

Using Comic Books as Read-Alouds: Insights on Reading Instruction From an English as a Second Language Classroom

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Using comic books to teach lessons about text helps young English-language learners with reading and writing.

Literacy researchers have recently drawn attention to the connections that can be made between students' knowledge of popular media and the literacy activities commonly valued at school (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b; Marsh & Millard, 2000). From this perspective, popular media texts can be seen as a resource for learning to read and write various types of texts at school. For example, because movies, video games, comic books, and other popular media tell stories in their own ways, these media can serve as a frame of reference and familiar territory for thinking about narrative (Newkirk, 2002). This approach has been extended to the use of a variety of popular media as frameworks for literacy learning, including video games (Ranker, 2006), movies, popular music (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994), and comic books (Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002).

These findings about the potential for students to use popular culture and media as resources for learning reading and writing practices at school apply not only to students learning literacies in their first language; but also to students becoming literate in a second/additional language (Duff, 2002). In this article, I extend these findings by presenting the exciting ways in which an innovative teacher used comic books as read-aloud texts in order to scaffold her first-grade students—all designated by the school district as English-language learners (ELLs)—as they learned

new ways of reading and writing. Ms. Stephens (a pseudonym, as are all names in this article) read aloud from comic books such as Spider-Man, Wild Girl, and Hulk—as well as comic books that she composed herself. The Hulk and Spider-Man comic books were “all ages” versions of the comics, with more accessible text, published by Marvel Comics. Ms. Stephens read these comics as she normally would read from a piece of children's literature, using them to develop recognition of text features like dialogue, narrative structures, and critical reading stances for the students to add to their rapidly growing reading repertoires.

Ms. Stephens's use of comics as read-alouds in her English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom fits with a growing body of research that has specifically explored the possibilities of using comics and graphic novels in learning to read and write at school. These curricular possibilities include students' producing comics about their lives as urban youth (Bitz, 2004), as well as using comics across the curriculum to explore various subject matter (Schwarz, 2002). The use of comics during free reading and activities involving students in producing comics have also been explored with second/additional-language learners in particular (Cary, 2004; Liu, 2004). As was evident in Ms. Stephens's classroom, comics are of high interest to many students, thus increasing motivation to engage in literacy (Norton, 2003). Because of their capacity to increase interest and motivation, comic books are also an effective way of increasing reading comprehension and teaching comprehension strategies (Morrison et al., 2002).

In the next section, I will briefly describe the background of my study in Ms. Stephens's first-grade classroom. Then, in the following sections, I will present

three of Ms. Stephens's read-alouds and lessons that used comics. I'll describe each in turn, focusing on how she used the comics to teach about reading, as well as often linking these lessons to the students' own independent reading and writing practices. It is my hope that teachers who want to use comics as read-alouds with their students—both first- and second/additional-language learners—can benefit from the insights of Ms. Stephens's teaching as a framework for trying out new forms of teaching reading in their own classrooms.

Background of the Study

I first became acquainted with Ms. Stephens as a student in my second/additional-language literacy class. Stemming from her work in my class, I developed a case study of her classroom, gathering several types of data using qualitative research principles and procedures (Merriam, 1998). I was particularly interested in how Ms. Stephens implemented a reading/writing workshop (Taberski, 2000) with second/additional-language learners. Ms. Stephens's use of comics in teaching reading was one aspect of the study that addressed this interest. From November to June of an academic year, I visited Ms. Stephens's class one or two days each week during the morning literacy workshop (which lasted approximately 2½ hours).

The students in Ms. Stephens's class were bilingual, speaking Spanish as their first language (except for one student, who came to the classroom from Somalia late in the school year). Most of the students' families had originated in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, or Guatemala. The students primarily spoke English in this ESL classroom, although Ms. Stevens did value the students' first languages and allowed them to use Spanish as well. Ms. Stephens delivered her instruction primarily in English (this was the required use of language by teachers in this school district), except in instances where a particular student did not understand (in which case she first modified her speech in English, then rephrased in Spanish if necessary).

Learning About Story Structure From Spider-Man

In the lesson that I feature in this section, Ms. Stephens used a Spider-Man comic in order to teach students to recognize a central problem and resolution in narrative

structure. Ms. Stephens developed this lesson by reading aloud from a Spider-Man issue (*Marvel Age Spider-Man Team-Up*, No. 5, April 2005), talking through the content of the story with the students and helping them to identify the central problem (as well as the concept of a central problem in stories in general).

Before beginning the read-aloud, Ms. Stephens first talked a bit about the concept of a problem and a solution, and asked the students if they had ever seen a movie with a problem and solution. She did this in order to activate the students' background knowledge and establish a reference point for her lesson. Anticipating the read-aloud from the Spider-Man comic book, one student, Steven, mentioned that she had seen a Spider-Man movie recently. Ms. Stephens then discussed the concept of a problem and solution in relation to Steven's recall of the plot of the movie (which several other students had seen as well). Steven identified a problem in the movie as the villain's attempts to defeat Spider-Man. Ms. Stephens then linked this identification with the concept of a solution. Below is an excerpt from this conversation:

Ms. Stephens: Let me see if I understand what you are saying. The problem was that someone was trying to kill Spiderman. And how did that problem get fixed?

Steven: You know Peter Parker...

Ms. Stephens: What happened when Dr. Octopus tried to kill him? Did Spider-Man fight him?

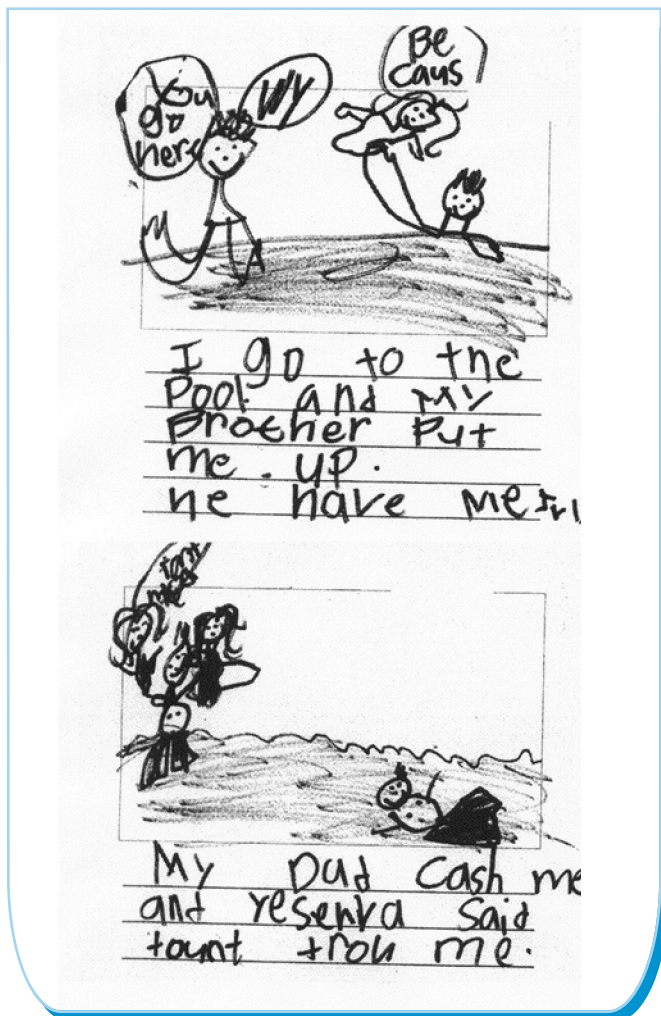
Steven: No. And you know in the part when Dr. Octopus decided he didn't want to come up because he was Peter Parker.

Ms. Stephens: So that's how the problem was solved, because he turned back into Peter Parker?

Steven: Yeah.

After this initial conversation, during which the students shared their own understandings of the concept, Ms. Stephens began the read-aloud. This particular issue of Spider-Man featured another popular character, Storm. Storm is a female superhero and part of a superhero team called the X-Men (a cartoon, movie, and comic book series of popularity). In this issue of Spider-Man, Storm was making a guest appearance (*Marvel Age Spider-Man Team-Up*, No. 5, April 2005). As Ms. Stephens opened the comic to read, it

Figure 1
Sonia's Story That Incorporated a Problem and Solution



was evident (through sighs and cheers) that the figure of Storm immediately caught students' attention.

The selection that Ms. Stephens read aloud features Storm flying over New York City, reflecting upon her life with the X-Men, when she sees a helicopter that is having mechanical trouble and is headed for a crash. Storm saves the day (in usual superhero style) by calling the wind—a power she has as a mutant—to hold the helicopter in the air while she helps the innocent citizens down to the helipad. At the appropriate point in the text, Ms. Stephens paused to work with the class in identifying the problem.

Ms. Stephens: So do we know what the problem is now? What's the problem? Who can

tell me? Sonia [raising her hand], what's the problem?

Sonia: The helicopter is going to fall down.

Ms. Stephens: So the helicopter is going to fall and crash. That is quite a big problem!

At the end of the reading, Ms. Stephens paused to recall the problem and then help the students identify the solution:

Ms. Stephens: So we figured out the problem. What was the problem? Carlos?

Carlos: That the plane was going down.

Ms. Stephens: OK, so the helicopter was going to fall down and crash. How did that problem get fixed?

Carlos: Storm helped them.

Ms. Stephens: OK, so Storm saved them. How?

Carlos: She told the person to come on down because she already had them.

Ms. Stephens: That's right. She held them up with the wind so that they could go down to the helipad.

As was customary at the end of the lesson, Ms. Stephens invited the students to include the textual feature that she had discussed in their own writing during the composing period that followed. In this case, she invited the students to include an identifiable problem in their story. She ended the lesson in the following way.

In the story there was a problem and a solution. And for me, as a reader, that made it really interesting to read. Because I wanted to find out if the problem was going to get fixed. It kept me wanting to keep going as a reader. I was like "Oh my gosh, is the helicopter going to crash? Are they going to be saved? What's going to happen?" "So, boys and girls, I think that today, in your writing, whether or not you choose to write a superhero story.... Because even in other kinds of books that I read, if there's some kind of problem, I always want to see if it's going to get fixed. So today, maybe you can try to think about putting a problem and a solution in your story. Something that goes wrong, and then it gets fixed.

Sonia was one of the students who took up the idea of including a problem and solution in her own writing, which she shared with the class that day. Excerpts from her writing are featured in Figure 1. The story narrates how she, her family, and a friend went

to the pool. The problem she chose to introduce was that her brother was threatening to throw her in the pool. The problem was resolved by her father catching her. In addition, her friend, Yessenia, helped to solve the problem by telling Sonia's brother to stop throwing Sonia. The writing at the top of Figure 1 means: "I went to the pool and the brother put me up [in order to throw her]." The writing at the bottom of the figure means: "My dad caught me and Yessenia said to not throw me."

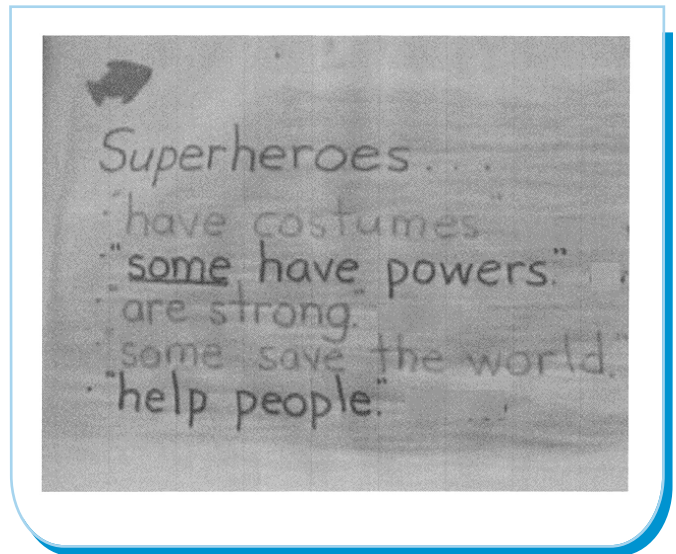
Students also took up elements of this lesson and the genre study on comics more broadly by creating superhero stories of their own. In this way, the read-alouds served as springboards for the students, calling to mind familiar subject matter that they could explore in their own writing. In previous lessons, the class had explored the qualities of superheroes by comparing across texts. They produced the poster represented in Figure 2 as a result. It lists the qualities of superheroes that the class discussed during the lesson. Ms. Stephens referred to it during the lesson featured in this section.

Juan was particularly inspired by the superhero theme and began writing his own Spider-Man book. Figure 3 includes two pages that were produced as part of this book (along with Ms. Stephens's conventional version of his print). Juan's first sentence reads: "I like Spider-Man." The second sentence reads: "I made a snowman and Spider-Man." Juan's work with the superhero theme revealed that Ms. Stephens's reading lessons had multiple possible benefits for the students. In this case, they sanctioned subject matter about which Juan had detailed knowledge and which he could use to work with print during the extended composing periods of the workshop.

Taking a Critical Reading Stance: Lessons from Hulk and Wild Girl

In this section, I will focus on Ms. Stephens's read-alouds that used issues from two comics—Hulk and Wild Girl. Ms. Stephens selected these two comics to incorporate critical media literacy (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000a) into her reading curriculum by drawing attention to the gendered representations of the characters within the comics. Hulk, for example, presents a particular version of masculinity that Ms. Stephens wanted to critically frame for her students,

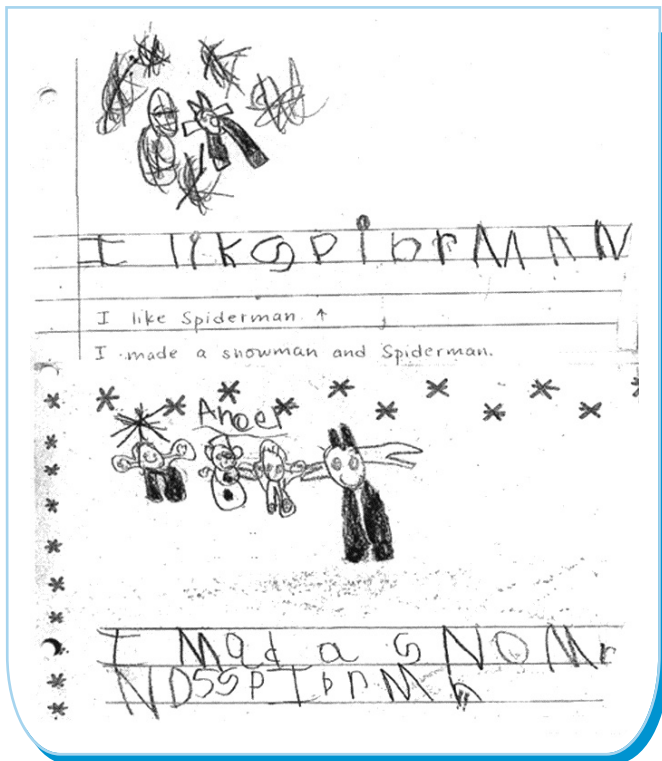
Figure 2
Qualities of Superheroes Derived From the Class's Readings of Comics



consistent with one objective of critical literacy, which is to "critically analyze...texts by acting on knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral" (Luke & Freebody, 1999, para. 20). Similar to Ms. Stephens's approach, Alvermann and Hagood extended the critical literacy approach into the realm of popular media, noting that students "must acquire the analytic tools necessary for critically 'reading' all kinds of media texts—film, video, MTV, the Internet, and so on" (2000a, p. 203).

Ms. Stephens based her idea to develop critical media reading lessons with comics upon a question posed by one of the students. After she had read aloud and discussed a Hulk comic book in which the superhero Catwoman also appeared, Juan asked, "Who is stronger, Catwoman or Hulk?" Ms. Stephens used this as an opportunity to critically frame the students' reading of the comics by exploring stereotypical versions of strength as reflected in the comic book characters' genders. Figure 4 is a reproduction of the chart that Ms. Stephens and the students produced as they discussed this question, indicating who they thought was stronger and their reasons for thinking so. Each checkmark on the chart represents a student who indicated that he or she thought that their chosen character was stronger. All three students who indicated that Catwoman was stronger were girls, and the rest of the

Figure 3
Juan's Writing About Spiderman as Inspired by Ms. Stephens's Read-Alouds of Comic Books



class (both girls and boys) indicated that they thought Hulk was stronger.

Because the meaning of strength fell out across stereotypical gender lines during these discussions, Ms. Stephens continued to critically frame the students' representations of strength on a subsequent day. Ms. Stephens found it difficult to obtain a comic book with a female hero who exhibited unconventional versions of strength. However, she did find a comic called *Wild Girl* that included a strong, female, central character who met these criteria. She used *Wild Girl* in conjunction with another Hulk comic during the lesson that I feature in this section.

In this lesson, Ms. Stephens first read a Hulk issue entitled "The Abomination!" (*Marvel Age Hulk*, No. 4, February 2005). She framed the reading by asking: "What did Hulk do or say to make you think he was strong?" This Hulk issue featured the Incredible Hulk's confrontation with the villain, the Abomination, who is terrorizing a small town in Texas while living in a nearby cave. Dr. Bruce Banner (Hulk's human form) had previously worked with the Abomination's hu-

man form on a scientific experiment, which led to the gamma rays that transformed them both into their monster forms.

After reading Hulk, Ms. Stephens read from *Wild Girl* (March 2005). In this comic, a young girl is transformed into a superhero through her dreams. *Wild Girl* must pass a test (climbing to the top of a tower to retrieve a golden ring) to gain the respect of all of the animals in the mythical world in which she lives. She is hailed as the queen of the animals after passing the test. Ms. Stephens framed her reading of *Wild Girl* by saying: "I want you to think about the same thing we discussed for Hulk—how do you know that *Wild Girl* is strong?" She then worked on a chart with the students (represented in Figure 5) that compared the characters' strengths by listing the students' reasons for thinking that each character was strong. As they worked on the chart and discussed the qualities of strength that were evident in the comics for each character, the following conversation ensued:

Ms. Stephens: So who do you think is stronger? Do you think *Wild Girl* is stronger? Or do you think that Hulk is stronger? Julio?

Julio: Hulk.

Ms. Stephens: So why do you think that Hulk is stronger?

Julio: Because he has muscles.

Ms. Stephens: So it doesn't matter how he uses his strength, it's just that he has really big muscles and that makes him strong? What do you think, Steve?

Steve: Because he has muscles and he can jump very high.

Ms. Stephens: OK, so two people who think that Hulk is stronger. Does anybody think that *Wild Girl* is stronger? Valeria?

Valeria: *Wild Girl* is stronger because she will take care of her animals.

By reframing Hulk's strength in the context of *Wild Girl*, Ms. Stephens made new reading positions available to the students that many would likely have not considered otherwise. In particular, Valeria identified a version of strength (taking care of her animals) that challenged the stereotypical versions of strength (having muscles, jumping high) that Julio and Steve offered. In addition, another student indicated *Wild*

Figure 5
Chart Featuring the Class's Comparisons of Hulk and Wild Girl

How were the characters strong?	
Hulk	Wild Girl
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Big muscles■ He jumps high■ He can hit things and breaks them■ He punches hard■ Hits the Abomination really hard	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ She climbs to the top (she had to climb really high)■ She jumped and got the ring (she almost fell)■ She climbed the tower even though she was scared (brave)

literacy was thus a starting point rather than an end in itself. As was true in Ms. Stephens's classroom, teaching critical literacy requires multiple curricular engagements (Vasquez, 2004), because challenging young students' stereotypical versions of gender takes time. In addition, how students' own gender identities interact with critical approaches is complex and may result in student resistance to such instruction (Boldt, 1996).

Reading Textual Features of Dialogue Using a Teacher-Created Comic

In this section, I'll focus on one more lesson that shows how Ms. Stephens used comic books in her read-alouds and reading lessons. In the lesson, she used a comic to show the textual difference between narration and dialogue. In this lesson, Ms. Stephens composed her own comic featuring herself at her birthday party (her birthday was the next day). Her comic featured all of her friends arriving and greeting each other. She presented the comic on a large piece of poster board, which had been divided in half. On each side of the dividing line, Ms. Stephens wrote the same story. On the left hand side, she used "speech bubbles"—or dialogue balloons, a common way of representing speech in comics—to represent the dialogue. On the right hand side of the dividing line, she wrote the same story using quotation marks to designate character dialogue. The comic that she created for this lesson is represented in Figure 6.

As she introduced the story to the students, she explained the differences between representing dialogue using quotation marks and speech bubbles. Following is her description of these differences during this lesson:

It's the same story; I just used different ways to show that people are talking. What people do is they put what is happening down beneath the picture, which is what I did. And they put the words that people are saying in the speech bubbles.

During the lesson, Ms. Stephens drew attention to and defined dialogue (as opposed to narration) and discussed examples from her story as well as examples that the students offered. She read the story to the students with the speech bubbles first; then she read the same story using quotation marks. Again, the class discussed the differences between the two ways of representing dialogue. As they discussed these differences, Ms. Stephens introduced language for the students to name and discuss the textual means of representing dialogue, such as in the following example.

In my story I wanted to have people talking. And I thought, "What are some ways that I can show that people are talking?" Sometimes people use speech bubbles.... Have you seen these speech bubbles before? Speech bubbles. Because speech is when people are talking. That's speech. And some people use quotation marks. Quotation marks are those little marks that hug the words [gesturing with two fingers on each hand to represent quotation marks]. Remember those from guided reading? Remember that sometimes I say, "Put

your fingers on the quotation marks?” to show that people are saying words?

As seen above, Ms. Stephens related the lesson to the students’ guided reading lessons, during which she had also scaffolded them into recognition of the concept of speech and use of quotation marks to identify the speech. Ms. Stephens then went on to reinforce these connections by asking the students if they had seen speech bubbles before, as evident in the following conversation.

Ms. Stephens: Where have you seen speech bubbles before?

Carmen: In my school in Puerto Rico the books had them.

Ms. Stephens: Oh, your books at school in Puerto Rico had them? That’s interesting. Where else have people seen speech bubbles?

Julio: In a video game.

Ms. Stephens: Okay, in a game.... Anywhere else?

Gloria: You know those things?

Ms. Stephens: Speech bubbles right?

Gloria: Yeah...you know why I know? I looked at my brother’s comic books and they all have those things. And my brother said that all of them have it.

Ms. Stephens: Yeah, a lot of comic books do have speech bubbles. I’ve noticed that, too.

Ms. Stephens scaffolded the students’ learning of these reading practices during her read-aloud, while inviting the students to incorporate dialogue balloons into their own writing during the composing period that morning to increase their understandings of dialogue. Figure 7 is a reproduction of Emilio’s incorporation of the reading lesson and his own writing. It reads: “And we were playing run and freeze.” The author, a character in his story, used dialogue balloons to say, “Oh, no!” as he almost gets caught.

A Discussion of Teaching Issues Related to Using Comic Books in Literacy Instruction

Before concluding, I would like to acknowledge a concern that some readers may have—that sanction-

Figure 6
Ms. Stephens’s Comic That Compared Two Ways of Reading Dialogue

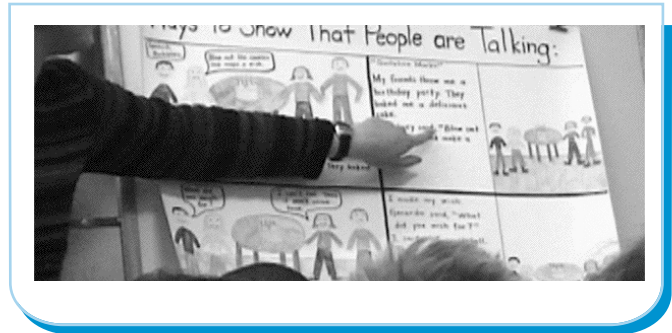
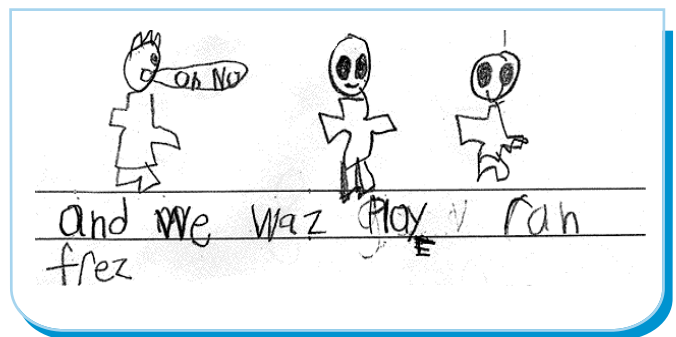


Figure 7
Excerpt From Emilio’s Writing Featuring His Own Use of Dialogue Balloons



ing the use of comics in the classroom represents a tacit sanctioning of the fictional violence that they often portray. Although Hulk and Spider-Man offered engaging reading material to the students, they also featured fictional battles between the characters (unlike Wild Girl). This is a question worthy of pursuit as teachers make curricular decisions about the use of comics in their classrooms. Buckingham (1996) has taken up this very point, noting children’s often underestimated ability to separate fictional violence portrayed in popular media from real violence. Therefore, his findings indicate that there need not be a direct connection between reading texts with fictional violence and a sanctioning of real world violence, especially when critical reading skills are used to mediate the relationship between the two.

A teacher who wished to use comics in read-alouds because of their motivating power and visual

support could simultaneously “critically frame” (New London Group, 2000, p. 35) such fictional violence by discussing it with the students. Such an approach, as discussed by critical literacy and critical media literacy researchers (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Luke & Freebody, 1999) would be a way of providing a critical stance from the teacher’s perspective, as well as a way for teachers to gain knowledge about their students’ understandings of fictional violence in popular media such as comics. This approach would be similar to that taken by Ms. Stephens with regard to gender representations in the comics, but with a critical stance toward fictional violence in addition to gender.

It is important to note that Ms. Stephens’s use of comics worked in conjunction with other aspects of her teaching that deserve highlighting because they increased the effectiveness of her use of comics. Both first- and second/additional-language researchers have found that teachers need to have high expectations for their students, engaging them in a wide variety of texts and diverse literacy practices (Freeman & Freeman, 2000; Mohr, 2004; Taberski, 2000). Through her read-alouds, lessons, and reading demonstrations, Ms. Stephens represented reading from multiple angles. The students were introduced to reading comics specifically, as well as the broader idea of reading media texts from a critical perspective as they learned to read with an eye for gender representations.

At the same time, students were taught to read texts with an understanding of story structure and ability to recognize dialogue representation. They also were taught to read with an eye for how their readings might provide material for and insights on their own reading and writing practices. Through Ms. Stephens’s lessons and their connections with the other aspects of the literacy curriculum, she created a seamless, balanced experience for the students to engage simultaneously in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing modes. As students come of age in a rapidly changing and complex society, they will need multiple and flexible ways of interacting with print (New London Group, 2000). When using comic books as read-alouds, Ms. Stephens didn’t settle for a simplistic and reductionistic reading pedagogy for the second/additional-language learners in her classroom—a danger in teaching ELLs that several authors have noted (Fitzgerald, 1993; Mohr, 2004).

In conclusion, it is important to note that Ms. Stephens’s use of comics highlighted the visual mode

in relation to language and print. Including the visual mode is an important way to support reading comprehension for all types of learners (Piro, 2002). In addition, because comics are highly visual texts, they have been shown to be especially effective for increasing reading comprehension for second/additional-language learners (Liu, 2004). When second/additional-language learners don’t have the relevant target language readily available for comprehension, nonverbal cues to meaning are invaluable (Levie & Lentz, 1982; Tang, 1992) as they allow access to the text’s meaning through the visual mode. At the same time as providing this visual support, comics gave the students in Ms. Stephens’s classroom interesting, motivating reading material that she used to engage them in learning various aspects of reading processes—as well as opportunities to write, think, and discuss texts as they learn new literacy practices.

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