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Comics and Manga to Promote EFL Literacy Strategies with 6th-grade Students

Abstract

One of the main ways to develop literacy skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms is through textbooks, novels, tales, or guidebooks. However, today literature is being neglected in the learning process, where students have been experiencing difficulties, both in developing these skills and in their interest in learning. For this reason, the purpose of this research was to recognize the promotion of comics and manga as a literacy practice of English as a foreign language with 6th-grade students of a school in the city of Medellín through the implementation of a workshop where Students had to receive advice to design their own comics and mangas. Some of the aspects that were discovered were that the visual factor facilitates the understanding of texts, through which educators can create bridges that facilitate meaningful learning experiences. Finally, it was concluded that resources such as manga and comics allow both teachers and students to benefit from literature since different and contemporary perspectives are proposed. However, given the unconventional nature of comics and manga in educational settings, it is advisable to have printed sections easily accessible or displayed.

Keywords

Unconventional resources, comics, manga, EFL literacies, storytelling, workshop

Introduction

During our practicum processes, it was possible to notice how some students were struggling with their linguistic competencies skills, hurting them like a rejection of their own learning process, feelings of stress and frustration towards reading, and the literary resources to work with did not usually meet their educational needs, as a consequence, most of the students were not developing skills necessary to advance in their literacy development. As a result, the current research purpose was to foster students' literacy

skills by implementing unconventional resources such as comics and manga as a strategy, applied in a school from Medellin City, a private institution located in Robledo, with sixth-grade students.

Considering the importance of developing these skills through reading and the ideal students' interest in reading resources, Toro et al. (2019: 59) state that 'learning to read, since this skill requires not only time and the use of appropriate materials, but a didactic that matches the motivation and involvement of foreign language learners.' We planned three interventions to fit these materials and match students' motivation.

The first intervention was an introductory class. Its primary purpose was to introduce the students to comics and manga, explain how to read them, highlight the essential elements to comprehend the reading, and allow them to explore and read the resources independently, concluding the session with an interview where we explore students' first impressions.

Once the students could get in touch with the comics and mangas, the second intervention was destined to be an interactive workshop, where they create their own narratives; using the mind maps strategy learned during the first intervention, they were able to organize the information they wanted to include in their writings, like setting, time, plot, characters, among others.

The students shared their creations with their classmates and us during the third intervention and final activity. At the end of the session, through the focal group discussion, it was possible to evidence some of the students' thoughts regarding the process of creating their narratives. They analyzed the importance of perceiving characters' expressions and feelings to comprehend the story or how the bubble text shapes show dialogue intentions.

One of the primary purposes of this research was to explore how promoting unconventional resources in EFL classrooms allow students to develop their own literacy skills since, nowadays, this type of population is willing to be drawn by the variety of different elements these types of resources contain, such as pictures, character designs, or plot. Besides, it is important to meet their needs in terms of interest in new reading resources and the motivation to read them. In this regard, 'discussing the needs of newer teaching methods that take advantage of the necessity of providing interesting material, which is well known by the learners so that they can easily get in touch with that material' (Katsara, 2015, quoted in Marzuki, Prayogo & Wahyudi, 2016: 16) so that the student feels engaged and/or motivated to learn with the influence of the comic and mangas. Based on this, our research question was: How can comics and manga, as unconventional resources, promote EFL literacy strategies with 6th-grade students?

1. Literature Review

Nowadays, finding strategies where students feel captivated and engaged becomes relevant, mostly in EFL classrooms, where literacy development is commonly focused on grammar books. Authors like Marzuki, Prayogo, and Wahyudi (2016) help to understand how comics and mangas help to explore how to develop literacy skills and go beyond grammar structures. Kunai and Ryan (2007) initially examined the relevance of manga structure, visuals, and narratives and how these factors make students feel engaged and motivated to create connections with reading tasks. Toro et al. (2019) also explain how developing literacy benefits from transforming pedagogical practices. Finally, Malo and Bullard (2000) analyze the different experiences that manga provides to foster a reading culture. This review highlights the potential for renewing teaching practices by integrating comics and manga to enhance literacy outcomes in EFL.

1.1. Theoretical Assumptions

To effectively explore how unconventional resources within educational scenarios help to renew either learning or teaching practices, it is necessary to review how mangas and comics are conceptualized under the scope of Kunai and Ryan (2007), as he emphasizes their visually captivating nature and widespread popularity. Additionally, Marzuki, Prayogo, and Wahyudi (2016) stress the importance of providing interesting and relevant materials to enhance literacy outcomes, encouraging educators to consider learners' needs and interests, and finally, Toro et al. (2019) and Malo and Bullard (2000) underscore the multifaceted nature of literacy, extending beyond basic reading skills to include interpretation and analysis of various texts through storytelling based activities.

1.1.2. Manga and Comics: The 21 Century Resources

When developing EFL literacies, it becomes relevant for educators to consider unconventional resources such as comics and manga to renew the resources available for teaching. Kunai and Ryan (2007: 3) associate this type of resource with a visually captivating nature that significantly contributes to children's engagement, in addition to its widespread popularity 'irrespective of gender, nationality, and age'; these resources, digital or printed, arise as one of the most striking, popular, and frequented resources of interest for children and adolescents in recent decades.

Manga and comics use panels and dialogue to tell stories chronologically, creating immersive storytelling experiences that resemble young readers with familiar settings and even plots. In this sense, Kunai and Ryan (2007: 3) highlight that 'manga stories tend to reflect daily life (even if the story takes place in a fantastic setting) and contain authentic dialogue, even slang. In this sense, manga can be a useful source of authentic English'. This connection between the authenticity of manga dialogue and their ability to

engage readers suggests that this kind of resource promotes students' interaction with reading material and boosts their literacy skills through the support of visual aids and authentic dialogue narratives.

Accordingly, the necessity to update the available resources for EFL literacy development grows as students' interests evolve in seemingly opposite directions from education's resources. Thus, as teachers face struggles to bring catching and relevant enough resources that ease the EFL teaching to enhance overall literacy outcomes, implies the necessity of 'discussing the needs of newer teaching methods that take advantage of the necessity of providing interesting material, which is well known by the learners so that they can easily get in touch with that material' (Katsara, 2015, quoted in Marzuki, Prayogo & Wahyudi, 2016: 16). For these reasons, a new approach to literacy development could be closely related to more visual and engaging factors that manga and comics provide.

Hence, manga and comics are unconventional resources that promote literacy development thanks to their engaging and beneficial qualities. Is a growing recognition of manga and comics as providers of authentic and engaging language experiences that better reflect their daily lives, needs, and interests that effectively close the gap between classroom learning and real-world language usage, paving the way for a more dynamic and enjoyable approach to literacy explorations.

1.1.3. Literacy: Beyond Reading and Writing Development

Developing literacy skills extends beyond learning to listen, read, speak, or write. Literacy refers to how the reader uses the information he or she has to interpret both literal texts and visual elements (or non-textual material). When the teacher focuses only on the learner learning to read 'properly' a text, it leaves aside other aspects of literacy, such as interpreting or analyzing the exact text. In this regard, Toro et al. (2019: 59) state, 'It becomes urgent to encourage students to have comprehension schemes that enable interpretation and analysis, which help them to develop ways to present their points of view and to expose their criteria from reading a text.' Thus, literacy encompasses more than just the four basic skills; it fosters interpreting, analyzing, and comprehending different texts surrounding them, along with their elements, such as pictures, situations, environments, and behaviors. Promoting literacy awareness in an EFL classroom requires using the appropriate resources to develop the four literacy skills.

Appropriate resources and engaging methods strongly support effective literacy development. One way to connect the development of the four literacy skills and foster learners' interpretation and analysis is by using resources that allow them to feel comfortable and connected with their learning. Learning happens when students connect with their lives or the world around them. Appropriate resources serve as the bridge between students' learning and development.

On this subject, Toro et al. (2019: 59) explain that 'it is essential to point out that students experience many difficulties while learning a language, especially in reading. It requires not just the utilization of proper materials but also the implementation of pedagogical methods aligned with learners' engagement'. Hence, proper resources are essential for adequately developing these skills in an EFL classroom. Among these resources is storytelling, which enables students to bridge the gap between their learning and personal experiences.

1.1.4. The Magic behind the Storytelling

Storytelling is a strategy that fosters students' literacy skills while they are involved in reading activities. In this regard, Malo and Bullard (2000: 5) argue that 'the child who is consistently exposed to an oral tradition of stories gains skills that prepare them for reading. In fact, in many cases, storytelling may be a more powerful medium to learn these skills'. Hence, Storytelling offers a powerful and interactive way to develop literacy skills in students. Regular exposure to diverse narratives, presented in various ways, goes beyond just comprehension. Storytelling fosters essential skills like perception, analysis, imagination, and reflection. These skills are crucial for understanding unconventional reading materials such as comics and manga. Furthermore, encountering new vocabulary in engaging narratives helps students learn and retain new words. Following the flow of a story also teaches them concepts of logical sequencing, which is vital not just for clear and organized writing but also for better interpretation.

In short, storytelling's multifaceted approach strengthens students' literacy foundation and prepares them for success in their literacy skills. Moreover, Storytelling in EFL contexts is a strategy that offers several learning opportunities through diverse narratives. In this regard, Marzuki, Prayogo, and Wahyudi (2016:17) stated:

'Activities in listening to and reading stories can, fortunately, be followed up with speaking activities in which the students retell the story in their own words. In this manner, through storytelling, EFL learners have the opportunity to engage their audience using diverse types of vocabulary and develop their thoughts, sentiments, and encounters connected with the story.

Consequently, storytelling implements more narrative and auditive techniques causing stimulation of students' creativity, vocabulary, listening, and reading skills while generating a deeper engagement of students' interest and their language learning advancement through the diverse literary elements they may find during the development of this strategy like images, flashy letters, or even the tone of the voice or different expressions that go along with the narrative process. Storytelling offers a powerful and engaging way to build strong literacy skills in students. It goes beyond comprehension, fostering critical thinking, expanding vocabulary, and the ability to follow along with a sequence of narrative events. These skills are valuable for understanding different types of reading materials and preparing students for success in reading.

Recognizing the importance of implementing resources inside the classroom that increase students' motivation is a strategy to develop their literacy. Comics and Mangas, as Kunai and Ryan (2007) mention, have components from their structure that are eye-catching and facilitate the creation of those connections that are necessary for learning a second language. Likewise, Toro et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of choosing proper materials since they will be the main means of developing students' literacy skills. On the other hand, Mallo and Bullard (2000) perceive storytelling as a strategy to enhance students' own narratives, allowing them to create connections not only with language elements like vocabulary or grammar concepts but also to analyze their perspectives, environment, and perceptions. As a result, manga and comics with storytelling are potential resources for EFL classrooms to implement.

2. Methodology

Intending to recognize the promotion of comics and manga as an EFL literacy practice with 6th-grade students through the incorporation of these resources in educative scenarios, this research carries out a qualitative inquiry under an interpretive paradigm, addressing the case study method, which allowed us to follow a process through the implementation of three research techniques with their appropriate instruments, which were developed from the exploration of this resources to the creation of narratives with students following comics and mangas structure, evidencing both the process and the research data that lead to the study's findings.

2.1. Research Approach

The research utilized a qualitative approach. Aspers and Corte (2019:155) define qualitative research 'as an iterative process in which improved understanding of the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied'. As was previously said, this approach relies on detailed contextual descriptions of phenomena, ensuring objectivity while facilitating a deep understanding of their nature and enabling the analysis of systematically collected information.

2.2. Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm highlights the importance of interpretation and understanding in social research, recognizing social reality's subjective and contextualized nature and promoting research approaches that allow for a deep and meaningful understanding of social phenomena. Accordingly, Phothongsunan (2010: 1) argues that 'social sciences study objects dependent on human beings, requiring researchers to act as meaning-makers, interacting with participants to construct meanings; contrasting with

the natural sciences, which have an independent existence'. In this sense, research becomes the construction of meanings within a dynamic social context, highlighting the active role of researchers in shaping knowledge and understanding.

2.3. Design: Comics and Manga within Educative Scenarios

Through the implementation of the case study methodology, the inclusion of these unconventional resources in the EFL classroom context provides a suitable scenario to explore and understand how useful they are for educational purposes since, according to Durán (2012: 121), 'the case study (CS) is a way of approaching a fact, phenomenon, event or particular situation in depth and in its context, which allows a greater understanding of its complexity and, therefore, greater learning from the study case'. For that reason, this methodology offers an opportunity to analyze in detail how comics and manga can contribute to developing linguistic skills and promoting creativity and active participation of students in the foreign language learning process.

Therefore, the research was carried out in a school in the city of Medellín, Colombia, where 12 sixth-grade students, with an average age between twelve and thirteen years, were randomly selected, representing the general population. Students were responsible for designing their own manga or comics to improve their reading and writing skills while providing evidence of their process. To do this, permission was requested from the institution to carry out the research with the children. In addition, informed consent was given to the student's guardians, whom they had to sign to confirm the approval of the children's participation in the information collection activities. Please note that, for the students' safety and privacy, the researchers will keep their names anonymous and confidential.

2.4. Data Recollection Technique

Bringing comics and manga to the classroom elicits diverse reactions, opinions, and feelings from students and teachers. These resources impact their learning process differently since they are not typically included in the EFL teaching and learning process. For these reasons, we delved carefully into how to explore these kinds of resources and understand the scope they can provide to foster literacies. In this framework, the development of the implementation of this research began with the application of the techniques and their respective instruments (built by the researchers) that would help respond to each of the specific objectives established to carry out the research; in addition, we were taken into account some strategies, a schedule to develop each intervention and it was defined that all meetings would be audio recorded.

2.4.1. Technique 1: Semi-structured Interview

To identify the advantages or disadvantages that unconventional storytelling resources offer to develop EFL literacies, we conducted a semi-structured interview that allowed us to understand the students' interaction with manga and comics factors that fostered either classroom dynamics or literacy development.

Semi-structured interviews typically revolve around predetermined open-ended questions, supplemented by additional inquiries that arise organically during the dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee(s). Therefore, semi-structured interviews allow us to address students' knowledge interests and the scope of unconventional resources to be applied. Through this collecting data technique, we can be provided with student experiences with manga and comic resources explored in concordance with DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006: 321). The main purpose of the interview: 'In-depth interviews can provide rich and in-depth information about the experiences of individuals'. For this reason, an interview was implemented where students had to answer questions that were related to their knowledge of unconventional resources such as manga and comics and whether that resource was interesting to them. To do this, the researchers had a questionnaire that served as a basis to ask questions according to the information they wanted to obtain; however, the researchers also asked questions that arose according to what the students were answering.

2.4.2. Technique 2: Interactive Workshop

Considering interactive methodological workshops as ways of organizing and conducting the activity with a more systemic approach but at the same time participatory and constant exchange between subjects through reflections, creative proposals, and debates to raise the educational work quality, is implemented an interactive workshop to work so that the participants were involved in the process where they could create their own proposals with which they felt identified and demonstrated some development in their reading-writing skills.

To carry out this activity, one of the researchers assumed the role of teacher to clarify and introduce students to the process of reading manga, highlighting its distinctive structure compared to traditional books. In this research, reading was practiced with the manga *Boku no Hero Academia* (Kohei Horikoshi, 2014); hence, the students recognized the dialogue boxes, onomatopoeias, and reading order from right to left, among other aspects. Further, students were engaged in reading-aloud activities where instructors asked guide questions to check the overall comprehension of topics, dialogue, and settings. In addition, the teacher explained other paramount aspects of the design and creation of comics and mangas, such as the schematization of the students' ideas to begin to give a structure to their thoughts through the construction of mind maps while responding to questionnaires about the essential components of the story that the

student intends to design. Finally, he proceeded to give instructions and recommendations so the students could choose between manga and comics and begin designing and creating their own resources.

2.4.3. Technique 3: Focal Group

At the end of the process of designing the manga and comics by the students, a focus group was held with the intention that the students express how they felt about the use and creation of the comics and mangas throughout the research process. Therefore, six students of the twelve in the initial sample were selected to answer several questions based on a questionnaire (instrument) directed by the researchers to recognize the scope of the resources created by the students in developing their literacy. With this, it was possible to identify whether the resource was useful or not to improve literacy in learning English.

2.5. Data Analysis

These data were collected systematically in a defined time frame, and the audios were manually transcribed. Each researcher was in charge of transcribing and cleaning the recollected information, and then coding and categorization techniques were employed to organize and understand the information more effectively. To facilitate the triangulation process, we implemented a color-coding system. Three colors (purple, pink, and blue) were chosen to represent each of the objectives to differentiate the information since it was searching, extracting patterns, themes, and relationships in the data that would serve as a guide to respond to the objectives. After this, the open codes were extracted, and words were selected and listed, aligned with the testimonies collected. Then, the axial codes were extracted, and different open codes were grouped since they had to focus on responding to the same issue. Finally, three categories were obtained from the entire coding process, corresponding to each objective.

Table 1

After implementation, this is a part of the table that was created to facilitate the data analysis process, enabling the creation of findings and discussion topics.

	Open codes	Axial codes	Categories	Topic
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<p>To identify the advantages or disadvantages that unconventional storytelling resources offer to develop EFL literacy.</p>	<table border="1"> <tr><td>Reaction</td></tr> <tr><td>Surprise</td></tr> <tr><td>Observation</td></tr> <tr><td>Syntax</td></tr> <tr><td>Manga structure</td></tr> </table>	Reaction	Surprise	Observation	Syntax	Manga structure	<p>LITERACY ACTIVITIES</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>Manga structure</td></tr> <tr><td>Syntax</td></tr> <tr><td>Sequence</td></tr> <tr><td>Pronunciation</td></tr> <tr><td>Reading comprehension</td></tr> </table>	Manga structure	Syntax	Sequence	Pronunciation	Reading comprehension	<p>How the first approach towards literacy activities impact the students' writing processes.</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>Literacy activities</td></tr> <tr><td>Students' writing processes</td></tr> </table> <p>Identification of the advantages and disadvantages through students' reactions using unconventional storytelling resources.</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>Students' reactions</td></tr> <tr><td>Difficulties</td></tr> </table>	Literacy activities	Students' writing processes	Students' reactions	Difficulties	<p>Advantages or Disadvantages of Manga and Comics Towards EFL Literacy Development.</p>
Reaction																		
Surprise																		
Observation																		
Syntax																		
Manga structure																		
Manga structure																		
Syntax																		
Sequence																		
Pronunciation																		
Reading comprehension																		
Literacy activities																		
Students' writing processes																		
Students' reactions																		
Difficulties																		
<p>To design among students' comics and mangas as unconventional storytelling resources in EFL classes.</p>	<table border="1"> <tr><td>Narration</td></tr> <tr><td>Reading comprehension</td></tr> <tr><td>Connection</td></tr> <tr><td>Manga observation</td></tr> <tr><td>Interpretation</td></tr> </table>	Narration	Reading comprehension	Connection	Manga observation	Interpretation	<p>UNCONVENTIONAL STORYTELLING FINDINGS</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>Reading comprehension</td></tr> <tr><td>Manga socialization</td></tr> <tr><td>Plot elements</td></tr> <tr><td>Connection</td></tr> </table>	Reading comprehension	Manga socialization	Plot elements	Connection	<p>Teacher's intervention and student's comic and manga designs as unconventional resources.</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>Unconventional storytelling findings</td></tr> <tr><td>Teacher's intervention</td></tr> </table>	Unconventional storytelling findings	Teacher's intervention	<p>Comics and Mangas Produced by Students.</p>			
Narration																		
Reading comprehension																		
Connection																		
Manga observation																		
Interpretation																		
Reading comprehension																		
Manga socialization																		
Plot elements																		
Connection																		
Unconventional storytelling findings																		
Teacher's intervention																		

To recognize the scope of students' literacy development through the implementation of comics and mangas	Workshop difficulties	<p>SCOPE</p> <p>Manga/comic traits</p> <p>Motivational factors</p>	The scope reflected from the implementation of the resources created by the students	The Potential of Manga and Comics for EFL Literacy Development
	Manga/comic traits			
	Understanding			
	Limitations			
	Writing		Students' engagement	
		<p>DIFFICULTIES</p> <p>Workshop difficulties</p> <p>Lack of confidence</p> <p>Manga structure</p>	Scope	
		<p>STUDENT'S ADVANCE</p> <p>Improvement</p> <p>Progress</p> <p>Courage</p>	Student's advance	
			Difficulties	

In this order of ideas, the research was carried out in three two-hour sections and followed some stages that ultimately led to the results that provided information to researchers about non-conventional resources such as comics and manga implementation in an EFL classroom, in the midst of which the students made their own comics and mangas. For the analysis, some representative works were selected, which allowed the researchers to obtain the required information regarding the purpose of the work. Once the entire process of analyzing the data collected throughout the research was completed, the construction of the results presented below began.

3. Manga and Comics Findings: Discovering New Ways to Teach and Renew EFL Literacies

To recognize the scope of students' literacy development through the implementation of manga and comics, it is imperative to identify the elements that enhance the overall literacy, advantages, disadvantages, and scope, and the learning and teaching practices that involve those resources within educational scenarios.

3.1. Advantages and Disadvantages

The chosen methodology to develop the research was a case study with an interpretative paradigm. To achieve the first objective, before collecting the data, we decided that the best way to introduce the main instrument to the students was to design an introductory class. We designed a lesson plan where we first showed them how a graphic organizer works and how it can extract the main information from the reading. Then, we showed them the main instruments from our research: the mangas and the comics. We started with reading aloud, where we identified the main elements of this type of resource, such as onomatopoeias, dialogue bubbles, and how to follow the reading sequence. Once we finished the introduction, the students were separated into groups, and each group had one manga or comic to explore and read.

Designing this class and then giving the resource to the students to allow them to have a first approach to explore it and reading it allowed us to identify some advantages and disadvantages that using these unconventional resources has to develop EFL literacy in the students. Some advantages regarding students' initial impressions of comics and manga in the classroom were that they found them entertaining and comprehensible, thanks to the pictures and illustrations. At the end of the first intervention, students were asked, 'Do you think when you are here in class, it is easier to use manga to understand the story?' One of the students, Hana, shared, 'It's easy because we can see the story through the illustrations' (Interview, session 1). Another advantage students found was that there was clear evidence of the grammar structures inside the texts; the question was, 'Do you think when you are here in class, it is easier to use mangas to understand the story?' 'It is helpful as we can see the words and understand them better with the help of drawings' (Interview, session 1).

On the other hand, as we did questions to identify advantages, those same questions also allowed us to uncover some disadvantages. The students provided answers regarding the reading structure and sequence. Since resources like manga are designed to be read from the right side of the book, which is typically where Western readers expect the story to end, reading manga requires starting from what we typically perceive as the end of the story. One of these questions was: 'And what difficulties or disadvantages do you see in manga and comics in this class?' Rose responded, 'Maybe someone does not understand how to read it' (interview, session 1). Another question we did regarding comprehension was, 'When you were reading, it was confusing at some point? Matias, another student, answered, [...] reading because I don't know the sequence of what we need to read' (Interview, session 1).

3.2. Workshop Strategies to Develop Stories with Students

The workshop activity developed with 6th-grade students comprises the students' understanding of Comics and manga's structure to be able to create their own narratives.

Hence, this activity took place after several reading-aloud activities that allowed us to check the student comprehension of the visual and textual properties of mangas and comics such as panels, bubble texts, onomatopoeias, and backgrounds role as mediums that offer a different perspective to tell stories.

Hence, the workshop activity was introduced from the manga and comics attributes and structure, elements required to enable students to design and produce their own visual and narrative stories. First, we used *Boku no Hero Academia* (Kohei Horikoshi, 2014) story elements to allow students to recognize the key factors in a story, such as plot, characters, theme, genre, inflection points, inferential and explicit elements through the construction of mind maps. Thus, students answered questionnaires about the essential components of the story that they intended to design (see Figure 1).



Figure 1

Kohei Horikoshi (2014), *Boku no hero academia*, vol. 1, Shueisha, p. 11. ©2019 Shueisha Inc.

In this regard, the students made mental maps or questionnaires (see Figure 2) where they gave a logical order to their story and determined its content, determining their story title, the main problem in the plot, descriptions, and intentions of the character they would use. Finally, students defined the elements that were important to consider when starting to design the comic or manga, such as the genre, narrative structure, dialogues, scenarios, and theme.

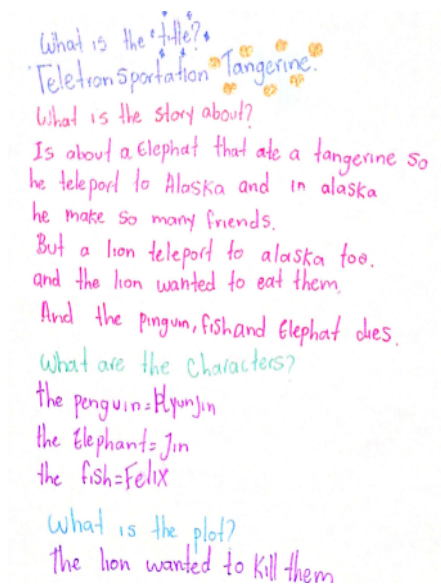


Figure 2

Questionnaire 1. Participants number 1 and 2.

Consequently, students created the comics and mangas following the comics and manga's panel structure, with scenarios and dialogue bubbles. Despite introducing students to manga structure (which typically follows a writing order from top right to bottom left), we found that all students omitted it. In Figure 3, it is notable that all stories created by students featured a vertical sequence, which integrated horizontal reading (following the order of the panels) from left to right, influenced by the usual left-to-right reading and writing orientation students acquired along their lives.

The children included speech balloons to indicate each character's dialogue and placed the person who had the first conversation on the left side. They also used text balloons to frame the onomatopoeia, but with a different design that can be assumed to be stronger or more striking. Furthermore, it is observed that they used punctuation marks but did not distinguish between their use in the Spanish and English languages. However, they considered grammatical aspects such as the initial capital letter and the period at the end of the phrase or sentence.



Figure 3
 Story 1. Participants number 1 and 2.

Referring to Figure 4, precisely the same thing happened regarding how the story is read. Still, in this case, the student did not consider the speech bubbles but instead wrote directly on the drawings and the scenario, complicating reading comprehension to a certain extent.



Figure 4

Story 2. Participant number 3.

3.3. Exploring Visual and Textual Literacy Development Through Comics and Manga

Children's creation of manga and comics represents a blend of literacy development and artistic expression that enhances the visual-spatial intelligence and comprehension of textual/graphic narratives. This exercise highlights not only the crafting of visual narratives from students' perspectives but also the recognition and development of literary elements within manga and comic workshops that enhance the overall performance of students' proficiency with EFL.

The workshop involves a structured session where students explore an alternative way to communicate through storytelling, dialogue, plots, and visual narratives created by themselves. Through the development of the workshop, students were engaged with storytelling techniques such as character development, plot structure, narrative pacing, and body language. Through the interactive sessions, students explored the creation of their own narratives, fostering a deeper understanding of the elements necessary when creating stories and encouraging students to analyze and emulate effective storytelling strategies in their own creations through the previous elaboration of a mind map strategy.

Dialogue, onomatopoeias, and settings (backgrounds and character drawings in panels) substantially influenced the students' understanding of narrative flow. Students were asked to infer information from these elements when developing a reading-aloud strategy. In this regard, student Lisa argues that the way bubble text shapes and some onomatopoeias ease the comprehension of the intention that carries the dialogue: 'When reading bubble texts, we could infer when it was a thought or a dialogue thanks to the shape of those' (Lisa, focal group, session 3). Additionally, the inclusion of drawings in the stories implies that each character develops a narrative including facial expressions, gestures, or body language that students recognize to be a key element to understand clearly communicative acts and the settings where they occur: 'It is easy because we can see them throughout the illustrations' (Jennie, Session 1, 2023), serving as a medium to ease the understanding of tone, message, and context within plots and narratives.

In short, this extensive study on using comics and manga to develop EFL literacy skills reveals several significant advantages and challenges. Thanks to the images, introducing these unconventional resources in the classroom allowed students to find reading more entertaining and understandable. However, difficulties related to the reading structure were identified, especially due to the manga's right-to-left reading orientation, which goes against the Western convention of left-to-right reading.

4. Discussion

Integrating comics and manga into an EFL classroom has revealed an opportunity to enhance students' literacy skills through unconventional resources. These unconventional resources have various attributes that captivate and foster students' engagement with both reading material and the learning environment. Through our recollected information and analysis, it was possible to evidence that engagement occurs when students can comprehend and follow the story itself, thereby increasing motivation and facilitating literacy development. Additionally, employing these reading strategies within a workshop strengthens students' class participation and independent work, providing an opportunity to observe how students reveal their perceptions through their comic and manga creations. In this discussion, we will explore the specific qualities comics and manga have through implementation in an EFL classroom and the implications of their use for promoting literacy development in EFL learners.

4.1. Advantages or Disadvantages of Manga and Comics Towards EFL Literacy Development

The use of comics and manga in the class provides different learning opportunities to improve students' EFL literacy skills; one of its attributes is its visual structure and eye-catching elements like setting, situations, genre, and authentic dialogue. On one hand, it was possible to witness during the students' interview answers when we asked Hana if it was easier to understand the story through the manga; she answered: 'It is easy because we can see them throughout the illustrations'. This reinforces one of the advantages of implementing these resources in the classroom: the support of illustrations in all the panels of these stories works as a helpful element in the comprehension and following of the story itself. Kunai and Ryan (2007: 3-4) state that 'manga is no longer a simple four-panel cartoon that even children can draw, but may even require image processing for higher quality for characters to look realistic. This high-quality artwork is attractive enough to engage readers 'imagination.'

For instance, manga and comic illustrations are developed in a catching way where all the elements the authors try to express and reflect, from the characters' facial expressions and gestures to the setting elements, serve as tools to stimulate readers' imagination, in this case, Hana who used her imagination to make connections between draws and letters to make the story more comprehensible.

On the other hand, it was also possible to witness some disadvantages along the implementation process that were reflected in the answers they provided us in the interview; during the process, it was possible to notice how some of them were struggling with keeping the sequence of reading the manga due to its structure as Rose expressed in her answer: 'Maybe someone doesn't understand how to read it.' which was completely expected since it was the first approach with these resources for most of

them and using that situation, we propose a question based on the reading comprehension being affected by that. 'When you were reading, it was confusing at some point?' and Matias answered, '[...] reading because I don't know the sequence of what we need to read'.

Considering it was our first intervention and the exposure of the majority of the students to comic and manga format, their initial responses prepared us to provide supplementary instruction on proper reading. Fortunately, due to the students' attentiveness and the simplicity of the authentic text it presents, comprehension of these conventions was achieved successfully. In this sense, Kunai and Ryan (2007: 6) mention that 'compared to conventional books, which may overwhelm students with the sheer number of words, the text in the manga is separated into panels, which allows readers to pause before they go to the next one'. Indicating that the way the resource is developed, not just the pictures but also the text accommodation, could serve as a guide for those who are not very close with it, and eventually, the constant exposure to the format along the classes will help them to start feeling familiarized reading it, including Rose and Matias who was experimenting this unfamiliarity.

4.2. Comics and Mangas Produced by Students

Education is a constantly evolving field, and teachers play a crucial role in finding engaging strategies and resources that promote student learning, considering their needs and classroom dynamics. In this sense, the incorporation of comics and manga as unconventional resources in this research has been a strategy that aims to improve the literacy skills of English as a foreign language students, allowing them to become authors, artists, and narrators of their own stories, developing their creativity and strengthening active participation in the teaching-learning process of the foreign language. In this sense, central to this research is the teacher's guidance in acquainting students with manga's unique structure and conventions, which differ from traditional literary formats. Through applying manga and comics workshops blending storytelling and illustration, students embark on a journey of linguistic growth, exploring the intricate relationship between artistic expression and language acquisition. Consequently, to explore the comics and mangas created by the students, it is necessary to consider some elements in Figure 2, where it is important to plan and determine the necessary aspects that their stories will contain. Accordingly, Grant (2019) states that 'the cartoonist, like the manager of a construction project, must make practical decisions regarding how, when, and in what order things are to be done'. Therefore, the teacher must explain and clarify to his students from the beginning that they must use graphic organizers or questionnaires so that they have clarity about the project and the process that they are going to carry out in the design of their comics and mangas, providing an outline that can be very useful for students.

Furthermore, as seen in Figure 3 and Figure 4, the students considered the structure required to make a manga and comic, such as panels, text balloons, characters, and

settings. In this regard, Gran (2019: n,p) argues that 'the built environment is the result of many practical decisions layered upon each other. Similarly, the author of a graphic novel or a comic book must build and carefully police grids, frames, borders, fences, and cages'. In this case, one can point out the need to establish a design that allows the understanding of the story to develop.

On the other hand, creating visual narratives by students within comic and manga workshops is a compelling testament to their perception of the world around them and their ability to convey complex storytelling elements through images. These artistic endeavors offer a unique window into the students' perspectives, reflecting how they perceive and interpret their surroundings, experiences, interests, and emotions. As McLuhan (1964: 34) aptly noted, 'the visual image is a universal language. It can be understood by people of all cultures, regardless of their native language. This makes it a powerful tool for communication and understanding across borders'. It allows readers to immerse themselves in the story and become active participants in the creative process. Through their illustrations and drawings, students encapsulate their worldviews, providing glimpses into their distinct cultural backgrounds, values, and personal narratives and providing a window into their imaginations.

All in all, the teacher's intervention in this process is essential since, in addition to guiding students in the creation of comics and manga, it can help establish connections between the content of the resource and the students' creative expressions and work on them according to curricular requirements. In addition, through collaborative efforts between teachers and students, these unconventional resources pave the way for immersive and engaging learning experiences that transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries.

4.3. The Potential of Manga and Comics for EFL Literacy Development

The use of manga and comics resources for teaching and learning purposes evidenced the rise of motivation factors in students from the beginning of this implementation. Thus, factors like motivation and interest facilitated the development of topics and classroom dynamics. According to what students shared, it was commonly evidenced a better disposition, participation, motivation, and autonomy towards activities that involved the recognition of explicit, textual, and inferential elements in manga and comic resources; in this regard, Toro et al. (2019: 59) argue that: 'On the inferential level, the reader can recognize the base text and at the critical level, readers can abstract the text to propose a new text where they expose their own arguments'. These factors delve into desirable elements to promote better classroom dynamics and foster the development of literacies necessary to board complex texts and writing activities.

Furthermore, the implementation of manga and comics proposes advantages to narrow the gaps in students that evidenced difficulties towards vocabulary acquisition, inferential and critical skills, suggesting that involving reading and writing activities with

these resources enhances the overall teaching and learning practices, in addition, Toro et al. (2019: 59) suggest that, the teacher can build and: 'implement strategies, methods and/or curricular designs that promote the generation of a reading culture in English among students, to achieve an improvement in the reading comprehension processes in the Foreign Language'. Thus, recognizing how meaningful these resources are for students can lower the lack of confidence factors that hinder writing activities to be overcome.

All in all, the use of manga and comics resources as a promoter of literacy emerges as an alternative to narrowing literacy gaps in 6th-grade students. It allows educators to identify the elements required to approach complex text, enrich writing production, and promote interest and engagement in reading and writing activities. Hence, exploring inferential and explicit elements in manga and comics highlights their visually captivating nature, allowing students to comprehend elements such as dialogue, settings, body, and facial language in more contextualized environments.

Conclusions

To foster a reading culture essential in an increasingly digital era, comics and manga emerge as unconventional resources that can meet students' interests and improve the learners' difficulties being exposed to second-language literature. Hence, to close literacy gaps and integrate students with all necessary skills to fulfill the purpose of communication in a language and production demands, resources such as manga and comics enable both teachers and students to benefit from literature as different and contemporary perspectives are proposed. Moreover, the visual factor, topics, and language level of these resources aim to facilitate engagement for young readers while educators take advantage of scenarios, onomatopoeias, dialogue, facial expression, and body language to explore and expand student language. Educators can create bridges facilitating meaningful learning experiences by prioritizing resources that resonate with students.

When choosing manga or comics for educational purposes, it is crucial to consider their availability. Given their unconventional nature in educational settings, it is advisable to have printed sections readily accessible or displayed. This ensures easy access to the materials, facilitating their integration into the learning environment. Additionally, while manga and comics provide authentic dialogue in natural settings, they often include slang (Japanese or American). Therefore, educators need to be prepared to offer clarifications to students and ensure that learners grasp the nuances behind them.

While valuable tools for fostering literacy in EFL, manga and comics possess certain limitations that educators must consider, first, it is important to note that these kinds of resources rely on dialogue bubbles. Hence, the range of vocabulary and syntax is often limited compared to more complex texts like novels and tales, restricting the depth of language enrichment learners can acquire. Second, the visual nature of manga and

comics may hinder the development of traditional reading skills, such as inference and critical analysis, as learners may rely more on images than text for comprehension. Thus, it is crucial to understand that selecting proper passages within manga and comics should comprise the linguistic objectives that aim to develop.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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