

# Multimodality in Malaysian Schools: The Case for the Graphic Novel

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims at exploring the benefits of including graphic novels as a wholesome supplement in Malaysian schools. Research has indicated that the mono-modality of traditional linear texts may impede comprehension. The emphasis on multi-literacies clearly scaffold the need to employ multimodality in the classrooms; hence the suggestion of introducing graphic novels. Once placed at the bottom of the literary heap and viewed as a light reading material, this medium has been enjoying much popularity especially in the West. Graphic novels are able to stimulate reluctant readers' interests besides being a challenge to students familiar with traditional literature. As part of an on-going research which investigates how verbal and textual elements are represented in graphic novels, this paper discusses the advantages of including graphic novels especially in Malaysian schools. With the advent of multimodality through various platforms, graphic novels are interesting as an alternative mainstream multimodal medium. As an innovative and creative pedagogic supplement, graphic novels offer a multitude of learning and teaching experiences

**Keywords:** *Graphic novels; Comics; Visual literacy; Multimodality; Multi-literacies*

## INTRODUCTION

The constant evolvement of literacy is truly challenging and there is an urgent need to embrace changes that comes with this development. As progressive educators, the challenge is to face this reality and the need to implement pedagogical practices that support these dynamic changes. One important way of embracing this challenge is the use of multimodal texts.

Multimodality as an inter-disciplinary approach shifts from the idea that a medium communicates in a certain way, to the idea that any one medium may engage a number of different modes of meaning. Baldry and Thibault (2006) describe multimodality as the diverse ways different semiotic resources interact to construe meanings through co-deployment and co-contextualization. Kress (2003) argued that the old media (in this case, books) needs to be reshaped to face the onslaught of new media. Thus, the importance of providing a new landscape of communication is crucial. It must be noted that multimodal texts can be based on paper, digital or even live events or performances. The advent of technology has exposed students to a whole new world of learning experience, and as educators, new methodologies must be adopted to meet the challenges of facing students of diverse backgrounds. In a visually oriented culture today, students are exposed to various types of texts on a multimodal platform. These texts include videos, advertisements, blogs, short messaging system (SMS), Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Skype. Lyga and Lyga (2004) label this type of students as 'Generation Visual' and further reiterate that, "static text on an immobile page isn't just boring and laborious; it's practically alien" (p. 8) especially to this generation. In addition, Heckman (2004) believed that traditional reading programs need to be complemented with more engaging mediums to motivate readers as "the digitalization of the young adult mind is happening at a faster pace than traditional

ways of education can keep up with” (p. 3).

Recent years have seen literacy educators realizing the importance of providing students with multimodal texts which extrapolate a range of semiotic resources in developing critical thinking (Serafini, 2010). Duncum (2004) posited that exposure to “multimodal nature of dominant and emerging cultural sites” (p. 259) cannot be avoided. In relation to this, it is pertinent to employ methodologies that encourage students to become critical, creative and innovative learners as these practices are related to students’ diversified social engagements. The combination of two or more semiotic systems in a text produces a multimodal text. Examples of multimodal texts include web pages, picture books, brochures and the focus of this paper; the graphic novel. A graphic novel is often described as a book length comic. Similar to comics and cartoons, it is a narrative novel which encapsulates both text and image in a comic strip form. Being multimodal in nature through the modes of text and images, the utilization of these novels in the classroom elicits multiple benefits. The availability of multimodal texts, for example, gives educators a chance to condition students to become such learners. And here lies the responsibility of educators to offer a selection of suitable graphic novels to support the development of various multi-literacies.

It cannot be denied that graphic novels represent one of the most dynamic and fast growing types of literature for students, with books catering for children and young adults today. A growing number of researches clearly support the pedagogical potential of graphic novels (Connors, 2010; Evans-Boniecki, 2013; Hammond & Danaher, 2012). Krashen (2004) in his insightful book titled *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research* noted that people who are well read rarely have major problems in writing, spelling or grammar. In relation to Krashen’s argument, graphic novels definitely provide that interest and stimulus to entice students. Weiner (2010) believes that it is an understatement to say that graphic novels, sequential art, paperback comics novels and others of this medium have become “a major part of popular culture in the first part of the 21st century” (p. 5). Graphic novels complement learning through their rich illustrations and texts. The value of illustrations is clearly reflected in the colloquial notion that “a picture is worth a thousand words”. Nevertheless through interactions with teachers and librarians, it is noted that many seem reluctant to adopt these books as they consider the content of graphic novels unsuitable. The deconstructing of such mind-sets, and convince people on the benefits of embracing these novels, is a challenge;

Though many Malaysian educators have successfully utilized multimodal texts like magazines, newspapers, picture books, video, films and other mediums in their classrooms, graphic novels seem to elude many as they are considered as purely *fluff*. Also many who practice multimodality in their classrooms in Malaysia seem to be preoccupied with digital texts such as blogs, web pages and social media. Though this development is encouraging and highly commendable, it must be noted that alternatives focusing on multimodality on the more traditional paper based mediums like comics, graphic novels and manga are also available. Studies within the Malaysian context on the pedagogic implications of graphic novels and comics are very much in infancy. Existing studies on graphic novels by Sabbah, Masood and Iranmanesh, (2013); Yunus, Salehi et al. (2011) and Muniran and Yusof (2008) concentrate on the effects and advantages of using graphic novels in the Malaysian classrooms.

### **Graphic Novels and the Literature Component**

The introduction of the policy of Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the Command of English (MBMBI) in 2010 is seen as a move to fortify the grasp of the EL by the Ministry of Education of Malaysia (MOE). As a fresh approach to teaching literature in Malaysian schools, classics like *Black Beauty*, *The Boscombe Valley Mystery* and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* in graphic novel mediums were introduced for the first time. The second cycle which was introduced in early 2015 saw the introduction of *The Swiss Family Robinson*, *20000 Leagues under the Sea* and *King Arthur*. The decision by the MOE to introduce graphic novels to Malaysian students should be seen as a green light to further strengthen the case for graphic novels to be used exhaustively in the classrooms.

*What Are Graphic Novels?*

The definition of comics and graphic novels are important to determine the differences between these two mediums. Abbot (1986) describes comics as “a medium that combines written and visual art to an extent unparalleled in any other art form” (p. 155). Graphic novels, on the other hand, come in a comic strip form. Cary (2004) simply refers the graphic novel as the longer cousin of the comic book. In simpler terms, graphic novels are simply stories that are told in sequential illustrations. Scott McCloud (1993) in his seminal work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* defines comic as a “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (p. 9). Hammond (2009) postulates that “while all graphic novels are comic books, not all comic books are graphic novels” (p. 3). It is noted that Will Eisner coined the term “graphic novel” while promoting his book, *A Contract with God* (1978). Sabin (1993) asserts that, “on one level, as a piece of marketing hype, the idea of an evolution from ‘comics’ to ‘graphic novels’ had a specific purpose -- to add prestige to the form and thus to sell more product” (p. 235). On the hand, Yang (2008) believes that graphic novel is just a political term in an effort to depict this medium of comics in a “new, more literary light, apart from the genres usually associated with it” (p. 186). Nevertheless, whichever definition this sophisticated medium holds, what is certain is that its elevated status these days cannot be ignored.

In order to relate a story, a series of pictures are meant to follow one another, thus embracing the convention of comics which is adhered by graphic novels. Panels, images, sequential art and a combination of text which conveys a story are evident in graphic novels. In short, these are the prerequisites of the conventional forms of graphic novels. Table 1 denotes a few primary differences between graphic novels and comics.

**Table 1 Differences between Graphic Novels and Comics**

<b>Graphic Novels</b>	<b>Comics</b>
Relatively thicker than comics Hard bound cover	Usually thin, with a soft paper cover Staple-bound or saddle-stitched
Tend to cover one story wholly An entire story bound and published in a single release	Sequels and serials are common A short instalment of a larger story released at regular intervals
Has a beginning, middle and end	Conversely might start a story, begin in the middle of things, or end a story Considered ephemeral
Its shelf life is permanent because there are reprints Given an International Standard Book Number (ISBN)	Given International Standard Serial Number (ISSN)

*Note.* Adapted from Weiner (2002)

Although many will associate graphic novels with fiction, the main concentration of graphic novels has tremendously evolved. Besides fiction, non-fiction subjects such as history, biography, social studies and science are slowly reinventing themselves as graphic novels, thus contributing to its sophistication and dynamism. With such a varied and wide selection available, this medium needs the acknowledgement and recognition it truly deserves.

*Multimodality In Graphic Novels*

Multimodality emphasizes the significance of the different modes of semiotics and the language in account of construing meaning within a particular social context. Representations produced and seen around like image, music and gesture are stressed upon, thus placing new emphasis on multi-semiotic complexity. Graphic novels are multimodal in nature as they embrace the many varied modes like images, words and colours.

Morgan and Ramanathan (2005) point out that the multimodal materials are able to “engage identities and the imagination in provocative ways unmet through other textual sources” (p. 158), arguing further that fundamentally, these texts are able to rejuvenate critical literacies and multi-literacies. In today’s highly visual world, children are exposed to a multimodal environment both in print and on screen. More importantly, texts interweaved with words, pictures and sounds are readily available all around them. As such, graphic novels offer the opportunity to promote a multitude of literacies which include progressive, critical and visual literacies. Bearne and Wolstencroft (2007) argue that as children are surrounded with multimodal texts, the teaching of multimodality is pertinent to become effective communicators in the twenty-first century. Emery (2011) posits that students who read graphic novels are able to elicit higher level critical responses as compared to those who read only text based novels. She further reiterates that evidence of higher level thinking is also evident in the written responses and oral discussions from students who read graphic novels. Within the Malaysian context, Pillai and Vengadasamy (2010) note that the mono-modality of traditional texts in presenting information in the literature classroom often raises problems for students in understanding texts and developing a love for reading literature texts. A large volume of published studies posit the role of multimodality in enhancing literacy.

The graphic novel is one example of an emerging multimodal medium as it embodies print and image working together in constructing meanings. Though there are criticisms that this medium is simplistic, a substantial body of research argue for the literary and pedagogic value of graphics (Gillenwater; 2012; Serafini, 2010). Similar to traditional forms of literature, graphic novels can be useful tools in assisting students critically evaluate and examine fields like history, literature, science, social studies and art.

### The Benefits of Graphic Novels

The educational values of graphic novels are well documented as they offer variety as a new medium of literacy. The popularity of graphic novels and comics among students supports this medium to be used as pedagogical materials as they generate interest. An emphasis on content over form suggests that authentic materials as a whole are meaningful and more likely to engage students. It must also be noted that graphic novels display spoken language realistically; thus slang, hesitations and gaps are common and these features make them relevant to second language learners (Derrick, 2008). As graphic novels also employ literary elements such as satire, parody and irony, students have a chance to comprehend both visual and verbal elements in construing meaning. The interplay of text and images encourages critical literary analysis within the realms of metaphor and imagery. In addition, the old tradition of linearity is now combined with the newer literacy of amalgamating the various modes that encompass multimodality. Nevertheless, it is pertinent for the students to be introduced with the various conventions of comics such as balloons, captions, panels, gutters, bleeds and others before reading. This would encourage the exhaustion of the novels more extensively rather than just reading them without taking these elements into consideration. The benefits of incorporating graphic novels extensively especially in the Malaysian schools are discussed hereafter.

#### *Graphic Novels Promote Multiple Intelligences*

In schooling Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences (MI), graphic novels are able to support students with varied strengths. MI is a theoretical framework that describes people’s different intelligence factors. According to Laycock (2004), their rich textual components are an advantage for students with *linguistic intelligence*. The images in these books evoke vibrancy, thus assisting those with *spatial intelligence*. Those who are strong in *interpersonal intelligence* will be able to relate to the many non-verbal gestures which are prominent in graphic novels. These novels are also beneficial for those with *intrapersonal intelligence* in deciphering the many embedded themes, ideologies and issues.

As graphic novels are often quicker and shorter to read as compared to traditional texts, students can also participate in engaging discussions that encourage critical thinking. In an increasingly visual culture built on a multimodal platform, educators could maximize the full potential of graphic novels in drawing out deeper responses from the many different types of students.

### *Graphic Novels Support Visual Literacy*

Visual literacy buttresses the notion of the ability to recognize and understand ideas and concepts through images. Using graphic novels in the classroom encourages students to decode the meanings of images and symbols. Versaci (2007) posits that the visual design of these novels encourages “teachers to pose questions that help students do two things: understand how images produce meaning and become engaged in the search for this meaning” (p. 96). Gillenwater (2012) observes that while traditional literacy skills are pertinent in comprehending and construing images, visual literacy is able to boost this further. He further asserts that “developing skills in visual literacy considerably augments a person's ability to interpret his or her world by providing additional modes of making meaning” (p. 33).

### *Graphic Novels Support Different Learning Styles*

Learning Styles (LS) relate to how people prefer to concentrate, store and remember information. The Felder-Silverman (1988) model for one, classifies students' learning preferences into four learning style groups: sensing or intuitive, visual or verbal, active or reflective; or, sequential or global. Felder and Silverman also assert that teaching styles vary based on the educators' preferences. In relation to this model, the utilization of graphic novels supports the different types of learning styles.

For example, the visual or verbal learners will be able to enjoy the interplay of words and images in graphic novels. Active learners preferring group activities would be able to dissect these novels together while reflective learners can think through these texts independently. For sequential learners, graphic novels would be appealing as they scaffold sequential art and global learners would be able to comprehend the wholesome narrative of graphic novels. In short, the very layout and structure of graphic novels support various learning styles through proper instructional strategies.

### *Graphic Novels Scaffold Theories of Cognition*

The many popular theories of cognition support the deployment of graphic novels in the classroom. Among the few that will be discussed are those advocated by Alan Paivio, Frederic Bartlett, David Everett Rumelhart and Louise Rosenblatt.

- *Dual coding theory (Allan Paivio)*

A theory of cognition established by Allan Paivio, the dual coding theory (DCT) embraces the idea that the formation of mental images assists the learning process. The dual channel assumption of Paivio's theory establishes a verbal channel for processing verbal representations and the visual channel for processing visual and pictorial representations. As such, both visual and verbal elements represent information, working on the principle that recognition is enhanced by presenting information in both verbal and visual forms. Paivio (1986) asserts that “human cognition is unique in that it has become specialized for dealing simultaneously with language and with nonverbal objects and events” (p. 53). Using graphic novels clearly supports the notion of Paivio's DCT as the text embraces interplay between words and images.

- *Schema theory (Frederic Bartlett and David Everett Rumelhart)*

The schema theory (ST) posited by Bartlett (1932) and later developed by contemporary schema-theorist Rumelhart (1980) explains that understanding something only happens when a person can relate it to an existing knowledge structure. In understanding narratives, the theory explains that people rely on their own knowledge and experience to make sense while reading. As schemata facilitate both encoding and retrieval, it is pertinent when a student decodes and makes meanings from a graphic novel. Importantly, reading graphic novels involves the recalling of prior knowledge as meaningful encoding is facilitated. Marcus, Cooper, and Sweller's (1996) study on cognitive load theory concludes that cognitive load is reduced and lightened when schema is available through instructions in the form of diagrams. In the context of

graphic novels, it is clear that the images here will reduce cognitive load. This also enables the making of connections to construe meanings from graphic novels.

- *Transactional theory (Louise Rosenblatt)*

The transactional theory (TT) propounded by Rosenblatt emphasizes the role of the readers in deciphering texts based on prior experiences and to reflect upon them. TT also propagates that readers actively make the meaning they read, thus concentrating on the notion that the role of the reader is pertinent in the understanding of a text. The act of reading acts as a stimulus to enable readers to respond to the text in their own personal way which results a subjective interpretation. It must be noted that for transaction to occur, the reading must be aesthetic rather than efferent. As such, graphic novels offer the opportunity for readers to interact with the text through their visual and verbal components. The richness of visuals interweaved with texts offer opportunities for readers to decipher them accordingly.

#### *Graphic Novels Help Reluctant and Struggling Readers*

As schools are pacing towards the task of increasing literacy among reluctant and struggling readers, reading materials like graphic novels can be used to entice this category of students and stimulate their interest in reading. Though these students might be inhibited with their linguistic literacy skills, the images in these books can assist them to comprehend the novel. This can also be a motivating factor for these students to improve their linguistic abilities in a non-threatening way, hence increasing their confidence. This is clearly supported by Heckman (2004) who asserts:

Graphic novels have a gift for attracting reluctant readers. They are powerful motivational instruments that can capture and hold a reader's interest. Their eye-catching illustrations give contextual connections to the written text, making them perfect for remedial readers (pp. 3-4).

#### *Graphic Novels Promote the Reading of Other Genres*

It is a known fact that many canonical literature works have been given the graphic novel treatment. For one, teachers can introduce the graphic novel versions of these stories before encouraging the students to read the original versions. Derrick (2008) asserts that graphic novels are able to absorb the students thus encouraging them to explore more graphic novels or books, magazines, newspapers, and any other reading materials. Adaptations such as Nancy Butler's *Pride and Prejudice* (2009) originally written by Jane Austen and Peter's Kuper's interpretation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (2003) are able to introduce the simpler form of these classics to intrigue the reader who might find the original versions rather intimidating and difficult.

In addition, non-fictional graphic novels can be used to introduce topics from the syllabus. For example graphic novels like *Clan Apis* (2000) by neurobiologist Jay Hosler which touches on the biology of honey bees and Jim Ottaviani's *Dignifying Science: Stories about Women Scientists* (2003) which tells the stories of Rosalind Franklin and Marie Curie, among others, will be able to give an excellent account of scientific facts before students read other related texts.

A study conducted by Hammond and Danaher (2012) concluded that students enjoy reading comic books through autonomous learning. With programs like 'Drop Everything and Read' (DEAR) implemented in some schools in Malaysia, the diversity of reading materials can be a motivation for students to embrace lifelong reading habits. In addition, graphic novels offer an alternative to traditional texts. On light reading, Krashen (2004) asserts that:

Perhaps the most powerful way of encouraging children to read is by exposing them to light reading, a kind of reading that schools pretend does not exist and a kind of reading that many children, for economic or ideological reasons are deprived of (pp. 47-48).

### *Graphic Novels Allow an Easier Comprehension of Style Elements*

The common emphasis of verbal elements by graphic novel authors encourages readers to be exposed to a variety of elements such as diction, imagery, syntax and structure. Comic conventions such as italics, speech balloons, panels, boldface and special effect words provide opportunities for readers to construe meanings and understand the text better as compared to traditional texts. Furthermore, the interplay of text and image encourages a deeper and better understanding of figurative imagery such as pun, metaphor and paradox. In addition, the conventions of graphic novels can also be used to identify the tone and mood of the characters depicted. These elements are usually liberally peppered in graphic novels to add realism and aestheticism.

### *Graphic Novels Address Significant and Current Issues*

It is important to note that many graphic novels are rich with themes related to social, economic and political issues. Chang (2011) for instance, shows that both English and non-English learners are able to connect to social justice issues in graphic novels by utilizing personal journals, literature circles and online blogging. She further postulates that these students become more socially conscious and critical thinkers embracing the 21st century literacy practices. In addition, common themes such as prejudice, bullying, personal growth, sense of belonging, teamwork and others are also prevalent in graphic novels. With graphic novels such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) and Lesley Fairfield's *Tyranny* (2011), various current and relevant issues can be exposed to students, thus engaging in a lively and significant discussion in addressing "serious" and difficult topics such as oppression, inequality and poverty. Fairfield's *Tyranny* for example touches on anorexia, a common eating disorder among teenagers today.

### **Other Considerations**

In considering the choice of books, it is important to note that selection must be skirted by predetermined criteria, in line with the education philosophy of a country. Though it is true that many graphic novels contain elements of violence and sexual connotations, the final choice lies with the educators. Selection of books is crucial as in choosing books from other genres. Gorman (2003) opines that some of the elements taken into consideration include culture, religion and readers' sensitivities. In addition, the content and age appropriateness of these novels must also be looked into and stringently vetted. Equality of race, gender and social class should be positively portrayed as many graphic novels which deal with controversial and sensational themes.

### **CONCLUSION**

The variety, numbers and availability of graphic novels are increasing and gaining momentum especially in Malaysia these days. With careful planning, the acquisition of vocabulary, grammatical and communicative competences can be increased by using graphic novels in the classroom. With major bookshops (Kinokuniya and Borders, for example) stocking up excellent graphic novels, educators are able to offer a different a kind of text which certainly encourages healthy reading habits. The adaptations of this medium into popular movies such as *The Dark Knight*, *Road to Perdition* and *Ghost World* for example, have boosted the popularity of these books among many.

Researchers have clearly postulated that visual clues assist and increase the amount of comprehensible input and boosts comprehension among all levels of students. Graphic novels are certainly valuable and pleasurable assets as they come with great benefits. The marginalization of graphic novels will be a thing of the past if the Malaysian education fraternity starts focusing on this medium. As a powerful blend of text and image, these books offer a variety of reading experiences imbued with fun and entertainment. With the growing popularity of graphic novels, their incorporation will be highly beneficial for all levels of readers; from the proficient reader to the reluctant reader. Works like Datuk Lat's graphic

novels *The Kampong Boy* (1979) and *Town Boy* (1981) will expose the nuances of multiculturalism to students. As Schwarz (2002) posits, "graphic novels can bring new life beyond bland textbooks" (p.2). Regardless of literary format, graphic novels inspire children and teenagers a love for reading as the interplay of text and visuals are highly stimulating, beneficial and thought provoking.

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