

A Case for Comics: Framework for Fostering Critical Reading Skills in ESL Learners

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Abstract

This paper proposes a novel framework for fostering critical reading skills in English as a Second Language (ESL) students through the strategic use of comics and graphic novels. ESL learners often face the challenge of navigating complex linguistic and cultural nuances while simultaneously developing higher-order critical thinking. Comics, with their inherent multimodal nature, have the unique ability of making abstract concepts more accessible to such learners. The paper uses a Multimodal Critical Literacy (MCL) Framework comprising visual analysis, textual analysis, intermodal interpretation, and critical evaluation. The study believes that this framework would serve as a useful guide to learners and help them systematically deconstruct how meaning is constructed through the interplay of images and text. Four templated exercises included in the paper attempt to serve as a template for developing a pedagogical approach for future research in this area. The paper concludes by emphasising comics' transformative potential as a catalyst for enhanced critical literacy and calls for further research and teacher professional development in this promising pedagogical area.

Keywords: Comics; Language acquisition; ESL; Multimodal critical literacy; Critical reading

INTRODUCTION

The educational landscape is continually evolving, and graphic novels and comics are increasingly recognised as powerful tools for literacy development. Once seen as entertainment, these multimodal texts have now gained significant traction within academia in recent years. Moreover, in today's globalised world, the ability to critically engage with the text is an essential skill. Critical reading requires one to not only understand the literal meaning of a text but also be able to evaluate the author's purpose, infer underlying themes and question the reliability of the information presented. Developing these skills has been particularly challenging for ESL learners due to their incompetence in navigating linguistic and cultural barriers. As educators seek innovative ways to address these challenges, the comics genre has emerged as a valuable medium for enhancing students' engagement and critical thinking skills.

This paper introduces a new framework and a set of adaptable, templated exercises. These resources are specifically designed to harness the unique strength of comics in fostering critical reading skills among English as a Second Language (ESL)

learners. Our primary goal is to demonstrate how comics can serve as an effective medium for promoting deep critical engagement within the language learning environment.

In the Introduction to their work *Graphic Narrative*, authors Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven define graphic narrative as "narrative work in the medium of comics" (767). With their unique blend of visual and textual elements, a graphic narrative can offer a multimodal reading experience that can support comprehension and prove particularly effective in drawing in reluctant readers (Cary, 2004; Chun, 2009; Liu, 2004; *Learning Mole*, n.d.; *Teaching English*, n.d.). This multimodal approach significantly helps students visualise and grasp complex ideas, thereby contributing to the development of essential 21st-century literacy skills. Moreover, the reduced text load inherent in comics can substantially lower the anxiety ESL learners often feel when faced with dense, traditional print materials (*Cult of Pedagogy*, n.d.; *Learning Mole*, n.d.).

Ultimately, comics offer a uniquely accessible and engaging medium for ESL students to cultivate critical reading skills. However, this remains a

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largely unexplored area of research. Many studies and experiments treat comics as supplements to more traditional texts rather than as standalone materials that can independently foster critical analysis. Therefore, maximising this potential requires systematically teaching students how to critically analyse the intricate interplay between text and visuals, guiding them beyond simple comprehension toward deeper evaluation and nuanced interpretation. This pedagogical objective demands a structured framework and specifically targeted exercises that capitalise on the distinctive “grammar” of the comic medium.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: THE MULTIMODAL CRITICAL LITERACY (MCL)

The Multimodal Critical Literacy (MCL) Framework is a structured approach designed to enable ESL students to engage deeply and critically with comics. This framework integrates established principles of critical reading and visual literacy, acknowledging that a comprehensive critical understanding of comics necessitates proficiency in both verbal and visual literacies (Jaffe & Hurwich, 2018; ResearchGate, n.d.). The MCL Framework draws inspiration from influential guidelines such as the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (ACRL, n.d.; *Visual Literacy Competency Standards*, n.d.; *Framework for Visual Literacy*, n.d.), which provide an intellectual structure for developing skills in critically utilising visual media. The MCL Framework comprises four core components:

Visual Analysis

This component focuses on systematically deconstructing the visual elements inherent in a comic.

- **Knowledge Practices:** Students learn to identify and describe various visual cues, including panel layout, character expressions, the strategic use of colour, shading, and diverse forms of symbolism (Cary, 2004; Nattosoup, 2017; VCE Study Guides, n.d.; Toonsmag, n.d.; Learning Mole, n.d.).
- **Dispositions:** Learners cultivate careful observation skills, akin to the “Look, Observe, See” steps outlined by the Toledo Museum of Art’s process (Toledo Museum of Art, n.d.). They develop an understanding that visual elements are deliberately chosen by the creator to convey

specific meanings and intentions (Jaffe & Hurwich, 2018; ResearchGate, n.d.).

Textual Analysis

This component centres on deconstructing the linguistic elements within the comic.

- **Knowledge Practices:** Students analyse dialogue, captions, thought bubbles, sound effects, vocabulary choices, and grammatical structures (Toonsmag, n.d.; Learning Mole, n.d.). They practice identifying both the literal (denotative) and implied (connotative) meanings of words (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Valencia College, n.d.; Santa Ana College, n.d.).
- **Dispositions:** Learners develop an awareness of the author’s linguistic choices and their direct impact on the overall tone and message of the narrative (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Valencia College, n.d.; Walden University, n.d.).

Intermodal Interpretation

This is the central component for critical engagement, emphasising the dynamic interplay between text and visuals.

- **Knowledge Practices:** Students synthesise information from both images and text to construct a comprehensive understanding of meaning (Jaffe & Hurwich, 2018; ResearchGate, n.d.; Cult of Pedagogy, n.d.; Nordic Journal of Literacy Research, n.d.). They analyse how various panel transitions (e.g., moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect, non-sequitur) guide the reader’s eye, control narrative pacing, generate tension, and establish the story’s tone (Number Analytics, n.d.). Furthermore, they learn to interpret visual metaphors, hyperbole, juxtaposition, and caricature, understanding how these visual devices interact with accompanying text to convey complex ideas, emotions, or social and political commentary (Toonsmag, n.d.).
- **Dispositions:** Learners are encouraged to engage with texts critically to build robust multimodal literacy skills (Rajendra, 2015; Brugar et al., 2017; ResearchGate, n.d.). They develop the understanding that meaning is not solely derived from written text but is actively constructed through the integration of both written text and images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Nordic Journal of Literacy Research, n.d.). This process fosters the ability to infer meaning, predict outcomes, and make connections by

effectively utilising visual cues (Cary, 2004; Learning Mole, n.d.).

Critical Evaluation

This final component involves assessing the comic's overall message, its credibility, and its potential impact on the reader.

- **Knowledge Practices:** Students practice evaluating authorial intent and identifying both explicit and implicit biases within the narrative (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Valencia College, n.d.; Walden University, n.d.; Toonsmag, n.d.). They assess the overall trustworthiness of the comic as a source of information or a narrative (Walden University, n.d.). This includes determining how the combined textual and visual elements support presented conclusions or arguments (Walden University, n.d.). They also learn to recognise cultural norms and values that are depicted or reinforced within the comic (Lexia Learning, n.d.; Fisher Digital Publications, n.d.).
- **Dispositions:** Learners develop the capacity to form educated judgments about the text

(Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Valencia College, n.d.). They cultivate a questioning stance, challenging assumptions and recognising alternative interpretations of the presented material (Walden University, n.d.). They also develop an awareness of how visual communication can influence public perception and actively promote critical thinking (Toonsmag, n.d.).

Table 1 provides a clear, actionable mapping for educators, illustrating how specific critical reading skills can be targeted using distinct elements of comic art and narrative. Critical reading skills, such as identifying bias or evaluating evidence, can often feel abstract, particularly for ESL learners who are simultaneously navigating the complexities of language acquisition. Comics, however, offer tangible, visual elements that embody these abstract concepts. This table explicitly links these abstract skills to concrete comic elements. This direct mapping provides educators with a practical guide, enabling them to design lessons and prompts that directly connect critical thinking objectives to the unique features of comics.

Table 1: Critical Reading Skills and Corresponding Comic Elements for Analysis

Critical Reading Skill Focus	Key Comic Elements for Analysis
Identifying Author's Purpose/Intent	Panel layout, Character expressions, Visual metaphors, Dialogue/Captions, Art style, Colour scheme
Inferring Meaning/Drawing Conclusions	Gutters, Panel transitions, Character expressions, Body language, Visual symbolism, Implied actions
Evaluating Evidence/Argumentation	Textual claims, Visual evidence, Juxtaposition, Hyperbole, Panel sequencing, Author/Publisher credibility
Detecting Bias/Assumptions	Character expressions, Caricature, Visual metaphors, Panel angles, Colour/Shading, Tone of dialogue/captions
Understanding Cultural Context	Symbolic objects, Character actions, Setting details, Visual metaphors, Depiction of social norms
Analysing Tone/Mood	Colour scheme, Shading, Line work, Character expressions, Panel shapes, Dialogue font/style
Recognising Narrative Structure/Pacing	Panel transitions (Moment-to-Moment, Action-to-Action, Scene-to-Scene), Panel size/shape, Gutter use, Non-linear sequencing
Interpreting Figurative Language	Visual metaphors, Symbolism, Idiomatic expressions (with visual context), Hyperbole

TEMPLATE EXERCISES: OPERATIONALIZING THE MCL FRAMEWORK

The following template exercises are designed to operationalise the Multimodal Critical Literacy (MCL) Framework, providing educators with adaptable tools to cultivate critical reading skills in ESL students through the unique medium of comics.

Table 2 offers a concise overview of each exercise, its primary critical reading skill focus, and the key

comic features students will analyse. This table serves as a quick reference guide for educators and students, allowing for immediate understanding and efficient pedagogical planning. For a busy educator or researcher, this table acts as an immediate reference, enabling them to quickly grasp the purpose and scope of each exercise without having to read through lengthy descriptions, thereby enhancing the usability and pedagogical clarity of the proposed framework.

Table 2: Template Exercise Overview

Exercise Template Title	Primary Critical Reading Skill Focus	Key Comic Features Analysed
1. Analysing Visual Metaphors and Symbolism	Interpreting Implicit Meanings, Cultural Nuances, Authorial Intent, Bias Detection	Visual Metaphors, Symbolism, Caricature, Hyperbole, Juxtaposition, Cultural Context
2. Deconstructing Narrative Sequencing and Pacing	Understanding Narrative Flow, Inferencing, Analysing Storytelling Choices, Building Tension	Panel Transitions (Moment-to-Moment, Action-to-Action, Scene-to-Scene, etc.), Gutters, Panel Layout, Non-linear Storytelling
3. Interpreting Character Expressions and Identifying Bias	Inferring Emotions/Motivations, Recognising Perspective, Detecting Implicit Bias, Analysing Tone	Facial Expressions, Body Language, Panel Angles, Colour/Shading, Art Style, Dialogue-Expression Alignment
4. Evaluating Evidence and Argumentation in Multimodal Texts	Assessing Credibility, Analysing Arguments, Identifying Assumptions, Recognising Explicit/Implicit Bias	Textual Claims, Visual Evidence, Interplay of Text & Art, Counterarguments, Authorial Stance, Overall Trustworthiness

Exercise Template 1: Analysing Visual Metaphors and Symbolism

Focus: This exercise aims to develop students' ability to interpret implicit meanings, understand cultural nuances, and discern authorial intent through the analysis of symbolic imagery in comics. This directly addresses the common ESL challenge of comprehending figurative language and navigating unfamiliar cultural contexts.

Materials: Select comic strips or graphic novel excerpts that are rich in visual metaphors, symbolism, caricature, hyperbole, or juxtaposition. Editorial cartoons are particularly effective for this exercise due to their direct and often overt use of these techniques.

Procedure:

■ **Introduction to Visual Metaphors:** Begin by defining visual metaphors, symbolism, and related techniques such as caricature, juxtaposition, and hyperbole. Provide clear, simple examples from everyday life or easily recognisable images to build foundational understanding.

■ **Guided Analysis:** Present a carefully chosen comic panel or a short sequence. Instruct students to engage in careful observation, following steps similar to "Look, Observe, See" from the Toledo Museum of Art's process.

■ **Describe and Analyse:**

- "Describe precisely what you see literally in the panel or sequence."
- "Are there any objects, characters, or actions that appear to stand for something else, or

have a deeper meaning beyond their literal depiction?"

- "How do exaggerated features (caricature) or the placement of contrasting elements side-by-side (juxtaposition) contribute to conveying a specific message?"
- "What abstract idea, emotion, or piece of social/political commentary might this visual represent?"
- "How does the accompanying text (dialogue, captions) interact with the visual elements to create a more profound or layered meaning?"

(Read Brightly, n.d.; Toonsmag, n.d.)

■ **Interpret and Evaluate:**

- "What do you believe the author is attempting to communicate through the use of this visual metaphor?"
- "What cultural understanding or background knowledge is necessary to fully grasp the meaning of this symbol or metaphor?"
- "Does this visual metaphor influence your perception of the characters, the situation depicted, or the broader issue being addressed?"
- "Can you identify any potential bias in how the metaphor is presented by the artist or author?"

■ **Prompts for Discussion/Writing:**

- "Choose one prominent visual metaphor from the comic. Describe it in detail and explain its deeper meaning. How does this visual element help to simplify a complex issue for the reader?"
- "Discuss how the artist utilises symbolism to convey a character's internal emotional state

or to highlight a significant societal problem, often without the need for extensive dialogue.”

- “Imagine this comic were presented only as text. How would the meaning and impact be different without the powerful visual metaphors?”

Exercise Template 2: Deconstructing Narrative Sequencing and Pacing

Focus: This exercise aims to enhance students' understanding of how panel transitions, layout, and gutters fundamentally influence narrative flow, build tension, and shape overall meaning. It pushes students beyond simple plot comprehension towards a critical analysis of the creator's storytelling choices. This directly addresses ESL challenges related to deciphering difficult text structures and making inferences.

Materials: Select comic sequences that clearly demonstrate varied panel transitions, irregular panel shapes, or instances of non-linear storytelling. Works like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* are excellent examples due to their sophisticated and complex use of transitions.

Procedure:

- **Introduction to Panel Elements:** Begin by defining key comic elements such as panels, gutters, and the most common types of panel transitions. Explain how the size and arrangement of panels directly influence the reading flow and pacing of the narrative. Introduce the concept of “narrative grammar” as the underlying system governing how visual narratives are understood (Cohn, 2015; Wagner & Schönau, 2016).
- **Guided Analysis:** Present a specific multi-panel sequence from a chosen comic.
- **Describe and Analyse:**
 - “Identify the type of transition occurring between each consecutive panel in the sequence (e.g., moment-to-moment, action-to-action, scene-to-scene).”
 - “How does the artist utilise the 'gutter'—the space between panels—to imply the passage of time or an action that is not explicitly drawn?”
 - “How do the size and shape of the panels affect the overall pace of the story? Do they create a sense of urgency, slow down the action, or emphasise a particular moment?”

- “If the comic employs non-sequitur transitions or non-linear storytelling, how do these choices create surprise, disorientation, or provide subtle clues to the narrative?”
- “Analyse how the sequential arrangement of panels contributes to building tension or suspense within the story.”

■ Interpret and Evaluate:

- “Based on your analysis, why do you think the author chose *this particular* sequence or *this specific* type of panel transition at this point in the story?”
- “What emotional or atmospheric effect does this sequencing have on your understanding of the characters' feelings or the overall mood of the narrative?”
- “How does the panel layout and sequencing contribute to the story's main argument or central message?”

■ Prompts for Discussion/Writing:

- “Take a cut-up comic strip and re-order the panels in a different sequence. Justify your new arrangement, explaining how it alters the narrative, pacing, or emotional impact of the story.”
- “Select a specific sequence from the comic and describe how the panel transitions effectively guide your eye and control the story's rhythm. What narrative elements or emotional nuances would be lost if this sequence were merely a prose description?”
- “Explain how the interplay between panels and gutters compels you, as the reader, to make inferences about events or details that are not explicitly depicted between the frames.”

Exercise Template 3: Interpreting Character Expressions and Identifying Bias

Focus: This exercise is designed to help students infer characters' emotions, motivations, and potential biases by closely analysing facial expressions, body language, and the overall visual tone conveyed through the artwork. This directly addresses ESL challenges related to articulating opinions about text and understanding implicit information

Materials: Select comic panels or sequences that prominently feature character expressions, distinct body language, and variations in art style, colour, or shading that clearly convey mood or tone

Procedure:

- **Introduction to Visual Cues for Emotion/Bias:**
Discuss with students how artists utilise various visual elements to convey emotion, power dynamics, or attitude. This includes facial features (e.g., eyes, eyebrows, mouth), body posture, the use of warm or cool colours, heavy or light shading, and the angle of the panel (e.g., sloping up or down)
- **Guided Analysis:** Present a specific panel or sequence that focuses on a particular character.
- **Describe and Analyse:**
 - “Describe in detail the character's facial expression and body language. What specific visual cues (e.g., a furrowed brow, slumped shoulders, wide eyes) do you observe?”
 - “What emotions, attitudes, or internal states do these visual cues suggest about the character?”
 - “How do the overall art style, colour scheme, or shading in the panel contribute to the mood or tone of the scene?”
 - “How does the panel angle (e.g., looking up at a character from below, or down at them from above) influence your perception of the character's power, significance, or vulnerability?”
 - “Compare the character's visual expression with their spoken dialogue or internal thoughts. Do they align? If there is a contradiction, what might that imply about the character or the situation?”
- **Interpret and Evaluate:**
 - “Based on these visual cues, what can you infer about the character's motivations, personality traits, or their role in the narrative?”
 - “Does the artist appear to be presenting this character in a particular light (e.g., positive, negative, sympathetic, villainous)? How do the visual elements convey this implicit bias?”
 - “Discuss how an author might intentionally use character expressions to subtly influence the reader's opinion or understanding of a situation or another character.”
- **Prompts for Discussion/Writing:**
 - “Choose a character and analyse how their expressions evolve across a sequence of panels. What narrative does this progression of expressions tell about their emotional journey or development?”

- “Identify a panel where a character's visual expression seems to contradict their spoken words. What critical insight does this contradiction offer about the character's true feelings or the underlying situation?”
- “How does the artist's deliberate choice of expression for a character reveal their potential bias or specific perspective on the events unfolding in the story?”

Exercise Template 4: Evaluating Evidence and Argumentation in Multimodal Texts

Focus: This exercise is designed to enable students to assess the credibility and effectiveness of arguments presented through the integrated interplay of text and visuals in comics. It involves identifying underlying assumptions and recognising both explicit and implicit biases. This directly addresses the core critical reading component of evaluating evidence and arguments.

Materials: Select non-fiction graphic novels (e.g., historical accounts, biographies, social commentaries) or editorial comics that present a clear argument or explore a complex issue. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (Lexia Learning, n.d.) is an exemplary resource for this type of analysis due to its intricate portrayal of historical events and personal experience.

Procedure:

- **Introduction to Argumentation in Comics:**
Discuss with students how arguments are constructed in comics, not solely through written words, but also through deliberate visual choices. Explain how elements like the selection of specific imagery, the use of juxtaposition, or the deployment of visual metaphors can simplify complex issues and contribute to the overall argument.
- **Guided Analysis:** Present a specific section of a comic that clearly articulates a particular viewpoint or argument.
- **Describe and Analyse:**
 - “What is the central argument or primary message that the comic is attempting to convey?”
 - “Identify specific textual evidence (e.g., dialogue, captions, narrative boxes) that supports this main argument.”
 - “Identify specific visual evidence (e.g., particular images, sequences of panels, character depictions, symbolic

representations) that also supports this argument.”

- “Explain how the artwork and the text work together to strengthen the overall argument. If either the words or the pictures were removed, would the argument remain as compelling or clear?”
- “Has the author presented or addressed any counterarguments, either explicitly in the text or implicitly through the visuals?”

■ Interpret and Evaluate:

- “Does the evidence presented (both visual and textual) adequately and convincingly support the conclusions drawn by the author?”
- “Are there any unreasonable assumptions made by the author, either explicitly stated in the text or subtly implied by the visuals?”
- “Has the author allowed personal bias to influence their work? How can you discern this from the combination of words and pictures?”
- “Are there alternative interpretations that could be made from the evidence presented in the comic?”
- “Based on your analysis, evaluate the overall credibility of the comic as a source of information or a persuasive argument on this topic.”

■ Prompts for Discussion/Writing:

- “Choose a specific claim or assertion made within the comic. Provide both textual and visual evidence from the panels to either support or refute this claim.”
- “Analyse how the artist's visual choices—such as character design, setting details, or visual metaphors—reinforce the author's argument. Discuss whether these choices are fair or if they introduce a subtle bias.”
- “If you were tasked with creating a counter-argument to this comic, what specific visual and textual elements would you employ to challenge its claims and present an opposing viewpoint?”

CONCLUSION

Comics and graphic novels represent a uniquely effective and transformative medium for cultivating critical reading skills in English as a Second Language students. Their inherent multimodal nature significantly reduces the cognitive load often experienced by ESL learners while simultaneously boosting their motivation and engagement in the

reading process. This accessibility provides a crucial pathway for understanding complex linguistic features, such as figurative language, and navigating subtle cultural nuances, which otherwise frequently pose significant hurdles for ESL students.

The Multimodal Critical Literacy (MCL) Framework, introduced in this paper, provides a structured and comprehensive approach for deconstructing comics. By focusing on Visual Analysis, Textual Analysis, Intermodal Interpretation, and Critical Evaluation, the framework guides students through a systematic process of deep engagement. The templated exercises offer practical, adaptable tools for educators. These exercises are specifically designed to implement the MCL Framework, directly targeting key critical reading skills within the complex context of second language acquisition.

The implications for future research and pedagogical development are substantial. Further empirical research is needed to comprehensively explore the long-term effectiveness of comic-based critical reading interventions across diverse ESL proficiency levels and varied cultural backgrounds. Targeted training programs would equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and pedagogical skills to effectively integrate comics into their curricula and confidently facilitate multimodal critical analysis. Additionally, the development of a wider range of diverse, culturally relevant graphic novel resources specifically designed with ESL critical literacy development in mind would be highly beneficial. The potential of student-created comics as an innovative tool for both assessing and deepening critical understanding warrants further dedicated exploration, as it offers a unique avenue for learners to actively construct and demonstrate their critical insights.

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