Colloquium

Can the use of web-based comic strip creation tool facilitate EFL learners' grammar and sentence writing?

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Introduction

Both teacher- and learner-made computer visuals are quite extensively reported in Computer-Assisted Language Learning literature, for instance, filming interviews (Gromik, 2006; Hanson-Smith & Marzio, 2006), soap operas (Alm, 2006, 2008) or mini-documentaries (Brooke, 2003), creating storyboard projects (Hazzard, 2006), authoring podcasts and vodcasts (Stanley, 2006), designing digital stories (Alexander & Levine, 2008; Banaszewski, 2002; Skinner & Hagood, 2008; Tendero, 2006). Such student-made digital assets are used to present to their classroom peers for discussion and feedback. Teachers also might take advantage of the digital format of learner-made assets to build their classroom libraries with highly interesting, appropriately leveled texts for students to read during independent reading in the readers’ workshop. Finally, children and adolescents could share their digital materials online and participate in broader digital, global communities that might include children and adolescents with similar backgrounds and experiences.

However, the use of comic strip creation tools has not been that widely researched. One of the very few studies is that of Engler, Christopher and Payne (2008), who had students design a two-page comic based on their section of the text, using different digital assets such as ready-made photos and images as well as their own artwork. The language aims of the project involved the practice of summarizing, paraphrasing, restating and quoting, to be used in the comic. The output was produced with the Comic Life software after a 20-minute in-class tutorial. Once completed, the final comic pages were saved as JPEGs, emailed to the instructor and compiled on the course Moodle website so that all the students could view each other’s work. In addition, the instructor opened a forum so they could comment on their peers’ comics.

Almost all of the publications focusing on the use of comic strips found that participants showed positive attitudes and enjoyed the activities. Jacobs (2007) stressed the importance of comic strips as they highly support literacy and recommended that educators “see the potential that exists when we, as teachers and scholar, engage with comics in meaningful way” (p. 185). So far the studies have just dealt with the use of comic strips from daily newspapers or other books (Bowen, n.d.; Derrick, 2008; McVicker, 2007; Richie, 1979). However, the current study aimed to provide the participants with an opportunity to create and share their own comic strips using the online comic strip creation site, MakeBeliefsComix, in classroom activities related to grammar. This study aims to explore and examine the extent to which the participants enjoyed creating comic strips using a self-report questionnaire. The following research questions were used to gain understanding of the participants’ perceptions related to creating comic strips:

- Would the participants enjoy creating comic strips?
- Would the comic creation facilitate the participants’ grammar and sentence writing?
Methods
Participants
Data were collected from 25 Turkish English as a Foreign Language students who were enrolled in a pre-intermediate General English class at a private language institution in Turkey. They were selected using purposive sampling and aged between 14 and 18. Age and sex were not taken into consideration.

Procedures
After a general introduction to the online comic strip creation site (http://www.makebeliefscomix.com) and orientation to the site, learners were given tasks to create their comic strips. Each week, after the teacher introduced a grammar form/function, the participants were asked to create a comic strip using the website. Each participant created at least five comic strips related to the grammar topics discussed for 5 weeks (Figures 1 & 2). After the participants completed each comic strip, they emailed the strip to their teacher. The teacher then published them on a wiki (PBworks), where the other participants read and wrote their comments. The researcher analyzed the output produced by the participants qualitatively to investigate their use of grammar and the quality of the sentences.

Figure 1: A student’s strip on passive voice

Figure 2: A student’s strip on the difference between say and tell

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Instruments
Upon the participants’ completing the comic strips, they were given a questionnaire including four questions related to the use of comic strip creation. Descriptive data were used to draw conclusions about their perceptions. Participants’ opinions on the usefulness of the computer-produced comic strips were collected using a self-report questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed to the students after they created comic strips related to the grammar topics discussed during 5 weeks.

Results and discussion
The responses that the participants provided to the questions were analyzed descriptively. The first question on the participants’ enjoyment of the comic strip creation gained almost full agreement from the participants with a percentage of 96%. Out of the 25 students, 24 students stated that they enjoyed creating comic strips, and only 1 participant stated that he or she did not like it. When answering the second question concerning the willingness to create comic strips for reading and writing activities, 24 participants (96%) indicated their agreement while 1 student (4%) indicated his or her uncertainty. With regard to reading other participants’ comic strips, 23 participants (92%) agreed and 2 (8%) disagreed.

The following responses have been provided by some participants commenting on the use of comic scripts. They provided their responses in L1 (Turkish). However, while translating, every effort has been made to provide what they aimed to say.

I really enjoyed expressing my opinion using comic strips. It was fun and instead of wasting time playing computer games, I used my computer to write dialogues.

I hate grammar, but I liked to create comic strips although it was about “grammar.”

Creating my own comic scripts helped me improve my writing as well as reviewing my grammar knowledge.

I enjoyed creating my own comic strips. It was really fun. I also enjoyed my friends’ dialogues with the funny characters.

While I was creating my comics, my father was very interested in it. He helped me and provided some interesting dialogues. We really had fun.

I used it in other activities, not just grammar. I made the funny characters talk about the moral lessons of the stories that I had.

I liked creating comic strips as I have found them more useful than writing a postcard or what I did last weekend.

Considering the comments, it is interesting to note that some participants benefited from comic strips not only in grammar activities but also in other ones such as reading. It is also noteworthy to notice that one of the participants shared her or his activities with her or his parents. Allowing students to also have control over the content of the material, its beginning as well as the final product, gives them the opportunity to have more authority over their own learning (Iwasaki, 2008). The process of creating computer-based materials gives students the opportunity for global language, while tapping into metacognitive strategies and increasing ownership and authorship of language learning materials. This kind of computer-based materials, according to Apple and Kikuchi (2007), can be claimed to bring the following benefits:

• They are student-centered.
• They are motivating, enjoyable, and they increase self-reliance and autonomy.
• They provide students with real-world tasks that have value outside the language classroom.

The sentences created by the students in the comics were qualitatively analyzed. Considering the sentences used in the comics, the participants produced longer utterances than they normally did, while the content of their sentences exhibited much greater variety than in the case of traditional writing. Sample sentences indicate attempts at increasing structural complexity by the use of more sophisticated expressions (reflexive pronouns, conditional sentences,
defining relative clauses and gerund/infinitive constructions) that have not yet been fully internalized by students.

Overall, considering the data analysis, the participants showed positive attitudes toward comic strip creation, and all agreed that comic strip creation should also be integrated into other activities related to reading and writing. Moreover, they enjoyed creating comic strips, reading and writing comments on other participants’ comic strips. These results are similar to the findings of Engler et al (2008), who observed a group of English as a Second Language students’ using Comic Life software. Even though this was not web-based, Engler et al’s participants used comic strips to summarize academic readings and found them valuable. The present study, being largely preliminary and pilot in its nature, will need to be replicated on a larger scale, with experimental setup and control of variables, in order to gain greater validity of data. Especially, a greater corpus of comic strip data will need to be compiled and compared with samples of student traditional writing, in order to assess lexical threshold of computer-based output and lexical variety using type/token estimate. Possible applications of electronic comic strip creation in a language classroom may be multifold, covering all possible stages of grammar and vocabulary teaching: presentation, practice, production and testing. Depending on the pedagogical purposes, activities may be executed with the whole class with output displayed with an LCD projector or an interactive whiteboard, in pair and group work modes. Finally, the focus of comic strip creation tasks may vary from purely form-focused grammar practice activities to meaning-oriented communicative exchanges with students applying newly learned grammatical structures and lexical items in more meaningful contexts.

Conclusion
The integration of comic strip creation software into in-class grammar activities received strongly positive feedback from the participants. In the course of the pilot study, it has been observed that comic strip creation has increased learners’ motivation while dealing with the task and grammar items. However, it is due to note that the present study can be considered as a preliminary study on web-based comic strips, and it lacks in-depth analysis as it only considers one aspect of language learning, namely grammar. Although the findings of this study are promising, it is not possible to emphasize the significance of a relatively small-scale study. Therefore, further research is strongly recommended to study the impact of the use of learner-generated comic strips, compare the effectiveness of learner-generated comic strips and premade comic strips in grammar as well as other activities such as reading and writing.

References

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