that is of interest to them and intriguing to us: the appeal of Archie comics. The Archie comic, unique in maintaining its popularity for over fifty years (see Robbins, 1999), has monthly sales of approximately one million and a Web site (www.archiecomics.com) that attracts thirteen to fourteen million hits a month. It is for these reasons that Norton began a program of research on Archie comics in 1997. She found that these comics have attracted the attention of millions of primarily preadolescent children, not only in North America, but in diverse countries around the world. Indeed, on a visit to Pakistan in October 2000, Norton was intrigued to find dozens of Archie comics on magazine racks in Karachi markets and, upon further investigation, found that many young Pakistanis were avid readers of these texts. Similarly, another student in the study, Namisha, commented that a friend of hers who had visited Thailand had ready access to Archie comics.

While Norton’s research has addressed a range of questions about the appeal of Archie comics (see Norton, in press), this chapter focuses on one particular aspect of the research, conducted with Karen Vanderheyden, which addresses the appeal of Archie comics for English language learners. In this regard, Krashen’s (1993) work in the area of free voluntary reading serves as a starting point for this research. He suggests that comic books, as a form of light reading, could be viewed as an incentive for children to read, citing Archie comics, specifically, as one of

Comic book culture and second language learners 203

the comics that could be used in language classrooms. The appeal of Archie comics, he contends, stems mainly from its high interest content (high school context) and its accessibility (Grade 2 level of writing). In this chapter, however, we move beyond Krashen's claims to investigate the multiple ways in which English language learners engage with Archie comics in both classrooms and communities. Thus, we are interested not only in the ways in which Archie comics facilitate language learning and the development of literacy in English, but how popular culture can serve to engage second language learners in the culture of their peers as well as in the wider target-language culture. In this spirit, as Luke and Elkins (1998) have argued, we are interested in literacy as more than the process of reading and writing; we conceive of literacy as a social practice that must be understood in the context of wider social and institutional relationships.

For the uninitiated, an introduction to Archie comics is appropriate. Archie comics describe the lives of a group of teenagers living in a suburban area called Riverdale, in a temperate coastal region of the United States. The main characters in the stories are Archie, the classic boy-next-door; Betty and Veronica, two best friends; Jughead, an eccentric who is constantly eating (but never gets fat!); Reggie, the local rich boy; and various parents and teachers. The girls generally wear fashionable clothing, and beach scenes are common. The stories are often humorous and there is much play on words. Any given comic book has about twenty short stories of varying length addressing a variety of themes about friendship, schooling, dating, and family life. The comic is published in the form of a small booklet and costs about \$4 Canadian (\$2.60 U.S.). It is popular among both girls and boys, with ages ranging from approximately nine to twelve years old.

Comics, critical literacy, and popular culture

Almost two decades before Krashen's work on free voluntary reading, Wright (1976) had already made the case that the type of visuals found in comic books contributes positively to second language reading (p. 37). He argues that visual materials are an invaluable part of the construction of meaning for language learners and advocates the use of comics in all areas of the language curriculum. Furthermore, he makes the case that comics can also support writing as a nonverbal prompt to composition. He cites an example of a cartoon strip activity that was created by students for a classroom activity that entailed cutting up a comic, remounting the drawings, and having the students either write their text and dialogue on the strip or in their books.

204 *Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden*

Notwithstanding Wright and Krashen's enthusiasm for the use of comics in the second language classroom, there has, in fact, been little research on this topic. One of the few studies in the literature is that of Elley and Mangubhai (1983), who conducted research using nontraditional literature with Fijian elementary students. They were particularly interested in the impact these materials had on second language literacy skills. Using the shared book experience method developed by Holdaway in 1979, the teachers were able to engage the English language learners in lively group discussions around the comic books presented. The teachers also encouraged the use of comic books during sustained silent reading periods in the classroom. After eight months, the researchers found that students exposed to high-interest stories progressed in reading and listening comprehension at twice the normal rate. Furthermore, after twenty months, they found that the increase was even more dramatic and began to have a beneficial effect on other language skills, including writing and speaking.

While the literature on comics and second language learning is limited, there is a growing body of research in the areas of critical literacy and popular culture that brings insight to our study of Archie comics and language learning. Educators who are interested in critical literacy are interested in studying texts as sites of struggle, negotiation, and change (see, for example, Kress, 1997, 2000; Luke, 1995, 1997; New London Group, 1996; Norton Peirce & Stein, 1995). Such educators argue that texts are not restricted to the written word, but include oral, visual, and graphic representations of meaning. In this view, the meaning of such texts is not stable, but is constructed within the context of a variety of social and institutional relationships and assumes diverse identities on the part of readers. Such readers use texts to make sense of the world even as readers, themselves, are positioned in particular ways by different kinds of texts. Changing forms of literate behavior have become the central interest of the work of the New London Group (1996), who, through groundbreaking research, address the multiple ways in which technology is transforming literacy practices. The group takes the position that literacy pedagogy should account for the increasing variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies, including an understanding of the way visual images relate to the written word.

Likewise, the emerging literature on popular culture and educational practice seeks a more complex appreciation of the role of popular culture in schooling than hitherto conceived (see Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Buckingham, 1998; Dyson, 1997; Finders, 1997; Giroux & Simon, 1988, 1989; Hilton, 1996; Lewis, 1998; Norton, 2001). These scholars take the position that if educators do not take seriously the social and cultural texts that are authorized by youth – which may simultaneously empower and disempower them – they run the risk of negating and silencing

Comic book culture and second language learners 205

their students. Much of this research locates the study of popular culture within the context of a critical pedagogy that seeks to validate the knowledge that students bring with them to the classroom, knowledge that is constructed within the practices of students' everyday lives outside the classroom. In this view, popular cultural texts provide an important window on the activities and investments of students outside schools.

While popular culture has received little attention in the second language literature, a recent study by Duff (2001, 2002) suggests that, at least in some K–12 classrooms, references to popular culture are integral to classroom practice. In her Canadian study in a multilingual secondary school classroom, she found that references to such TV shows as *Ally McBeal*, *The Simpsons*, *Seinfeld*, and *Friends* were common and that English language learners were unable to enter into discussions that assumed such cultural knowledge. Duff (2002) quotes the following comment made by Sue, an anglophone Canadian. It is an eerie echo of the comment made by eleven-year-old Dylan, quoted at the beginning of this chapter:

Most of the [ESL] students in this class don't sit down and read the paper or anything . . . for the popular culture aspect, like the movies and even things like the radio songs and stuff. Different types of radio. They're missing a lot. And I think that might be one of the spots where the segregation starts between ESL students and us because they don't have the same radio stations, and they don't watch the same movies and they're not as absorbed by the same pop culture that we are. (p. 485)

In Norton's (2000) research with immigrant adult women, she found that references to popular culture were also common in conversational banter in the workplace. She cites the case of Eva, a language learner from Poland, who felt silenced and disempowered when her coworker, Gail, berated her for having no knowledge of the TV show, *The Simpsons*.

Given such changing perspectives on literacy and popular culture, it is timely to revisit debates on the comic book and second language education. Since the 1950s, when texts such as Wertham's (1955) classic, *Seduction of the Innocent*, were published, there has been much controversy about the value of comic books within educational practice. These debates have frequently been related to prevailing conceptions of the text, the reader, and the process of reading. While Wertham might dismiss comic books as trash, Haugaard (1973) believes they deserve a better press. Meek (1988, 1992), more recently, argues that comic books have unique characteristics that call for thoughtful analysis and expresses surprise that educators "have ignored for so long the reading skills they taught our readers" (Meek, 1988, p. 25).

What, indeed, have Archie comics taught our readers, and do they have a place in the multilingual language classroom? Given the multimodal

features of Archie comics, which include pictures, dialogues, and narrative text, they might be conceived of as a classic multimodal text. However, as Stein (2000) argues, incorporating multimodal texts in the classroom, whether they be photographs, drawings, television shows, dramatic exercises, or computer graphics, requires nothing less than a reconceptualization of representation in the classroom. Fundamental to the theory she cites is the principle that semiotic modes serve as *resources* that do different kinds of work and produce different kinds of effects. Such theory is relevant to the Archie research because comics represent a particular kind of multimodal resource that produces different effects among children, teachers, and parents. Such effects, in turn, have a significant impact on the perceived legitimacy of comics within the context of schooling, more generally, and second language education, more specifically.

Because we are interested in English language learning among preadolescent children, we have also been drawn to sociocultural research which investigates the social relationships between English language learners and their first language peers within the context of the multilingual K–12 classroom. The research of Duff (2001, 2002), Gunderson (2000), Harklau (1994, 2000), McKay and Wong (1996), Miller (2003), Toohey (1998, 2000), and Tosi and Leung (1999) is particularly relevant here. While language learners in Gunderson's Canadian study reported overwhelmingly that practicing English with native English speakers was essential for language development, opportunities for interaction were rare. Researchers have found that a major challenge for school-aged language learners is gaining access to the social networks of their first language peers that will, in turn, provide opportunities for interaction and English language development. Harklau (1994), for example, drawing on a longitudinal study in an American secondary school, notes the following: "Perhaps the most salient aspect of observations of ESL students in mainstream classes was their reticence and lack of interaction with native-speaking peers." Likewise, Duff (2001, 2002) refers to the lack of confidence of the ESL students in her study, noting that if language learners wish to become active members of the classroom discourse community, their cultural knowledge may be as important as their academic proficiency.

The research is not uniformly bleak, however. McKay and Wong (1996) cite the case of Michael Lee, who, as a result of his prowess at sports, was not only successful in accessing peer relationships with first language speakers in his American secondary school, but also made great progress in his development of oral skills in English. Toohey's (2000) work with elementary school children in Canada is another case in point. Those students, such as Julie, who made effective use of allies were able to access first language friendship networks and make great progress in language learning. Of particular interest to this study is Toohey's

observation that the lending and borrowing rituals within elementary classrooms provide a window into social relations and learning opportunities within the classroom. In our study, we were particularly interested in the extent to which Archie comics were traded, exchanged, and borrowed among our preteen readers and the impact this may have had on learning opportunities for second language students.

A study of Archie comic readers

The study in which Joong-ha, Dylan, and Namisha participated was conducted at Mountain Elementary School, in the city of Vancouver, from May 1998 to May 1999. This site was selected for its culturally diverse student population as well as its large second language population. The study included fifty-five elementary students in Grades 5, 6, and 7, twenty-five of whom were English language learners – defined as those students who speak a language other than English at home. There were approximately equal numbers of male (thirteen) and female (twelve) students in the second language group, thirteen of whom were Archie readers (six male and seven female). This chapter will focus on the contributions of the thirteen Archie readers, whose language backgrounds include Korean, Swedish, Mandarin, Bengali, Farsi, and Cantonese. For the purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for both the site and the following participants in this research: Guofang, Jonas, Liming, Nancy, and Ping from China; Diane, Dustin, Joong-ha, and Sook from Korea; Badar and Mohammed from Iran; Namisha from India; and Eva from Sweden.

In October 1998, a three-part questionnaire was distributed to elementary students in Grades 5, 6, and 7. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on the third part of the questionnaire which targeted our Archie readers only. The questionnaire was designed to gain insight into the appeal of Archie comics, the literacy development of the Archie reader, and the social network of Archie readers. Such questions included the following:

- Why do you like reading Archie comics?
- How old were you when you started reading Archie comics?
- How did you find out about Archie comics?
- Do your friends like reading Archie comics?
- Which world would you rather live in – your world or Archie's world?

Following an analysis of the questionnaires, we interviewed ten of the second language Archie readers on a chilly day in February 1999. The interviews took place in the nurse's station at the school, where we could catch glimpses of students and teachers scurrying in the corridors and hear the distant sound of intercom announcements. In the interviews,

208 *Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden*

which were tape-recorded and lasted approximately thirty minutes each, we asked students to elaborate on comments they had made in the questionnaire and to respond to a variety of prompts, including the following:

- Do you think Archie comics are helpful in learning English?
- Do you read comics in your home language?
- Should you be allowed to read Archie comics during silent reading?
- Do you talk about Archie comics with your friends?
- Do Archie comics tell you anything about Canadian society?

After much animated discussion, each student left the room brandishing a copy of the latest Archie comic we could find in our local grocery store. In May 1999, we returned to the school and presented some of the major findings from the study to groups of elementary students and their teachers.

Insights from Archie comic readers

In this section, we will present and discuss our findings with respect to three related questions we were investigating for the purposes of this chapter:

1. What is the appeal of Archie comics for English language learners?
2. To what extent can the reading of Archie comics promote literacy development?
3. Do Archie comics foster social interaction between English language learners and their anglophone peers?

The appeal of Archie comics

Like many of their anglophone peers, the English language learners in our study found Archie comics appealing because they are humorous and engaging to read. Out of a total of thirteen language learners who responded to the question, “Why do you like reading Archie comics?” eleven cited humor as central to the appeal of these texts, using the adjectives “fun,” “funny,” and “humorous” to characterize the Archie appeal. This was a sober reminder that the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment is no less important for second language learners than for their native-speaking classmates. Namisha, for example, explained how the Archie comic hooks the reader:

’cause it’s funny and it’s like interesting ’cause most – like novels – in the beginning it hooks you but then it gets boring, right? Archie comics don’t really because you want to know what happens at the end without all that boring detail.

Comic book culture and second language learners 209

Mohammed, in a similar spirit to that of Namisha, highlights the entertainment value of Archie comics. In response to the question, “Do you think you should be allowed to read Archie comics during silent reading?” Mohammed replied:

Yes! I don't really know what my teacher would care, but like, I would love it. I would love not wasting time working – just reading Archie books. . . . I'd like to do Archie books for entertainment. So it would be just like having entertainment at school.

The humor and entertainment value of Archie comics should not be dismissed as trivial. Meek (1988, p. 19), in arguing that “a joke is often the best reading test,” notes that while children learn very quickly the rules for both behavior and for reading, they also learn, likewise, that rules can be broken and subverted. The puns, the humor, and the twists in Archie stories presuppose sophistication on the part of readers and are a source of great delight for preadolescent children, whether English language learners or anglophone readers.

The pleasure principle was not the only source of the Archie comic appeal, however. Children new to North America who are struggling to understand the sociocultural practices of their new society find in comic books like Archie images of popular activities among young people. In this regard, the students made little distinction between popular activities in the United States and those in Canada, agreeing, as Liming noted, “they're pretty much the same.” In response to the question, “Do Archie comics tell you anything about Canadian society?” some of the students felt that Archie comics were appealing because they could help students learn about their new society. In his interview with Norton, Dustin illustrates this point:

Bonny: Do you think that Archie comics teach you about Canadian society? I mean, you know you come from Korea right?

Dustin: Yeah, it does.

Bonny: Oh, it does? Oh like what, Dustin?

Dustin: Like when they go to the swimming pool or restaurant and – not a lot, but a little about swimming pools – I mean the beach. There's like all these ah – it tells a little bit.

Bonny: So you said “the beach” and um “the swimming pools” and things like that – like the events that people spend time, their leisure activities. Yeah.

Dustin: In Korea (laughs), they don't like spend time a lot um – going to the beach or something because they're like busy or they got like a lot of work to do.

Bonny: You mean like even the children?

Dustin: Children they have to study till midnight to get their homework done, but there's like not much homework here.

Guofang explained that her mother suggested that she lend her immigrant cousin some of her Archie comics to help him acquire his new language

210 *Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden*

as well as knowledge about Canadian society. She offered the following insights in her interview:

Guofang: I'm lending some of them [Archie comics] to my cousin. He just came here from China and like then the words he can't understand and then he could learn about the society here.

Bonny: And he's learning?

Guofang: He's learning.

Bonny: So did you think when he came here, "Oh, Archie comics will help my cousin." Did you think that?

Guofang: First, it's like my mom gave me a suggestion to give, lending them to my cousin – Well, first she just said it's kind of easy to understand and he could learn more.

We explored, in some depth, the question of whether students thought that Archie comics would give them insight into their future lives as teenagers. Of the eleven language learners who responded to the question, "Do you think Archie comics tell you what your life will be like as a teenager?" there was a mixed reaction. Six of the students said no, four said yes, and one was uncertain. Of those who said no, they explained, for example, that some stories are "impossible" and that comics are "just stories." Of those who said yes, students explained, for example, that "you should be ready for some bimbo to steal your boyfriend" and that "whatever I do I'm going to be a teenager." The student who was uncertain added, "Well, some of them will, but not all of them."

While students indicated that Archie comics gave them some insight into what life might be like as a teenager, how friends relate to one another, and what leisure activities are popular among young people in North America, they recognized that Archie comics are not "real life." Joong-ha, for example, said that characters "never die," Sook said that Archie comics are "cartoony," and Ping noted, with reference to what she called the "fictional" Archie story used in the study, "how can [Betty] go into fairytale land and go and talk to people and tell them to switch their ways and stuff like that?"

While the English language learners found aspects of the Archie world appealing, most agreed that they would not trade their world with the Archie world. In answer to the question, "Which world would you rather live in – your world or Archie's world?" only two students, Guofang and Mohammed, indicated a preference for Archie's world. Guofang made the point that teenagers in Archie's world seldom got into trouble, while in her world, "if you're a teenager, you've got lots of problems to solve." Mohammed indicated that in Archie's world, students had greater freedom than in his culture in which there were "lots of rules." Thus, contrary to what some teachers and parents might think, the students had no difficulty distinguishing between the reality of their lives and the fantasy of the Archie world.

Archie comics and literacy development

When asked if the reading of Archie comics would be helpful for people learning English, nine of the ten English language learners interviewed responded affirmatively. Most students agreed that the simplified vocabulary of Archie comics makes them accessible to language learners, rendering them, as Mohammed said, “perfect” for instructional purposes. Liming made the point that the acquisition of vocabulary is a developmental process and that the simplified vocabulary of Archie comics helps to scaffold language learning: “Because they use quite easy words that you could learn that could help you, and as you grow older, you can learn harder words by yourself.”

Even more appealing for the students, however, are the visuals and pictures in Archie comics. As Liming explained, “When the author draws and when I read it, it makes me laugh.” For many learners, however, the visuals are not only a source of humor, they are important signposts for events in the Archie stories. As Guofang explained, “Well, they got picture, can help them, colorful pictures can help the reader to understand like how, what is happening, going on.” Namisha elaborated on this point, noting, “Well, sometimes when it’s normally written, there’s like not much pictures, right? But here it’s showing you who’s saying it with those little bubbles.” Eva’s strategy was even more proactive than Guofang’s and Namisha’s. “The stuff that I did,” she said, “was that I first looked at the pictures and then I made up my own words.”

While many teachers consider visuals and pictures a distraction in the reading process, Meek’s (1988) response is more textured. She makes the case that the comic book demands that the reader make two interpretations simultaneously: one of pictures and another of text. The multiple forms of representation, including balloon dialogues, inset sketches, the drawing of asides, together with the reader’s impulse to keep the story going, are not only challenging for readers, but illustrate convincingly that the reader assumes two identities in the reading process: the identity of the teller and that of the told. This dual identity is one that is rarely taught, she argues, except in those instances when an adult might substitute for the author by reading out loud to a child. In comic book reading, however, a child cannot rely on an adult to assume the author’s voice as visuals and icons cannot be easily interpreted. It is the young reader, alone, who assumes the identity of the teller and the told in the construction of meaning. When Eva “made up [her] own words,” she was following the dictates of the genre.

Ownership over meaning making is clearly one of the appealing facets of comic book reading, and Archie readers in the study were very astute at using multiple strategies to engage with the comic book. Not only did they closely examine the pictures, study the dialogues, and make up

212 *Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden*

their own words, but they also felt at liberty to move nonsequentially through the text, from one section to another. As Mohammed explained, in response to the question, “Why do you like reading Archie comic books?”,

A regular book is just like completely one story and wherever you go, if you like get from somewhere – like if you’re in the middle of the book, and you don’t want to read it, and you just want to go forward, you won’t know the middle – so there’s no point to the book. But with Archie, you can just go to another complete section.

Thus, the structure of Archie comics provides the reader with diverse strategies for negotiating the text, much as the more contemporary World Wide Web offers choice and variety for readers. As Kress (1997, p. 161) argues, “The sequentiality and linearity of former textual structures is replaced by a web, which can be entered at any point of my choosing and explored with neither a pre-given point of entry nor a pre-given point of departure.”

While the focus of our study was on literacy development with reference to Archie comics, we discovered that the students in our study found other English language comics, such as Calvin and Hobbes, equally entertaining. Perhaps more significantly, we also collected interesting data pertaining to comic book reading and literacy development in the mother tongue. In answer to the interview question, “Do you read comics in your home language?”, six out of ten students indicated that they read comics in their first language as well as in English. One student, in fact, began reading comics in English *before* he began to read comics in his first language. Such data supports Gunderson’s (2000) finding that the reading of comic books in the mother tongue was common among the students in his large-scale study.

It is intriguing to consider whether mother tongue maintenance could be promoted by encouraging second language learners to read comic books in the mother tongue. The study suggests that comic books in the mother tongue may provide an important connection to the preimmigration life of young language learners. First language loss is often a devastating consequence of immigration of young people (Kouritzin, 2000; Norton, 2000) as children seek acceptance among target-language speakers in their classrooms and communities. If children read comic books in the mother tongue and find connection to their home language through popular culture, they may engage more actively with their histories and identities. Indeed, as Stein (2000, p. 336) would argue, such students would be “re-sourcing resources” – that is, “taking invisible, taken-for-granted resources to a new context of situation to produce

Comic book culture and second language learners 213

new meanings.” Consider the following extract:

Karen: Now you’ve talked about reading comics in Korean, that you read some Korean comics. So I’m really interested in that. What kind of comics do you read in Korean?

Joong-ha: They’re like fighting things.

Karen: How do they compare to Archie comics?

Joong-ha: This is like new life and that’s old life.

The data suggest further that students make cultural distinctions between the comics they read in their first language and Archie comics, noting, in general, that Archie comics are more about real life than other comics they have encountered. Liming noted, for example, that Pokémon Power, a favorite Japanese–Chinese comic, focuses on adventure, while Archie comics focus on what he referred to as “our lives in the future.” Dustin described his enjoyment of the Korean comic, Dragonball and, in answer to the question, “So how is Dragonball different from the Archie comics?” responded as follows:

Like Korea doesn’t make any comics like this [Archie comics]. Um – this is based on environment – I mean nature. But Dragonball and stuff it’s like – um – it’s like a place that’s not real. It’s fake, it’s all fake. All the stuff in there is fake in there but it’s all real in here [Archie comics]. Like swimming and beach and all those stuff are real, but in Dragonball it’s fighting.

With the exception of Guofang’s mother, however, data from the study suggest that both teachers and parents were, at best, ambivalent about comics – at worst, completely dismissive. Data to support this view were generated by the following key question: “Should you be allowed to read Archie comics during silent reading?” While many of the students thought Archie comics could be helpful in language learning, many of the same students said that their teachers would not find Archie comics acceptable in the classroom, especially during silent reading. Joong-ha, for example, said his teacher would think it was “bad,” explaining that, “I think they think that there’s few words and a lot of pictures.” A similar sentiment was expressed by Namisha who, in response to the same question, answered as follows:

Um I mean you read and stuff, right. Well, there are some comics, some popular comics that people were allowed to read like in my old school, but they’re not allowed to read Archie comics for some reason. There’s like no swearing or anything so we could probably but teachers say that it’s like not challenging.

In addition, some of the students interviewed mentioned that their parents did not approve of their reading of Archie comics as comics were

214 *Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden*

seen as a distraction from the child's school work or a waste of time. As Ping said:

Ping: My mom just doesn't want me to read comics anymore –

Bonny: So why do you think your mom doesn't like you to read comics?

Ping: She said it's like I'm wasting my time like I could do something better, like instead of reading comics, like actually doing homework.

Bonny: Now um do you think teachers think the same way about comic books?

Ping: Yeah, probably, but not always but usually they do because they want you to focus on your homework.

Such comments from Joong-ha, Namisha, and Ping suggest that although children derive great pleasure from their Archie comics and are clearly actively engaged in meaning making, this practice is considered an unchallenging waste of time and is consequently not authorized by teachers and parents.

In his classic text, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*, McLaren's (1986) insights about the nature and function of rituals within schooling are important for understanding why novels and chapter books, rather than comic books, are privileged during silent reading and homework activities. His argument is that rituals symbolically transmit societal and cultural ideologies, which are best understood in the context of competing claims to power. In the context of schooling, the teacher's power is derived from familiarity with chapter books, extended prose, classic texts, and teachers' guides. As Gunderson (2000) argues:

The study of literature, the "classics," is viewed as essential to the development of literate human beings. Central to the study is the notion that a particular body of literature is the canon, like Shakespeare and Chaucer, and to be truly "literate" one must study it. This view ignores the substantial oral and written contributions of most of the cultures of the world. (p. 701)

Within such a context, the humble comic book, with its cheap paper, extensive pictures, and bubble dialogues, is no match for the powerful canon.

Archie comics and a community of readers

Drawing on the data from our study, we have examined, thus far, the appeal of Archie comics in terms of their humor and their teenage content, we have discussed their accessibility with reference to vocabulary and visual representation, and we have suggested that their dismissal by some teachers and parents may not be in the best interests of language learning and mother tongue maintenance. As discussed earlier, however, we are

Comic book culture and second language learners 215

concerned not only with literacy as a process of reading and writing; in this study, we are also addressing literacy as a social practice. As Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič (2000) argue, all uses of written language can be seen as located in particular times and places, positioned in relation to the social institutions and power relations which sustain them. Given this perspective, we would like to argue that the community of readers associated with Archie comics is important for both the development of orality in English and for social relationships between English language learners and their anglophone peers.

In our study, we found that comics, in general, and Archie comics, in particular, constitute part of what Finders (1997, p. 25) would argue is the “literate underlife” of preadolescent children. In support of this view is data collected in response to the question, “How did you find out about Archie comics?” Eight out of thirteen language learners said a friend told them about the comics, and another two said they found out about Archie comics because of a sister. In addition, a majority of the Archie readers interviewed (seven out of ten) said that their friends also enjoyed reading Archie comics. What is significant about these data is the suggestion that students learn about Archie comics predominantly from peers or siblings – not from teachers or other adults. Thus, the network of Archie readers is one that is developed and nurtured by the peer group. As Badar said, “Well, lots of people in our class, last year they were reading it so I thought it’s good to borrow it from my friends and started reading it.” Further, when students were asked the following question, “Do you talk about Archie comics with your friends?” eight out of ten said that they discussed Archie comics with their friends on a regular basis:

Bonny: Do they [all your friends] read Archie comics?

Guofang: Yeah. We go to each others’ houses like after school time and then, and we sometimes talk about characters, about their personality and stuff.

Bonny: So how did you get to read Archie comics, who introduced you to Archie comics?

Guofang: My friend.

Like Guofang, Dustin explained that he has a Korean friend who reads Archie comics, and “when I go over to his house, I read his comics, and when he comes, he reads my comics.”

It was evident from the data that Archie readers, and the girls in particular, constituted an informal and loosely connected reading community in which students borrowed comics from one another, went to one another’s houses to swap comics, and talked about the stories on a regular basis. In this regard, two findings were of particular significance: First, we found that the talk which Archie comics generated was usually conducted

216 *Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden*

in English, and, second, we found that the rituals of swapping and borrowing crossed ethnic and linguistic lines. As Ping (1) and Joong-ha (2) said:

(1)

Ping: When I started reading it [Archie comics] when I was reading it I used to always talk about it with my friends who had them and we used to switch and read them –

Bonny: But that you did in English?

Ping: Yeah, even like with most of my Chinese friends.

(2)

Karen: Now when you trade, are you trading with other Korean kids or are you trading with Canadian kids? Or, who are you trading with?

Joong-ha: Both.

Karen: So some of your Korean friends read Archie also? Now when you trade with your Korean friends, do you speak in Korean with them about Archie, or is it in English?

Joong-ha: English. Well sometimes Korean.

Given the rich use of English generated by the reading of comic books, it is perhaps not surprising that Elley and Mangubhai (1983), quoted earlier in the chapter, found that the use of comic books had a beneficial effect on other language skills, including writing and speaking.

Further, perhaps more important, is the possibility that the literate underlife we associate with comic books and popular culture has much potential for building relationships among students of different linguistic backgrounds. In this regard, as Toohey (1998, 2000) would argue, the borrowing and lending practices of Archie comic readers are significant. Toohey has demonstrated that rituals of lending and borrowing among school children are intricate practices which engage the identities of students in complex ways. In her study of a multilingual elementary school classroom, Toohey found that children would engage in borrowing and lending rituals even when a student may have had little need of the borrowed item. Among other purposes of borrowing was the desire to enter into social interaction with other students – a practice that carried attendant risks. Lenders were in a powerful position vis-à-vis borrowers in that it was up to the lender to decide if the item could be shared and if conversations with the borrower were welcome. For example, while the initiatives of one language learner, Surjeet, were often rebuffed by classmates, other language learners, like Amy, were more successful at borrowing practices and would engage the lender in short conversations. As Toohey (1998, p. 75) concluded, “it seems evident that borrowing and lending practices in this classroom were reflective of the social relations of the children therein.”

Comic book culture and second language learners 217

In follow-up research, Toohey and Day (1999) have analyzed those practices in elementary classrooms which facilitate access of second language students to community resources, of which English as a linguistic resource is a prime example. They note that playful activities, in which the identities of students are protected and community knowledge appears accessible to all, help to transform the classroom participation of second language learners from minimal to full. For many students at Mountain Elementary School – and perhaps in other multilingual elementary schools – Archie comics could become another resource that not only promotes interaction between language learners and their anglophone peers, but helps build precisely the kind of community that Toohey and Day envisage. To this end, pedagogical practices would need to extend beyond the “cut and paste” methods discussed by Wright (1976) or the silent reading exercises promoted by Elley and Mangubhai (1983). Teachers would need to provide structured opportunities for the borrowing and lending of Archie comics, for discussion among students, and for input from parents. Language learners would be encouraged to bring their mother-tongue comics to the classroom, to share different stories, and to compare comic book genres. In this way, a comic book culture, which includes comics in both English and other languages, might enrich the literacy practices in the elementary classroom and promote community relationships in which diversity is celebrated.

Some concluding comments

In her Canadian study, Duff (2001, 2002) observed that teachers and anglophone students in the Grade 10 humanities class made frequent reference to aspects of North American popular culture, including Hollywood-produced television series and movies. She concluded that the English language learners in the class, besides needing academic literacy skills, also needed a more general popular culture literacy, characteristic of teen magazines, youth-oriented radio stations, and other media. While the language learners in her study showed little familiarity with such aspects of popular culture and were consequently marginal to many classroom discussions, we found that many language learners at Mountain Elementary, along with their anglophone peers, found Archie comics accessible and engaging. The students noted that the colorful pictures, contextualized vocabulary, and interesting content provided a compelling hook into reading. Further, we found that both language learners and their anglophone peers engaged in rich oral discussion about Archie comics and that the community of Archie readers crossed ethnic and linguistic boundaries. We noted, finally, that the reading of comic books in the mother tongue may be important for mother-tongue maintenance.

Teachers and parents might find it reassuring that the students did not necessarily embrace all the activities depicted in Archie comics. Even those students who said that Archie comics could provide insight into their lives as teenagers qualified their comments in a number of ways. Further, while students gained a great deal of pleasure from Archie comics, they were almost unanimous in stating that they would rather live in their world than the Archie world. What attracted students to the comics was the humor, the variety, the action, the social relationships, and the fact that they could work out meanings and understandings for themselves. For learners struggling to understand academic texts in a second language, the comic book represents an exciting opportunity to engage with text from a position of strength rather than weakness. There is no right answer to ferret out of the text, and there are multiple cues to meaning making.

Nevertheless, we believe it is highly significant that these young language learners had accepted the dominant view that comics, in general, and Archie comics, in particular, do not constitute “real reading” and hence have little educational value. It is clear that children are learning from a young age that “good reading” is associated with chapter books that are challenging, include lots of print, and have no pictures. When “good reading” is equated with “difficult reading,” the second language learner is particularly disadvantaged. We believe the scaffolding function of comic books in literacy development for second language learners has been underestimated. Further, it is possible to argue that while the use of chapter books, novels, and extended prose can have important pedagogical consequences for language learners, many teachers and parents may have shifted the focus of literacy instruction from meaning making to ritual.

As scholars in critical literacy would argue, there is much controversy among parents, teachers, and students about what constitutes literacy and how literacy should be promoted in the classroom. It is possible that the emerging research and theory on multiliteracies may begin to have an impact on the way texts such as comics are perceived in the multilingual classroom. Members of the New London Group would argue that the multimodal text is a legitimate genre, that the visual medium is here to stay, and that “surfing” an Archie comic is consistent with changing literacy practices on the Web. Perhaps both teachers and parents need to rethink their conceptions of literacy in a changing technological and social world. Notwithstanding the fact that many teachers and parents often think our influence on children is limited, the study suggests that what adults think can have a powerful influence on student perceptions of literacy. If we recognize that literacy references not only words on the printed page, but social relationships and community practices, we may yet find a place for Archie comics in the multilingual classroom.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank students and teachers at Mountain Elementary School for their generous participation in this study. We would also like to thank Patsy Duff for her thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. We gratefully acknowledge the support of a Hampton Grant from the University of British Columbia, as well as a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

References

- Alvermann, D., Moon, J. S., & Hagood, M. C. (1999). *Popular culture in the classroom: Teaching and researching critical media literacy*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Barton, D., Hamilton, M., & Ivanič, R. (2000). *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. London: Routledge.
- Buckingham, D. (Ed). (1998). *Teaching popular culture*. London: University College London Press.
- Duff, P. (2001). Language, literacy, content, and (pop) culture: Challenges for ESL students in mainstream courses. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 58(1), 103–32.
- Duff, P. (2002). Pop culture and ESL students: Intertextuality, identity, and participation in classroom discussion. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 45(6), 482–7.
- Dyson, A. (1997). *Writing superheroes: Contemporary childhood, popular culture, and classroom literacy*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Elley, W. B., & Mangubhai, F. (1983). The impact of reading on second language learning. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 19(1), 53–67.
- Finders, M. (1997). *Just girls: Hidden literacies and life in junior high*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Giroux, H., & Simon, R. (1988). Schooling, popular culture, and a pedagogy of possibility. *Journal of Education*, 170(1), 9–26.
- Giroux, H., & Simon, R. (1989). *Popular culture: Schooling and everyday life*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: OISE Press.
- Gunderson, L. (2000). Voices of the teenage diasporas. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 43(8), 692–706.
- Harklau, L. (1994). ESL versus mainstream classes: Contrasting L2 learning environments. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28(2), 241–72.
- Harklau, L. (2000). From the “good kids” to the “worst”: Representations of English language learners across educational settings. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34, 35–67.
- Haugaard, K. (1973). Comic books: Conduits to culture? *Reading Teacher*, 27, 54–5.
- Hilton, M. (Ed). (1996). *Potent fictions: Children’s literacy and the challenge of popular culture*. London: Routledge.
- Kouritzin, S. (2000). *Face(t)s of language loss*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

220 *Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden*

- Krashen, S. (1993). *The power of reading: Insights from the research*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.
- Kress, G. (1997). *Before writing: Rethinking the paths to literacy*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, G. (2000). Multimodality. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.), *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures* (pp. 182–202). London: Routledge.
- Lewis, C. (1998). Rock ‘n’ roll and horror stories: Students, teachers, and popular culture. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 42(2), 116–20.
- Luke, A. (1995). Text and discourse in education: An introduction to critical discourse analysis. In M. W. Apple (Ed.), *Review of research in education*, (Vol. 21, pp. 3–48). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Luke, A. (1997). Critical approaches to literacy. In V. Edwards & D. Corson (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education*, Vol. 2: *Literacy* (pp. 143–52). Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic.
- Luke, A., & Elkins, J. (1998). Reinventing literacy in “New Times.” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 42(1), 4–8.
- McKay, S. L., & Wong, S. C. (1996). Multiple discourses, multiple identities: Investment and agency in second language learning among Chinese adolescent immigrant students. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(3), 577–608.
- McLaren, P. (1986). *Schooling as a ritual performance*. London: Routledge.
- Meek, M. (1988). *How texts teach what readers learn*. Avonset, England: Thimble Press.
- Meek, M. (1992). *On being literate*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Miller, J. (2003). *Audible difference: ESL and social identity in schools*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of social multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60–92.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow, England: Pearson Education.
- Norton, B. (2001). When is a teen magazine not a teen magazine? *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 45(4), 296–9.
- Norton, B. (in press). The fantastic motivating power of comic books: Insights from Archie comic readers. *Reading Teacher*.
- Norton Peirce, B., & Stein, P. (1995). Why the “Monkeys Passage” bombed: Tests, genres, and teaching. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65(1), 50–65.
- Robbins, T. (1999). *From girls to grrrlz: A history of women’s comics from teens to zines*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Stein, P. (2000). Rethinking resources: Multimodal pedagogies in the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(2), 333–6.
- Toohey, K. (1998). “Breaking them up, taking them away”: Constructing ESL students in Grade 1. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(1), 61–84.
- Toohey, K. (2000). *Learning English at school: Identity, social relations, and classroom practice*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Toohey, K., & Day, E. (1999). Language-learning: The importance of access to community. *TESL Canada Journal*, 17(1), 40–53.

Comic book culture and second language learners 221

- Tosi, A., & Leung, C. (1999). *Rethinking language education: From a monolingual to a multilingual perspective*. London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching.
- Wertham, F. (1955). *Seduction of the innocent*. New York: Rinehart.
- Wright, A. (1976). *Visual materials for the language teacher*. London: Longman.

Foreign language comics are the superheroes of language learning. Here's how to find comics in your target language and let fluency take flight! Comics are excellent resources for language learners for a number of reasons, but one of the biggest is their appearance. Let's face it, the graphic art is colorful, fun and visually engaging. Anything that catches our attention and holds it while teaching us something is a useful tool. How to Add Comic Books to Your Language Learning. First, and maybe most importantly, choose comics that appeal to you. The variety is almost endless; it's really not difficult to find a character or storyline that will get you hooked. Comic book culture and second language learners. In B. Norton & K. Toohey (Eds.), *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 201-221). New York: Cambridge University Press. Learner autonomy as agency in sociocultural settings. In D. Palfreyman & R. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives* (pp. 58-72). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. Lee, E., & Norton, B. (2003). Comic book culture and second language learners Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden; 12. Putting Classroom interaction in its Place: understanding gender and foreign language learning Jane Sunderland; 13. Living with inelegance in qualitative research on task-based learning Constant Leung, Roxy Harris and Ben Rampton; Part V. Educating Teachers for Change: 14. Introducing a critical pedagogical curriculum to a MATESL course: a reflexive account from feminist perspectives Angel M. Y. Lin; 15. Negotiating expertise in an action research community Kelleen Toohey and Bonnie Waterstone; Performed E