

On the Use of Graphic Novels in the ESL Classroom

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I. Introduction

Graphic novels have received their namesake because of their unique blending of visual art and literary content. Graphic novels are in a standalone category of literature with several unique characteristics that separate them from the average piece of literature or visual art. Graphic novels are made up of visual sequences laid out in a logical order, or borrowing the terminology used by visual language researcher Neil Crohn, in a *visual grammar* on the page, and is used in conjunction with literary text to tell a story (240). This blending of visual and literary elements provides a very different reading experience than purely textual works. Whereas a textual work can stand alone without imagery, and might employ inserted imagery to add flair to the story telling process, graphic novels can remove neither the textual nor the visual and function as a stand alone piece of literature. However, graphic novels do not fall under the blanket category of visual art either, as graphic novels utilize a story telling process driving it into a category all its own. Whereas visual art may possess certain features of the storytelling process, graphic novels, much like the novel, focus all literary processes on the development of a single storyline, sequencing the story into clearly divided boundaries defining the beginning, middle, and end. Therefore, the graphic novel exists between the colorful world of visual art and literary novels, drawing upon

the strengths of both genres to create this unique hybrid literary technique. The unique manner in which graphic novels integrate imagery into the literary storytelling process also has the happy side effect of making works of English literature more accessible to non-native English learners. This paper will discuss the merits of utilizing the graphic novel as the source material for literature courses in an ESL curriculum.

Any number of tools may be employed in the ESL classroom to achieve any number of desired results. From traditional tools such as chalk boards/whiteboards, reams of paper, textbooks, and novels to more modern solutions such as Powerpoint presentations, tablets, computers, and interactive educational software; each tool offers a unique solution to the question of how to structure the most effective course to instruct the subject for which the students have enrolled. Textbooks are without doubt the most common educational tool used in ESL classrooms. Indeed, ESL textbooks are considered by many teachers to be the heart of their linguistic curriculum, as ESL textbooks provide the framework for the objectives of the course for both students and teachers alike (Tok, 508). Not only do textbooks provide the ESL student with written examples of the English language used in a variety of contexts from grammar drills to spoken dialogues, to excerpts, and everything in between, but the information is also presented to the student in a controlled environment, as well as in a manner that is easy to digest. The effectiveness and outright dominance of textbooks as the primary method of instruction in the ESL classroom is undeniable, and it begs the question: to what degree is the effectiveness of instruction in an ESL course affected if a textbook is not employed? This question becomes all the more pertinent in literature courses for ESL students, for which ESL textbooks and the effective manner in which they present easily digestible information are scarce. Textbooks and the manner in which they present information to the ESL student are invaluable tools of effective instruction, however textbooks may not always be available for the specific subject being taught in an ESL classroom.

Literature courses for ESL students must carefully consider what deficits in effectiveness of instruction may appear due to a lack of specific textbooks written on the chosen literature for a course. Many ESL students rely just as much on the visual presentation of information in textbooks as they do on the written linguistic components due to an imperfect knowledge of the English language, and

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their learning is moreover enhanced by this multimedia approach to instruction. This is supported by research that suggests that due in part to an enhanced deep learning process that involves the creation of mental representation from words *as well as* pictures (Mayer, 125). The number of textbooks written on the subject of how best to go about reading a piece of literature is not in question, however the number of textbooks specifically written for any one piece of literature is. Therefore a literature course for ESL students must directly confront the fact that a large percentage of students may not be able to interact with the material being presented in class as effectively as in a class utilizing an ESL textbook because of the deficit incurred by the inability to comprehend the English used in the source literature as well as a lack of ESL textbooks made available to guide the student through the choppy waters of specific literature written in a foreign language. The inability of any percentage of students to interact with the course material as effectively as they would if different course materials were utilized (namely textbooks instead of pure literature) must prompt the instructor to address this deficit in the effectiveness of instruction.

The dearth of ESL textbooks for the wide world of English language literature presents instructors of ESL literature courses with a unique range of problems about how best to engage with their students in a manner equivalent to a teaching method that utilizes an ESL textbook. If the problem lies in the students' inability to adequately comprehend the source literature in the original English, the instructor could choose to rely on the students' first language (hereafter referred to as "L1") in either the presentation/discussion of the source literature, or in a translated version of the source literature itself. This would, however, undermine the ESL component of the course, and should be avoided (Polio; Duff, 313). Another potential solution to the problem of inexistent ESL textbooks for source literature the instructor wishes to use in class would be for the instructor to create a range of teaching materials to mimic the effective pedagogical properties of the ESL textbook. This would, however, require a high level of pedagogical expertise on how to create effective instructive materials as well as the time to create such materials, so this solution might not be the most reliable. Perhaps the most reliable solution would be to choose the source literature for an ESL literature course to suit the needs of the students. Whereas an ESL class might not be able to interact with Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* as they would in their L1, the same

class just might be able to handle Elwyn Brooks White's *Charlotte's Web* in the target language (hereafter referred to as L2). This solution, as universally appropriate and prudent as it might be, still does not solve the problem of the deficit incurred by the lack of the multitiered pedagogical techniques employed in effective ESL textbooks. Fortunately, there is a genre of literature that solves all of these hurdles in ESL literature instruction, presents the English literary language in an easily digestible format by utilizing imagery to structure sequences of dialogue to tell a coherent story, all the while substituting the multitiered pedagogical approach utilized in textbooks with its binary storytelling process, interacting with the reader both visually and literally; this genre is the graphic novel, and is the ideal source material for ESL literature instruction.

This paper makes the assumption that the medium of the graphic novel is better suited as a pedagogical tool in ESL literature courses than unmodified English language literature. This assumption is made on the following suppositions: textbooks designed specifically for ESL instruction are a superior pedagogical tool relative to unmodified English language literature; graphic novels mimic many of the effective pedagogical features of ESL textbooks; the implementation of a graphic novel as the primary text in an ESL literature course would facilitate higher levels of interaction and retention within the field of English literature. This paper will analyze each of the aforementioned suppositions and then utilize Jeff Smith's highly distinguished masterpiece *Bone* to answer some of the specific questions that arise in analyzing the capacity of graphic novels to serve as the primary literary text in an ESL literature course at the university level.

II. Textbook Advantages

Anyone who has travelled to a foreign country with little to no functional knowledge of the primary language used in that region can attest to how effective visual cues are in establishing the fundamentals of communication. Visual gestures such as pointing, facial expressions, and hand gestures are all highly effective as a replacement for verbal communication, and can mediate many forms of social interaction from financial transactions to everyday conversation. Highly simplified pictures of airplanes, beds, and food posted on signs can easily replace written information to direct people to their desired destinations. All forms of linguistic communication, be they verbal or literary in nature, can in fact be heavily reliant

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on visual cues, and the retention of the content of what is being communicated may also be positively affected by reinforcing linguistic communication with said visual cues. This statement is supported by research observing that textbooks utilizing visualizations in conjunction with written text outperformed textbooks with other formatting (Mayer, et al., 31) The following section will discuss how the presentation of linguistic information in visual formats alongside written information, and/or used in conjunction with verbal information positively affects the retention of ESL instruction in textbooks, and furthermore why graphic novels should be a standard pedagogical tool in the ESL classroom due to this correlation of linguistic retention vis a vis visually communicative frameworks.

Visual communicative frameworks are not only necessary in situations in which basic linguistic communication is not possible, but are also supplementarily useful in their ability to reinforce communication even in situations in which linguistic communication has been achieved. This idea of combining linguistic information with visual information to reinforce communication is a very natural form of communication that is used in social settings everyday, and has had specific pedagogical applications in terms of textbook design. Although one may indicate a desired item to purchase by simply pointing to it, pointing to the item while specifically stating it by name is even more effective; although following an airplane icon posted on road signs will undoubtedly lead one to an airport, following the airplane icon posted next to the airport name will ensure that one arrives at the *correct* airport especially in cities with more than one airport. This positive visual supplementation to reinforce linguistic meaning used in everyday communication is also evident in the presentation of pedagogical material in textbooks.

Textbooks are a nearly universal pedagogical tool that are utilized in classrooms around the world, and present information to students simultaneously in a variety of formats from text blocks, to pictures, to diagrams, to illustrations. The pervasiveness of textbooks in many educational systems speaks volumes about their effectiveness not only in the information presented to students, but also in the ability for textbooks to help structure the pace and direction that an educational course takes from start to finish. In terms of pedagogical effectiveness, however, not all textbooks are created equal, and the question as to what makes a textbook effective must be defined. The visual presentation of the information in textbooks, or in other words the design of how information is presented to the

student, has a direct correlation to the retention of said information, and hence, in overall pedagogical effectiveness (Anderson; Armbruster, 168). According to another study conducted, the overall quality of instructional effectiveness may in part be measured by how well the textbook presents information pertinent to the subject being taught by detailing information in writing, and by the visual layout of said information (Mayer, et al., 31). In the aforementioned study, textbooks that presented all of their information in a written format or in a written format with visual aids inserted separate from the text blocks were not as effective in achieving retention of the presented information as textbooks which presented the written information *alongside* visual aids. Although not the only tool in effective instruction, well designed textbooks are invaluable catalysts to induce the retention of information presented in class due to the ability to blend the presentation of information in both written and visual formats. It comes as no surprise that textbooks have become widely used pedagogical tools in classrooms worldwide, including the ESL classroom.

Textbooks are effective tools of instruction in the ESL classroom for several reasons, the simultaneous presentation of course pertinent information in written and visual formatting notwithstanding. In a course covering the fundamentals of English communication for non-native speakers, effective ESL textbooks have the ability to divide language learning into specific categories, and to contextualize the vocabulary and grammar relating to each divided category in such a manner as to increase the retention rate of the material being presented (Anderson; Armbruster, 159). Instead of dumping the tens of thousands of exception riddled grammatical rules, various vocabulary in varying degrees of usefulness in everyday speech, and an ocean spanning degree of cultural insights into an intellectually indigestible pile of need-to-know information about the English language, textbooks will divide up the intimidatingly gargantuan form of the English language into bite sized chapters of information. A chapter on the category of "food" will include grammar, vocabulary, and cultural insights pertaining to food, and will focus the students' attention to a small array of words and phrases to memorize; likewise a chapter about "clothing" will not overload the students' attention by including extraneous information incongruous to the concept of clothing. This division of information allows for a step by step approach to gradually increase the students' abilities in the English language at a controlled pace. The additional

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opportunity to present this information in written and visual formatting is simply icing on the cake. For ESL classes focusing on gradually building upon a certain range of skills, textbooks are certainly an effective tool. The question must now be explored as to what the pedagogical efficiency of textbook implementation in ESL courses can impart on the problem of what pedagogical tools should be used in ESL literature courses that cannot make use of textbooks so easily.

The foundation courses of ESL education are, as discussed, highly conducive to the gradual progression through the keystones of English language acquisition that textbooks can offer. Utilizing, however, a textbook for a course in ESL literature may not yield the same advantages due to the fundamental differences between educationally driven textbooks and English language literature. An ESL course focusing on grammar, vocabulary, and culture has the luxury of being able to pick and choose all language used within the textbook, the distinct advantage of which being that the textbook can cross reference chapter vocabulary to use in grammar drills / cultural insight segments as well as being able to gradually build on the lessons from previous chapters. An ESL course focusing on literature is limited to the source literature chosen for the course, the disadvantage of which being that literature is not designed to gradually move the reader through a series of educational drills that build upon one another from chapter to chapter. Even if an ESL companion textbook were made to be used in conjunction with the source literature, any grammar drills and vocabulary selections will lack the cohesive categorical function that those of ESL textbooks are designed to have. This problem, again, stems from the fact that English literature is not designed to function as an educational course in linguistics, and therefore all vocabulary and grammar used is determined by the orientation of the story, and not on building upon linguistic knowledge from one chapter to the next. This problem of what to draw the students' attention to as they move through the source literature is possibly one explanation as to why there are so few textbooks created for ESL literature courses compared to more fundamental, linguistically oriented ESL courses. The fact that source literature for a university level course in literature is at a disadvantage when used in an ESL context does not, however, preclude the idea that a textbook is necessary for a university ESL literature course, and, indeed, sometimes the only option is to utilize the source literature as the primary text for the course due to the lack of specific ESL textbooks / companion

textbooks for English literature. There are, however, some inherent difficulties in integrating source literature as the primary text in university level ESL courses.

The difficulties involved in the successful integration of source literature as the primary text in ESL courses lie in the students' abilities in the English language itself. Although students who have reached a certain level of intrinsic knowledge in the English language often move on to subject matters that may be less linear in nature than courses on the fundamentals of the English language (such as literature courses), this does not mean that an ESL literature course can ignore the fact that the students are still non-native speakers of English and therefore the instructor cannot teach the ESL literature course in the same manner as a course designed for native speakers. In the grand majority of ESL classes, there is not only a wide array of student ability in the English language, but it may also be assumed that even the student with the highest level of English language proficiency will still be notably below native speaking level. This, of course, means that a large portion of instruction must be focused on ensuring that the students understand what they are reading (not excluding the possibility of supplemental instruction in L1), and furthermore that the source literature must be carefully chosen to suit the English comprehension level of the class. If too difficult a text is chosen, the students with lower levels of English comprehension will retain very little information from the class; likewise, if too easy a text is chosen, higher level students may not make any further progress. So although utilizing an ESL textbook is not always possible for ESL literature courses, with adjustments to instruction method, possible use of L1, and careful selection of the source text, successful integration of source literature as the primary text may be achieved. However, this integration comes at the cost of completely losing all advantages that textbooks induce in the retention of information through the simultaneous presentation of information in both written and visual formatting. In particular, when ESL students are still learning the fundamentals of the English language, the question must be raised as to whether the method of instruction in an ESL literature course may benefit from utilizing the unique written / visual formatting in textbooks, even when no textbooks are available.

As has been discussed, literature functions very differently than a textbook. This difference is not only seen in the information that each medium presents, but also in how the information is presented. With the evidence that effectively

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designed textbooks increase the retention rate of information through simultaneous presentation of written / visual information, as well as the ability to structure and pace the course from start to finish while categorically dividing information into chapters that build off of one another, textbooks have become a standard pedagogical tool in nearly every subject at nearly every level of institutionalized education. However, the utilization of a textbook is not always possible in literature courses, and in such cases the source literature chosen for the course takes over the role of the primary text to structure the instruction of the course. This poses unique difficulties to ESL literature courses, because the students are still learning the fundamentals of the English language, and may, in particular, benefit from a presentation more similar to that offered by a textbook. Fortunately graphic novels are an ideal candidate to solve the literature course textbook dilemma. Not only can graphic novels function as a literature source, but the unique storytelling process involving visual structures used congruously with blocks of text perfectly mimics the definition of effective textbook design. Furthermore, by translating a large portion of the storytelling process to a visual framework, a graphic novel may bridge language gaps ever present in ESL courses to ensure adequate comprehension of a plethora of important literary devices in the source literature such as plot construction, plot devices, narrative voice, setting, symbolism, and historical context (to name a few).

III. Graphic Novels

The graphic novel, as the title might suggest, is a blending between visual sequencing and literary techniques used in conjunction with one another to create a unique storytelling experience. For all of the literary devices that graphic novels have in common with the textual novel, the reading experience of the graphic novel is drastically different to that of a purely textual experience. The literary world is in fact rife with examples of works making use of visual imagery as inserts, graphic novels, however, differentiate themselves from mere picture books through the use of panel imagery sequencing, then merging these visual sequences with textual elements on each page to unfold the story as opposed to using intermittent images inserted between blocks of texts that one might find with the average picture book. To put it simply: picture books use singular event imagery and text blocks *separately*, whereas graphic novels use sequence imagery and text

simultaneously. Picture books and other literary works that make use of inserted imagery notwithstanding, perhaps the largest obvious difference between text only literary works and graphic novels lies in the fact that the novel must rely on a linguistic turn of phrase to generate its storyline, whereas the graphic novel utilizes both imagery and text to move the story along. In the sense that the graphic novel is able to present to the reader visual information corresponding with and reinforcing the meaning of the textual information, the graphic novel storytelling process possesses a very similar presentational framework to that of the pre-defined pedagogical efficiency of textbooks. It is this unique method of storytelling that makes the graphic novel the ideal literary format to utilize in ESL literature courses. Even with the efficient hybrid approach of image laden text mimicking the efficiency of textbooks set aside, graphic novels have the potential to greatly increase student comprehension of source literature in ESL literature courses by bridging language gaps through multi-sensory formatting and illustrating literary devices such as foreshadowing, metaphors, and symbolism.

An effective ESL literature course at the university level must address the following pedagogical objectives: it must instruct its students in the literary process, it must instruct its students in the process of critical response, it must instruct its students in the culture of the source text, and it must instruct its students in the use of literary English. Instruction in the literary process refers to the instruction of the rudimentary principles of the storytelling process and includes instruction in, but not limited to, such principles as plot construction, plot devices, narrative voice, setting, symbolism, and historical context. Critical response to a literary work refers to the ability to analyze any given literary work based on its historical significance, and to apply said analysis to a modern context in an insightful or otherwise meaningful manner. As with any literary work, there are also numerous cultural insights to be gathered from a literary work that must also be illuminated upon through the course of instruction, and that can be used to instruct students on a broad cultural spectrum of the source literature. Finally, due to the inescapable fact that an ESL literature course is still at heart a course in foreign language acquisition, the source text must be used to provide students with instruction in the English language. An effective ESL course in literature must not only address the aforementioned pedagogical objectives, but must also make use of a text that can provide its students with the ability to interact with

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said objectives in a meaningful manner. Although it remains true that traditional literature may accomplish all of the above stated tasks for an ESL literature course, graphic novels have distinct advantages over traditional text choices, simply because graphic novels do not entirely rely on a language of which the students have an imperfect knowledge in order to establish the fundamentals upon which the course is constructed; if the students do not understand the text, the aforementioned pedagogical tasks for effective literary instruction are not possible (even if conducted in the students' L1). The following section will delineate how traditional literature that relies entirely on text to impart its information is not the ideal source text for an ESL course in literature.

Teaching a literature course to non-native English speakers necessitates special consideration of the students' ability to interact with any chosen text. The very fact that a traditional piece of literature must rely on written text as the principle medium of interaction with its audience means that the audience with an imperfect understanding of the English language will always have an imperfect understanding of the novel itself. Any source text that utilizes only written text for an ESL literature course must acknowledge the fact that the efficiency of instruction in the field of literature is directly correlated to the students' proficiency in the English language due to the fact that any instruction provided in the four areas mentioned at the start of this section (literary process, critical response, culture, and literary English) is tied to how well the student has understood the text. If the student has only understood half the text, the same student will therefore only understand roughly half of the literary instruction. This situation of an inadequate ratio of comprehension between the students, the text, and the instruction in literary processes is on one hand partially controllable with the selection of easily comprehensible texts. On the other hand, the fact of the matter is that any ESL course will have students with mixed proficiencies in the English language. This leaves us with the unfortunate scenario of a certain percentage of students not engaging in literary education as proficiently as the rest of the class, despite careful selection of the text, despite efficient instruction, and the culprit is a simple language barrier. Fortunately, there are other forms of literature that contain all of the pedagogical potential of traditional literature, but do not monopolize written text for communication, thus inducing an increase in the efficiency of instruction: the graphic novel.

Graphic novels outperform pure text literary works as educational texts in ESL literature courses in two distinct ways: the visual representation of story elements, and the simultaneous presentation of visual and textual information. An imperfect knowledge of English may diminish the educational gains of literary instruction in an ESL literature course when the source literature for said course uses only written English to tell its story. However, due to the fact that graphic novels rely on both linguistic and visual frameworks to construct their stories, even when an ESL student fails to comprehend the language utilized in the graphic novel, the imagery may fill in the missing gaps resulting in a more complete understanding of the story; the more complete the understanding of the source literature is, the more efficient the instruction of the literature becomes. As has been previously argued, textbooks offer an increase in information retention due to the simultaneous presentation of information in textual and visual frameworks. However, due to the lack of specific textbooks for source texts in the field of English literature, the potential benefit that this particular pedagogical tool may offer an ESL literature course is nullified. Fortunately, due to the visual / textual framework of graphic novels fitting the aforementioned criterion for textbooks benefitting information retention in students, graphic novels are an ideal choice for an ESL literature course at the university level. Not only will graphic novels help bridge linguistic gaps for ESL students to increase the instructional effectiveness in English literature with the added benefit of potentially increasing information retention due to the visual / textual hybrid framework inherent in graphic novels, but graphic novels also have the potential to increase comprehension of fundamental literacy devices such as plot construction, plot devices, narrative voice, setting, symbolism, and historical context through multi-sensory formatting.

Using a text only literary work as the primary text in a university ESL course fundamentally limits the efficiency of instruction in literary processes to the level of English proficiency of the students enrolled. Furthermore, limiting the primary text of an ESL literature course to a selection of text only works, the recognized educational benefits related to information retention when textbooks are used which present their contents simultaneously in visual and written formats are nullified. On these two fronts, graphic novels are the superior choice for the primary text in ESL literature courses. The implementation of a graphic novel as the primary text in an ESL literature course also has unique opportunities to instruct

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on literary devices, whereby certain devices such as symbolism may be, depending on the selection of the graphic novel, presented in a visual format, literally illustrating to the students what a novel must use words to describe (Schwarz, 264). These unique features provide the instructor with distinct opportunities to impart highly efficient instruction in the field of literature. Concise examples from Jeff Smith's renowned, award winning graphic novel *Bone* will be provided to illustrate these superior pedagogical features, and furthermore how a graphic novel such as *Bone* might be implemented as the main text for a university ESL literature course will be discussed in depth in the following section.

IV. Graphic novels in ESL Literature Courses

In implementing a graphic novel in a university level ESL literature course, the same level of rigor must be applied to the instruction of the text used to achieve adequate academic improvement, and the idea that graphic novels have innate characteristics that make them a superior pedagogical text compared to text only works must not imply the assumption that graphic novels are a self instructive learning experience. Indeed, quite the opposite of this dangerous assumption that graphic novels simply teach themselves, the same line of thorough academic dissection of any literary text must be applied to the graphic novel to achieve desirable increases in the academic understanding of the field of literature. When teaching an ESL literature course that employs a graphic novel as the primary text, the instructor must still guide the students through the primary elements that make up all literature: characters, setting, historical framework, plot, and literary devices. It is, however, in the instruction of these basic literary components that the strength of the graphic novel as the primary text of an ESL literature course are demonstrable, specifically in regard to how the multi-sensory formatting of the graphic novel bridges the L1 / L2 language gap, and how the graphic novel provides unique visualizations to common literary devices that can be harnessed to increase the students' academic comprehension of the basic tenants of literary analysis (Smetana; et al., 228). In this section, Jeff Smith's graphic novel *Bone* will be used to analyze the efficiency of multi-sensory formatting in graphic novels to serve as the primary text in a university level ESL literature course, and furthermore how the visualization of literary devices in graphic novels can be harnessed to increase the effectiveness of instruction in the field of literature.

The same basic principles of literary instruction apply to any literature class, regardless of the implemented text. Whether one is teaching Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, or Jeff Smith's graphic novel *Bone*, the characters must be established, the setting must be described, the historical framework must be analyzed, the plot must be exposed, and the literary devices put to use by each novel's respective author must be delineated. How successful the instruction of the aforementioned fundamentals is in an ESL class, in which the students are all non-native speakers to varying degrees of proficiency, depends on how well the students understand the text itself. As a direct example of how difficult a standard piece of literature can be to understand for non-native speakers, the following excerpt has been taken from an English translation of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*:

One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin. He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. The bedding was hardly able to cover it and seemed ready to slide off any moment. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked. (Kafka, 5)

For a native speaker, there is actually quite a lot of useful information in the three sentences above to help the reader understand instruction given on characters, setting, plot, as well as literary devices. We can gather that Gregor Samsa (the character), who, after a sleepless night, has found himself in his bed (the setting), much to his dismay, transformed into a brown insect (plot / literary device) lying on its back with its legs flailing about helplessly. Just by reading, and, perhaps more importantly, fully comprehending, these three sentences, any further explanation provided on these literary fundamentals become that much easier to understand. Thus, assuming adequate instruction has been provided, a student, after having read just three sentences, should easily be able to follow a lecture on how Gregor Samsa's transformation into a hideous insect is a symbolic metaphor representing the inner turmoil he faces through the sacrifice he makes to provide for his aging parents and younger sister. If, however, a non-native speaker were to read and not fully comprehend the excerpt sentences from *The Metamorphosis*, the efficiency of instruction, no matter how well said instruction may be executed,

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comes into question.

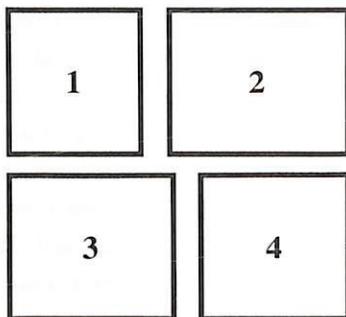
Although it is an impossible task to determine the working English vocabulary of each student in an ESL class, and it is therefore equally impossible to determine exactly how much of any given block of text each student has understood from the above excerpt from Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. However, by using a defined list of the most frequent English words, and excluding any word from the excerpt that is not included in said list, we may paint a better picture of exactly how much a non-native speaker of average proficiency might be able to understand. Using a list of the 1000 most frequent English words as defined by Wikipedia's Wiktionary, incorporating slightly more than Charles Kay Ogden's "Basic English" vocabulary set, we find that there are 17 individual words that are not included in the list. When these 17 words are removed, the following passage emerges:

One morning, when Gregor Samsa (x) from troubled dreams, he found himself (x) in his bed into a (x) (x). He lay on his (x)-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown (x), slightly (x) and divided by (x) into (x) (x). The (x) was (x) able to cover it and seemed ready to (x) off any moment. His many legs, (x) (x) compared with the size of the rest of him, (x) about (x) as he looked.

Assuming that the edited passage above with vocabulary omissions is all that a sizable percentage of students in a hypothetical ESL literature course could understand, then only the fundamentals of character, and setting may be divined from the murky depths from the passage above. We know that a man named Gregor Samsa (character) is in his bed (setting). While there are certainly clues into what the novel will unfold (many legs, for example), in reading the three sentences above with the omissions to recreate the reading experience for a non-native English speaker, a lecture on how Gregor Samsa's transformation into a hideous insect is a symbolic metaphor representing the inner turmoil he faces through the sacrifice he makes to provide for his aging parents and younger sister takes a decided blow to instructive efficiency, as the students must first fill in the missing pieces of what they did not understand about what they read before they can begin to process any additional instruction in literary analysis. Of course, there are many effective ways of instruction that can help students overcome linguistic proficiency gaps in order to make the progression through a literary work

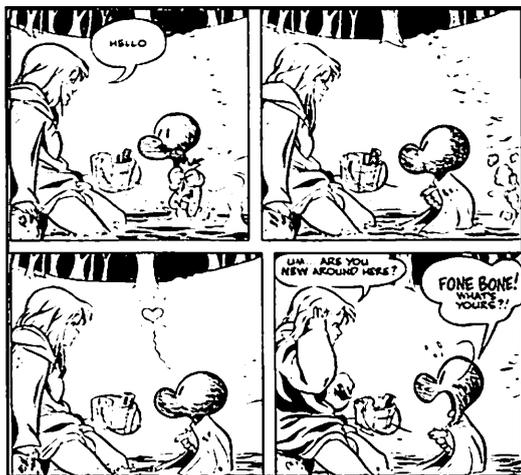
comprehensible, however, the more time spent on recapping what has gone on in the literary work, the less time can be provided in the instruction of literary analysis, the ultimate pedagogical aim of a university level literature course, including literature courses designed for ESL students. Fortunately, graphic novels with their multi-sensory formatting offer a much more comprehensible reading experience to a much more diverse range of linguistic proficiencies.

The excerpt taken from Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* are the first four sentences from the infamous novella, a literary medium that uses sentence construction to pace and advance the story. Graphic novels also make use of sentences, but rely much more heavily on panel work to pace and advance the story. The longer the sentence is in a novel, the more linguistic information, and therefore story pertinent information, it will contain; the larger the panel is in a graphic novel, the more linguistic *and* visual information it is likely to contain. In this sense, one sentence in a novel can be likened to one panel in a graphic novel. Much like the construction of a sentence using a linguistic framework, panels in graphic novels follow a specific grammar (Crohn, 240). In other words, panels in graphic novels must be read in numerical order. The numerical order, or panel grammar, can differ from culture to culture, the main divisions existing between Japanese panel grammar (right to left, top to bottom) and Western panel grammar (left to right, top to bottom) (Crohn). The following excerpt is taken from Jeff Smith's graphic novel *Bone*, and should be read from left to right, top to bottom as per the following example (Smith, 56):



If one were to conduct a literary analysis on the same fundamentals of character, setting, historical framework, plot, and literary devices as had been hypothetically done with the excerpt from *The Metamorphosis*, all five categories can

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be addressed in just four panels presented below. The hypothetical analysis conducted on *The Metamorphosis* passage could only account for four out of the five categories assuming that the reader, either native or otherwise, fully understood every word in the three sentence extract. When inadequate proficiency of English vocabulary was taken into account, and all words not included in

Wiktionary's 1000 most frequent English words list were omitted, only two out of the five literary fundamentals were accounted for. Not only do the four panels from *Bone* touch on all five categories, but every single word used in the text is included in Wiktionary's 1000 most frequent English words. This, of course, does not automatically mean that any ESL student will understand what is written (or perhaps more importantly, the context of the humor within), but a larger percentage of students in any given ESL class should have a categorical understanding of what is presented in the four panels above. The broader the comprehension of an implemented text, the higher the efficiency in any instructive method in literary analysis can achieve. The four panels taken from *Bone* are certainly much more accessible to a broader range of readers with varying levels of English proficiency than Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. The following section will delineate how the simultaneous use of visual frameworks with text bridges linguistic gaps to aid in the instruction of literary analysis.

The principle that literary fundamentals such as characters, setting, historical framework, plot, and literary devices do not have to rely on words to convey their information to the reader yields very real pedagogical advantages in an ESL literature course. This obviously lies in the fact that visual information does not require proficiency in a foreign language as a prerequisite to understand its contents. In fact, most of the fundamentals in literary analysis in the four panels taken from Jeff Smith's *Bone* are accounted for not in linguistic information, but

rather in visual information. A young girl (character) rests on a rock bathing her feet in a hot spring when a small creature named Fone Bone (character), new to the area (plot), nervously exits the forest and trudges through the snow to the hot spring (setting) to join this young girl that he becomes instantly enamored with and to wash the soot of his face (plot). The clothes that they both are wearing, robe-like cloaks, as well as the presence of a wooden bucket to the side of the hot spring seems to indicate that the story takes place in pre-modern times (historical framework). The creature named Fone Bone is notably different in a physical sense to the young girl; whereas the girl is rendered in a more naturalistic manner, namely that she looks more like a real human, Fone Bone is squat, bald, has a bulbous nose, pitch black eyes, and is otherwise rendered in a much more cartoon-like way (literary device). With the information presented in just four panels from *Bone*, a lecture on how the physical differences presented between the bone creatures and the humans of the valley constitute a visual metaphor representing the narrative voice, as the introduction of the bone creatures into the human valley sets forth a chain of events that drives the entire story becomes tangible to a much broader range of students regardless of their level of proficiency in English. Not only does the simultaneous presentation of literary information in a visual and textual framework help bridge linguistic gaps and increase instructional efficiency, but the ability to present literary devices in an entirely visual format creates a literary experience unique to graphic novels.



If one of the goals of literary instruction in an ESL literature course is to help illuminate the understanding of such fundamentals as the use of literary devices and

how they impact the analysis of a story, then graphic novels are perfectly suited to literary instruction. Through the visualization of literary devices such as metaphors, foreshadowing, and symbolism, it is not only easier to provide concrete, intelligible examples of the use of such literary devices, but, as has been discussed earlier, the simultaneous presentation of such principles in visual and textual formatting increases information retention, thereby increasing instructional efficiency. The following section will present three distinct visualizations of literary devices used in Jeff Smith's *Bone*.

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In the very beginning of *Bone*, three bone creatures, shown on the previous page, are chased by a swarm of locusts across a desert, and are forced into a valley, subsequently setting forth in motion a sequence of dangerous events that threaten to erase all life from existence (Smith, 21). The evil force that threatens to



wipe clean the earth of life is an ancient entity known as the Lord of the Locusts (depicted above), a nightmarish entity that exists in a void like space between waking life and a dreaming state (Smith, 782). Through the power of the Lord of the Locusts, the Hooded One (shown on the left) attempts to hunt down the newly arrived bone creatures using an army of rat creatures in order to perform a ritual to set loose the Lord of the Locusts on the inhabitants of Earth, and to bring about the end of the world (Smith, 537). These three panels provide visualizations of foreshadowing, metaphor use, and symbolism.



That the locust later comes to represent, quite literally the Lord of the Locusts, the primary antagonist, it is more than convenient that it should be a cloud of locusts that chase the bone creatures into the human valley at the beginning of the story. In fact, the very visualization of the swarm of locusts pushing them into the valley in which the Lord of the Locusts lies waiting for them is a visualization of foreshadowing. The Lord of the Locusts, too, being visually represented by the locust, becomes the visual metaphor of the literary antagonist, and all visualizations of the locust form come to represent this evil force. Finally, the Hooded One, shrouded in a cloak, wielding a scythe, is very clearly visually symbolic of the European concept of death. In the graphic novel itself, the Hooded One is the actuator of the will of the Lord of the Locusts, and not only symbolizes death, but ushers the same upon the inhabitants of the valley into which the bone creatures were chased. These three visualizations of literary devices not only make understanding what a literary device is easier to comprehend, but are also ideal for ESL classes, because a certain level of English proficiency is not required to comprehend these literary devices. These unique visualizations therefore create an environment in which the instruction of literary analysis is potentially

more efficient than that in which a purely literary text is used.

There are a number of efficient instructive methods in regard to literature courses at the university level, just as there are numerous potential texts to use to guide students through the process of literary analysis. Special attention must be paid, as has been demonstrated, with regard to text choice for ESL literature courses due to the simple fact that the students are non-native speakers of English. As the comprehension of an implemented text decreases, so too does the efficiency of instruction in literary analysis. This means that any text implemented in an ESL literature course must be suitable to the English language proficiencies of the majority of students enrolled in such a course. This, again, poses difficulties due to the often broad range of linguistic proficiencies in an ESL class; the text that is perfectly intelligible to one student, does not mean that it is equally intelligible to the next. This unfortunate truth creates an environment where any implemented text is either too easy for a number of students, or is too difficult for a number of students, because the only medium with which English literature conveys its information is the very medium that ESL students have an imperfect grasp of: the English language. Consequently, this leaves all instruction in the process of literary analysis at a disadvantage. Fortunately, graphic novels, with their multi-sensory formatting that incorporates the visual alongside the textual, have the unique ability to bridge these gaps in linguistic knowledge, because the visual framework that graphic novels employ can convey as much literary information as written text can in terms of character development, setting, historical context, plot, and literary devices. Indeed, in certain circumstances, a good deal more information may be conveyed by the visual framework of a graphic novel as literary devices such as foreshadowing, metaphors, and symbolism. This makes graphic novels the superior choice to implement as the primary text for a university level ESL literature course, as any increase in text comprehension will ultimately yield a subsequent increase in comprehension of the instruction provided in the processes of literary analysis.

V. Conclusion

Graphic novels have steadily been gaining academic recognition as viable sources of literature through the work of award winning creators such as Jeff Smith's *Bone*, and literary analysts such as Christian Chun's work on Art Spiegelman's

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Maus, perhaps the first graphic novel to be recognized for its true literary status in an academic sense. Of course, the graphic novel continues to spark the imaginations of people of all ages all over the world in popular culture. In no other country is its popularity more confirmed than in Japan, where comics and graphic novels are a highly lucrative industry. It seems an obvious connection, then, to implement English graphic novels such as Jeff Smith's *Bone* into the university ESL literature curriculum in Japan, and to reap not only the academic benefits that graphic novels potentially offer to both instructors and students alike, but also to engage Japanese ESL students with a literary medium that they are both familiar with and enjoy.

The potential pedagogical benefits that graphic novels offer ESL literature courses take shape in three ways: textbook-like efficiency, bridging the language gap, and visualizing literary devices. The simultaneous presentation of visual information alongside textual information is theorized to increase information retention. This effect is a recognized design feature of efficient textbooks, and makes the implementation of a graphic novel as the primary text of an ESL literature course highly desirable due to a dearth of textbooks specific to English language literature. In terms of bridging the language gap, the presentation of literary information in visual formatting as well as written text in graphic novels allows for a much higher degree of literary comprehension, and are therefore superior to text only works in ESL environments, because graphic novels do not only have to rely on the English language to convey meaning to readers with an imperfect grasp on the English language. Finally, the pure visualization of literary devices such as foreshadowing, metaphors, and symbolism offer concrete examples to instruct the students on the literary process. Considering these three pedagogical benefits inherent to the implementation of a graphic novel as the primary text in an ESL literature course, as well as the added benefit of increasing instructional efficiency in the processes of literary analysis, it is the official recommendation of this paper to conduct practical research by implementing graphic novels into the ESL curriculum at Himeji Dokkyo University.

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the potential pedagogical benefits that the literary medium of graphic novels has to offer ESL literature courses at the university level, and why graphic novels are superior in pedagogical application in ESL classrooms. The academic benefits of the graphic novel medium take shape in three ways: graphic novels have an innate textbook-like efficiency in their pedagogical application because of their visual formatting that is presented alongside written text; graphic novels are also shown to be exceptionally effective at bridging the language gap for ESL learners reading L2 literature due to the visual formatting of the graphic novels reinforcing text written in the target language; finally, graphic novels have the ability to increase comprehension of some of the basic principles of literary analysis by providing concrete visualizations of literary devices such as foreshadowing, metaphors, and symbolism. It is due to these three very clear potential academic benefits that graphic novels are a highly recommended pedagogical tool for university level curriculum providing instruction in literature for ESL students.