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The Use of Comic Books in the Teaching of English as a
Second Language

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ABSTRACT

Literary texts are a tool for the English teacher to exploit, and they can prove themselves very useful for the students, not only in the form of linguistic improvement, but also in cultural and personal development as well. Comic books, being more recent literary texts, should always be selected according to some criteria (mainly regarding content and purpose), to avoid their becoming a hindrance instead of an aid. Their specific linguistic features and their use as gateways to more complex works are among their best assets. The present proposal contains four sets of activities include comics in the teaching of English, from easy-to-read strips to more complex narratives, and explores different possibilities for their use as an encouragement for students to write and speak.

Keywords: literature, comics, culture, English teaching, Secondary education.

RESUMEN

Los textos literarios constituyen una herramienta que el profesor de inglés puede aprovechar, y pueden demostrarse muy útiles para los estudiantes, no sólo para su mejora de su nivel lingüístico, sino también para su enriquecimiento cultural y personal. Los cómics, en su condición de textos literarios más recientes, deberían siempreser seleccionados de acuerdo con una serie de criterios (que atañen fundamentalmente a su contenido y a su propósito), para evitar que se conviertan en un lastre en vez de una ayuda. Sus rasgos lingüísticos específicos y su uso como entradas hacia obras más complejas se hallan entre sus mayores atractivos. La presente propuesta contiene cuatro conjuntos de actividades que incluyen cómics en la enseñanza de inglés, desde tiras sencillas hasta narraciones complejas, y explora diferentes posibilidades para su uso como un estímulo para que los estudiantes escriban y hablen.

Palabras clave: literatura, cómics, cultura, enseñanza de inglés, educación secundaria.

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1. Introduction

Although not strictly indispensable in language teaching, literature can yield many benefits to both teacher and student alike. Not only it provides learners with some of the best instances of any given language, but it also may foster their skills, especially those concerning reading comprehension and writing. Far from it being the truth that literary language is artificial and cannot be useful in everyday communicative situations, its study within English lessons can help students widen their knowledge of the language, as long as the materials used are properly selected. Furthermore, literature is a gateway not only to other peoples, something that will appeal to those who seek to live and work abroad, as well as those who wish to study cultures different from their own.

A part of literature that only in recent times has earned itself the right to be considered as such is that of comic books. Barely considered culture in their beginnings, they have become literary items worth of attention and study. As such, they are perfectly useful in language lessons, and even more so in English lessons, as English is the main language in the world of comics. Without displacing classic literary texts, comics can contribute to the improvement of students' proficiency in English, and be a source of enjoyment for them.

This dissertation proposes a set of activities for EFL students that use comics as a resource, trying to explore their possibilities to some degree. First, some issues on the nature of literature are discussed, to continue with a view on the role of literature in the teaching of English, in order to finally explain the possible uses of comics for that purpose. These uses are later materialised in the form of an intervention and a didactic proposal that details the suggested activities.

2. The teaching of English

The importance of English in the world at the present moment is well documented and known throughout all layers of society. Although it is surpassed by Mandarin Chinese and Spanish in terms of native speakers, it is the most spoken language in the world when we include all those who speak English but not as a first language, who constitute a considerably larger group (see fig.1). This circumstance stems from the fact that English, aside from being the first language in several countries (i.e. the US, the UK, Australia, Ireland, etc.) is nowadays a *lingua franca* in many parts of the world. Some countries, like the Netherlands, Finland or South Korea, have large segments of population that speak English fluently, and even when this is not the case, international relations and exchanges frequently use it: congresses, summits, diplomatic relations or academic journals would be representative examples. Although some other languages may become more relevant in the near future, and even come to challenge the predominance of English in some parts of the world (Tinsley and Board, 2013), its status as a lingua franca is likely to continue.
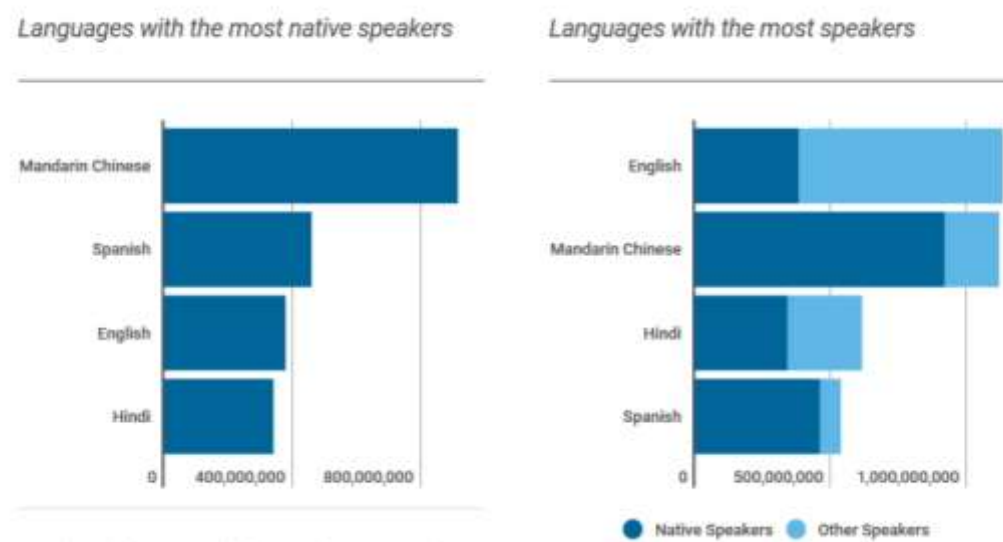

Figure 1 – Most spoken languages (both native and overall) in the world (Ethnologue, 2020)

In the light of this state of affairs, it can hardly be surprising that educational institutions worldwide devote time and resources to the teaching of English. In the case of Spain, the last two decades have witnessed an increase in the number of bilingual sections in primary and secondary education (a method that has its disadvantages, although it is not the topic at discussion here), and a shift in the teaching methods towards a more task-based approach, instead of the purely grammatical teachings of previous decades. The aim today for students of English (or any language, for that matter) is to properly develop four competencies: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. It is then a crucial task for teacher to choose suitable materials for their students, and it is regarding this fact that we can discuss the use of literature in English language lessons.

3. The use of literature in the teaching of English.

One of the first things we should be aware of when discussing language teaching should be the fact that learners usually will have different goals in mind. While some may want to focus on written English, others may prefer to prioritize his speaking skills; while some students will prefer to approach to a language in a holistic manner, others will only seek a purely instrumental and very specific use of it. Thus, not all of them may be equally interested in the development of the four competencies mentioned earlier. Bearing this in mind, the first question we should ask ourselves is how literature can help students, with their different views on the language, in their learning of English, and tied to this question is another one: that of what literature is. A query into standard dictionaries will yield results such as "pieces of writing that are valued as works of art, especially novels, plays and poems (in contrast to technical books and newspapers, magazines, etc.) (Oxford Learner's Dictionary) or "novels, play and poetry are referred to as literature, especially when they are considered good or important" (Collins Dictionary). There are, however, some problems with these definitions. First, it is a delicate task to discern what gives something value as a work of art, or what makes it "good or important" (in other words, to label something as a recommended reading or, if relevant enough, a classic). Second, both Oxford and Collins dictionaries include a second definition by which literature is "pieces of writing or printed information on a particular subject" (Oxford) and "The literature on a particular subject of study is all the books and articles that have been published about it" (Collins), thus making the process of defining literature even more confusing. We may, however, turn to more specialized sources. Terry Eagleton (1996), despite admitting the difficulty of the task, brings forth a definition of literature by which "in the words of the Russian critic Roman Jakobson, represents an organized violence committed on ordinary speech" (p.2). We would have here a first trait of what we call a literary text, a trait that would be given to us by its language. Eagleton carries on: "Literature transforms and intensifies everyday language, deviates systematically from everyday speech (p.2). We seem to have here some good foundations on which to build our concept of literature, those of a specific way of using language, a specific kind of writing. Then again, another problem arises: there are literary texts in which language is elaborate and baroque, and others in which (despite Jakobson's assertion) mimic everyday speech, and in both cases we may speak of literature. As a token of this contrast, we may compare J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in*

the Rye and any novel from Charles Dickens. Where Salinger's main character Holden Caulfield speaks in an informal register (as such register was in America during the 1950s), Dickensian writing is often more intricate (even though Dickens is not an especially verbose writer and has a good command of his narrative skills). If Salinger and Dickens are both literary works, we may begin to doubt whether language has importance at all when it comes to defining literature. Nevertheless, there is a common trait that sheds light on the matter: both in Salinger and Dickens language has gone through a process of elaboration, and it does not matter if the outcome is sharply different: there has definitely been such process. Even in those cases where a writer uses a very low register (Raymond Carver, Bukowski), there is elaboration. The same happens with children's literature: its language is adapted to children, but it nevertheless shows some degree of elaboration, in its case with a different target readership in mind.

This takes us back to our first question: how can literature help students with their learning of English? We must say, first of all, that this elaboration of literary language does not render it artificial and unusable. Takahashi (2015) describes how, in the context of Japanese secondary schools, the abandonment of literary texts in favour of those deemed more "authentic" proved to be detrimental for students' learning (p.37) . Hall (2015) emphasizes that "the language to be found in literary texts is often particularly interesting for language learners" (p.9), even if he warns that "there is no clear and obvious literary/non-literary divide to be defined on strictly linguistic principles" (p.10) and that "literary language cuts across dichotomies like spoken/written (oral/literate) and formal/informal" (p.10). He does well in warning us; we have already seen how a clear definition of literature is quite unlikely to ever be reached. Hall (2015), too, offers a key explanation on the usefulness of literature and literary language:

> Paradoxically, the linguistic study of literary language has indirectly provoked a
> better understanding of language and language use as a whole, just as diverse areas
> of descriptive linguistics, cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis have
> unexpectedly shown us the pervasively poetic and creative nature of everyday
> language use, and in doing so confirmed what once sounded like wild speculation
> in Derrida and other literary theorists. Far from a peripheral concern, in sum,

language used in literature is in many ways central to understanding language and language use in more general terms (p.10).

It seems clear that, from a linguistic point of view, the inclusion of literature in English lessons is advisable, but this is not the only advantage. Paran (2008) has criticized the "isolationist position, whereby language is concerned with acquiring competence in the L2 and nothing more […] this type of argumentation seems to be taking the learner as a person out of the equation" (pp.6-7). Literary texts appeal to us in more than one sense: they may help us with language learning, but they also appeal to us because "interest and love for literature is a human characteristic" (p.7). It is likely, as we can see, that the inclusion of literature has a chance of making language learning a more attractive experience.

In addition, one relevant factor we should point out is the approach that the teacher will take when using literature. Lazar (1993) proposes three main types:

-Language-based approach: the study and analysis of the language in literary texts contributes to the students' improvement of their own language, with which they can in turn assess and judge texts.

-Literature as content: literature is here the core of the lesson, its content, through which aspects such as history, sociology, politics, or literary critique may be studied. Language serves here as a tool.

-Literature for personal enrichment: this approach seeks to foster student's involvement in language learning by providing them with literary materials through which they can contribute with their own experience.

Although these approaches involve different ways of preparing materials and designing activities, it is not unlikely to encounter them combined to some degree, although maybe not in equal proportions.

3.1. Comics as a form of literature – The language of comics

While comics have been regarded as a "lower" form of literature, their artistic consideration has been steadily growing during the last decades; from being dismissed as "low-brow" and even vilified, they went on to become a form of art in its own right (Eco, 2007), with awards, specialized reviews and studies and press coverage of important releases. Comics, however, present some characteristic traits that are worth describing.

First of all, the most obvious feature of comics is the combination of image and text on a regular basis (unlike, for instance, an illustrated book, in which pictures support the text, but do not usually interact with it). The text is no longer self-sufficient; it needs the image to be wholly understood, but they coexist in a sort of symbiotic relation: they reinforce each other. As Eco (2007) states, there are grounds to say that comics have a linguistic code of their own, even if they use already existing languages. As a token of those linguistic features characteristic of comics, we can mention *balloons* (see figure 2).

Figure 2 – Comic balloons.

Balloons introduce new linguistic features in the language of comic books: they codify messages in new ways. Thus, the point that protrudes from a balloon indicates who is uttering the message; the shape of the balloon conveys paralinguistic information (a rounded shape means a normal tone, a pointy shape means a scream, a cloud-like shape means thought, etc.), and the its colour may indicate a different language (so that the reader can understand while some characters in the story cannot). Another feature of comic language is the fact that it usually works by association, as Moix (2007) explains: every image exists depending on others, whose dynamics it creates […] it is created spontaneously from the association process" (pp.96-97, my translation). The fact that comics have a code of their own speaks in favour of their use for the teaching of languages, as it can enable students to better recognize a wider array of different messages. Comic author Scott McCloud (1994) described how comics are "a form of amplification through simplification. […] By stripping down an image to its essential meaning, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (p.30).

3.2. The use of comics in the teaching of English

The use of comics in English lessons can be both interesting and beneficial for students. Three important advantages were described by several young students in a research carried out by Norton and Vanderheyden (2004):

Even more appealing for the students, however, are the visuals and pictures in Archie comics. As Liming explained, "When the author draws and when I read it, it makes me laugh." For many learners, however, the visuals are not only a source of humor, they are important signposts for events in the Archie stories. As Guofang explained, "Well, they got picture, can help them, colorful pictures can help the reader to understand like how, what is happening, going on." Namisha elaborated on this point, noting, "Well, sometimes when it's normally written, there's like not much pictures, right? But here it's showing you who's saying it with those little bubbles." Eva's strategy was even more proactive than Guofang's and Namisha's. "The stuff that I did," she said, "was that I first looked at the pictures and then I made up my own words." (p. 211)

Here we have three characteristics that are likely to be useful when using comics in the classroom. The first one is that they usually have elements of humour. Although that depends strongly on the selection of material, there are many comics that use humour in some way, like daily strips like *Garfield, Calvin & Hobbes*, *Pogo, Zits, or Baby Blues,* and short stories with few panels and a punchline that can be read in seconds.

The second element is that of the images as a helping device that, like Guofang (2004) states, helps the reader understand. In a comic, pictures supply a good part of the meaning of what is read: the text that the reader founds comes mostly in the form of utterances and brief captions, while descriptions are made unnecessary due to the fact that the settings and characters appear before our eyes. Since it is well-known that sometimes students are not too enthusiastic about reading texts, comics could ease that task for them in the form of stories that may catch (and hold) their attention more easily.

The third feature of comics is the fact that they lend themselves more to interaction. While many children like to create stories of their own, they may have difficulties when it comes to language. Nevertheless, if they are supplied with some images, they may find themselves more at ease to create, and use those images as a basis for their inventions. This is a good way of practicing with expression: we can think of activities in which the students are presented with comics in which balloons are blank, and they have to propose utterances that fit the different stories. Norton and Vanderheyden (2004) described this as an "ownership of meaning making" (p.211), explaining how, when reading comics, "the reader assumes two identities: the identity of the teller and that of the told" (ibid.). This dual identity (narrator and narrate) is usually attractive to young students, and it can help them focus on the lessons.

3.3. Criteria for the selection of texts

We may establish two groups of criteria regarding the choice of comics for the teaching of languages. The first group would revolve around *content* and its suitability. In a time when comic have attained a considerable degree of diversity, some selection work is needed. The teacher should always bear in mind the students he wants to use

comics with, and choose accordingly. There are comics such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen* or Bryan Talbot's *Luther Arkwright* that are probably ill-suited for most lessons due to their sheer complexity and dense language. On the other hand, some comics may have so little content that they would be mostly useless with students in upper levels. Similarly, the teacher should be aware of the different genres of comics: if he wants to work with stories that showcase everyday language and situation, then he probably should not choose superhero comics.

The second set of criteria is linked to *purpose*. There should be an aim when selecting comics to work with: why we choose them and what we want to achieve with them. Maybe they can aid the teacher when explaining some difficult concept, or provide easy-to-follow examples of some grammatical aspects. They can also provide with a good story for students to work on, or a base material for them to invent their own narratives. Comics may be useful too as gateways to more complex, classic literary texts (with which they should coexist): author Grant Morrison (2011) explains how comics lead him to investigate things such as Shelley's poetry, 18th history or the Bible. The teacher must bear in mind the English level of his students and what he wants them to work on, and the selection should prove fruitful.

It the light of what we have described in the previous sections, it seems clear that, even if an accurate definition of literature appears to be elusive, enough evidence is available to support the case for literary texts as useful tools for teaching. Far from being a set of "artificial" texts, literature keeps proving itself a good device for the linguistic development of students. While comics are a relatively recent invention (if we compare them to the rest of literature), they have grown in relevance to the point that their inclusion in language lessons should be carefully considered. The proposal that follows intends to be a small example of what may be done in the English class by using comics.

4. Teaching proposal

This section will describe the proposal for the implementation of a series of activities in a class of Secondary Education; activities derived from those tenets discussed in previous sections and further detailed in Sub-section 4.5.

4.1. Context

This proposal is aimed at a fourth-grade class of ESO in a public high school in the region of Castilla y León, and it is therefore regulated by and based on the Orden EDU/362/265, which describes how curricular contents are organized and details the standards for every subject and grade: contents, evaluation criteria and learning standards. Despite the fact that bilingual sections are increasingly extended in this region, the proposal here presented is aimed at students in a non-bilingual one.

The students at whom this proposal is aimed are, as said above, those of fourth grade of ESO (non-bilingual section) from a public school. The reason of choosing such grade is twofold: in order to make the most of these activities, it is advisable that students are at least above the basic level of English (thus making the first years of ESO a less suitable choice); on the other hand, students from Bachillerato have the preparation for the EBAU tests as their core purpose and may therefore reject activities that they consider unnecessary or not focused enough on the curriculum, even if such activities do help with their development of their linguistic skills. (We must face the fact that some students of English see literature or culture-related activities as less important, even when their benefits can hardly be denied). Another reason is the age of the target students. Evidently, those who like comics often begin reading them during school years, but for those who have never tried them, the teenage years are a good time to start. Even for those who enter their teens with a good knowledge of comics there is a lot to explore, as many titles are young-adult or adult-oriented and therefore not suitable for them at early ages. The fact that this proposal makes use of the communicative approach constitutes and additional reason to choose fourth-graders: Bachillerato, again, is focused on the EBAU tests and is therefore more grammar-oriented.

4.2. Objectives

It seems superfluous to state that the main goal in an English lesson is to improve the linguistic proficiency of learners. This goal, however, does not have to exclude others, and so is the case with the proposal presented here and the use of comics in the teaching of English. While one of its main objectives is, of course, the development of linguistic skills, it also aims at allowing the students to know different countries, cultures, literatures, and points of view, and to learn about them and compare to their own. We have already described comics as gateways to other things, and this is another objective of the activities presented in the proposal. There is also the chance for students to express themselves and put language in action; they should not be always receptors, but also producers of creative content, be it in the form of compositions, debates or presentations. The objectives pursued may be listed as follows:

Linguistic and academic formation

1- Improving and widening the student's vocabulary. Through different registers and different topics, they will learn different ways of speaking in keeping with each context.

2 – Using and reinforcing the student's understanding of grammatical structures, by seeing them in the different texts, and by using them in both their written and spoken production.

3 – Learning how to extract meaning and the main ideas from texts.

4 - Creating their own narratives and storylines; for instance, using "muted" comics in which they can supply their own meanings.

5 – Improving communicative skills: by means of conversations, discussions and presentations, students will gradually get accustomed to the use of language and they will polish their use of spoken speech.

Personal and cultural development:

1 – The students will know, and be encouraged to know, written literary works in the shape of comics, which are a cultural asset on their own but can also be the first step towards the discovery of more complex works.

2 – The students will learn how to present their own point of view on some issues and to respect those of others while discussing or even opposing them.

3 – By using comics as a first step, the students will widen their cultural formation on diverse topics; topics that they can research in more depth if they wish for more information.

4 –Students will be confronted with a means of expression that they probably are aware of but may never have come into direct contact with before.

Regarding the present legislation on education curricula, as stated in Orden EDU 362/265, the contents, evaluation criteria and learning standards that this proposal aims to fulfil are the detailed in the following table:

Contents	Evaluation criteria	Learning Standards
1 - ORAL TEXT COMPREHENSION (LISTENING)		
-Comprehension strategies: Use of previous information concerning type of task and theme (p. 32252).	Identify the general sense, essential information, main points and most relevant details in brief or middle-length texts (p. 32252)	[The student] 1 – Understands the main points of recorded or spoken languages that include instructions or indications (p.32252).

-Communicative functions: Description of physical features of people, objects, places and activities (p. 32252)

Accounts of past events, description of current states and situations (p.32252).

-Syntactic-discursive structures: oral, elementary, common usage lexikon regarding personal identification, home and personal context, everyday activities, friends and family, employment, free time, sports, travel and holidays, health, education, shopping, food, transports, weather, nature and ICTs (p.32253). | Be aware of and know the adequate strategies for the comprehension of the general meaning, main points and relevant details of the text (p. 32253).

Distinguish the most important communicative function (s)of a text, its most common exponents and its discursive patterns (p.32253) | 4 – Can comprehend, in an informal conversation, explanations or justifications of opinions and views o non varied issues of personal interest, as well as the formulation of hypotheses, expression of feelings and description of abtract topics (p.32253)

6 – Distinguish, with written or visual support, the main ideas and relevant information in presentations or talks (p. 32253). |
| 2- ORAL TEXT PRODUCTION (SPEAKING) | | |
| -Production strategies: Planning:

Conceiving the message properly, identifying the main ideas and basic structure (p.32254).

Adequating the text to the intended reader, with the corresponding register and structure for each case (p.32254).

-Production: Conveying the message in a clear and coherent way (p.32254).

Using previous knowledge, and compensate deficiencies by means of linguistic or paralinguistic procedures (p.32254). | Produce brief or middle-length texts, in formal, neutral or formal register (p.32254)

Know how to use the most suitable strategies to produce oral texts (monologues or dialogues), with a clear and simple structure, making use of available resource (p. 32254). | 1 – Gives brief and well-structured presentations, with visual aid, on specific aspects of academic or personal topics, organizing information in a coherent way and clearly explaining the main ideas and answering questions from listeners (p.32254).

3 – Takes an active part in face-to-face conversations, on everyday topics as well in less common ones, in which he exchanges information and justifies opinions and views (p. 32254). |

Sociocultural and sociolinguistic aspects (p.32255). -Communicative functions: -Communicative functions: Description of physical features of people, objects, places and activities (p. 32255). Accounts of past events, description of current states and situations, as well as future events (p.32255). -Syntactic-discursive structures: - Oral, elementary, common usage lexikon regarding personal identification, home and personal context, everyday activities, friends and family, employment, free time, sports, travel and holidays, health, education, shopping, food, transports, weather, nature and ICTs (p.32255).	Keep a speech pace fluent enough to make the message understandable in brief or middle-length interventions (32255)	
3 - WRITTEN TEXT COMPREHENSION (READING)		
-Comprehension srategies: Use of previous information concerning type of task and theme. Identification of textual type. (p. 32256). Ability to distinguish different types of comprehension: general sense, main information, core points). (p. 32256). -Communicative functions: Description of physical features of people, objects, places and activities (p. 32256).	Identify the general sense, essential information, main points and most relevant details in brief or middle-length texts (p. 32256) Be aware of and know the adequate strategies for the comprehension of the general meaning, main points and relevant details of the text (p. 32256).	3 – Comprehends, in any format including online forums and blogs, facts and experiences, impressions and feelings, and narrations real or imaginary (p. 32256)

Accounts of past events, description of current states and situations, as well as future events (p.32256). -Syntactic-discursive structures: - Elementary, common usage lexicon regarding personal identification, home and personal context, everyday activities, friends and family, employment, free time, sports, travel and holidays, health, education, shopping, food, transports, weather, nature and ICTs (p.32257).	Distinguish the most important communicative function (s)of a text, its most common exponents and its discursive patterns (p.32256)	7 – Understands the main features and the most relevant details of fiction texts and literary, contemporary, brief texts, in a standard variety of language (p. 32257)
4 - WRITTEN TEXT PRODUCTION (WRITING)		
-Production strategies: Use and coordination of general, basic competencies, in order to perform the task correctly (p.32257). -Production: Clear expression of the message, adapting it to models and traits of each text type (p.32258) Use of prior knowledge (established formulae, etc). (p.32258). Description of physical features of people, objects, places and activities (p. 32258). - Elementary, common usage lexicon regarding personal identification, home and personal context, everyday	Write (in paper or in electronic device) brief or middle-length texts, coherent and with a clear structure, on everyday issues or less common ones, with informal, neutral, or formal register, using cohesive devices and ortographic conventions, and showing a reasonable control of expressions and lexicon (p. 32257). Know, select and apply the most suitable strategies to write brief or middle length texts (p. 32258) Show a proper control of syntactic structures and select the correct elements of cohesion and coherence in order to organize discourse in an effective way (p,32258)	3 – Takes notes with simple and relevant information on everyday situations and specific aspects of academic and personal contexts (p. 32258). 4 –He writes notes, messages, or brief comments, in any format, requesting or transmitting information and opinions (p. 32258). 5 – He writes, in a conventional format, brief reports, in which he provides information on an academic or occupational, describing situations, peoples, places, objects and places, narrating events in a linear sequence (p.32258)

activities, friends and family, employment, free time, sports, travel and holidays, health, education, shopping, food, transports, weather, nature and ICTs (p.32257).		

Aside from contents, evaluation criteria and learning standards, this proposal is also designed taking into account the competences described in the Real Decreto 1105/2014, among which those whose development and improvement is pursued are listed below:

-Linguistic communication.

-Learning to learn.

-Social and civic competences.

-Cultural awareness and expression.

4.3. Methodology

The methodology of this proposal combines three different approaches. First, the communicative approach is used throughout the activities, which aim to encourage the students to produce (be it in written or spoken form), and to interact with others, to convey and receive messages, both among themselves and with the teacher (who will coordinate the students and facilitate situations that prompt communication: discussions, presentations, compositions, or even small talk within a class (which is useful as a warm-up). By doing this, they will learn to polish their performance and gradually correct their mistakes, as well as adequate their expression to different situations, with the teacher's guidance and intervention (as the teacher is a valid interlocutor in activities, too).

The activities also make use of Lazar's (1993) three approaches (language-based approach, literature as content, literature for personal enrichment) although they are not used uniformly. While it could be said that language-based approach underlies the entire

proposal (as its main aim is the improvement of target student' linguistic performance), it wanes in some activities in favour of the other two. When history-related comics are used, we are closer to the literature-as-content approach, while in other activities it is the third approach that is more favoured; for instance, presenting the students with cultures or cultural items they did not know, or allowing them to speak their minds and justify their views.

Finally, the third approach is that presented in Gavigan and Tomasevich (2011), which offers ideas for including comics in English lessons and use them to foster literary knowledge and linguistic skills, some of which we used for our proposal (use of wordless comic for students to fill up, use of characters in comics as a base to create stories, self-identification of the students with the characters, etc.).

4.4. Selected materials

As it was explained in previous sections, the variety of comics may nowadays seem staggering, especially for those who approach them for the first time. They have been already described here as gateways, and it would be fair to say that they are gateways to hundreds of places. They present some variety of themes and of language use, and they cover a wide temporal arc (from 1950s' *Peanuts* to the contemporary *Zits*). As the proposal is structured around four sets of activities, each of them entails the use of a comic (or several). The comics used and the themes linked to them are, to some extent, arranged from easier to harder, from the short strips of the first activities to the more complex comics of the last ones. The grouping has been designed according to the kind of literary material (comics, in this case) used in each of them, with each set being given a general name, indicated below. Activities are not meant to be done in a row, or to have a strict continuity, but it is recommended to follow the order in which the sets are presented:

-Set 1: Comic strips: *Calvin & Hobbes* (Bill Watterson, 1992), *Peanuts* (Charles Schulz, 2004), *Baby Blues* (Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott, 2020)

-Set 2: Teenage years: *Zits* (Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman, 2017)

-Set 3: Other cultures: *Persepolis,* (Marjane Satrapi, 2004)

-Set 4: History: *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (Art Spiegelman, 1991) *Last Day in Vietnam* (Will Eisner, 2000)

As for the selection criteria that guided the choice of materials, two have already been mentioned: *content* and *purpose.* There are, however, some other criteria, such as those presented by Lazar (1993): background of the target students, both cultural and literary, and their linguistic proficiency. Once we work with these guidelines in mind, the choice of materials for the lessons should not, in all probability, be hindered by aimlessness. Since our target group is mainly composed of students aged 14-15 (non-bilingual section), it is evident that their linguistic performance forces the teacher to leave aside some potential materials; while comics are usually deemed as easy reading, it is not uncommon to find works that could pose a challenge even for university students: not only complex works such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen* or Bryan Talbot's *Luther Arkwright* (mentioned earlier), but also apparently more accessible comics like American Sunday comics from the 20s and 30s, which, albeit short, use a characteristically American variant of English, with many linguistic feature that are now heavily outdated. Such works would probably by an ill-informed choice for a fourth-grade English class in many cases, although the case may be that they could be useful for a very specific purpose (study of English linguistic variation, for example). It could be objected to this proposal that one of the comics it includes (*Zits*) uses a somewhat colloquial register, something that is usually not advisable. Nevertheless, only 25% of activities use material from *Zits,* a comic whose colloquial language is considerably mild, and it rarely uses difficult slang. Regarding the other comics included in the activities, their linguistic difficulty is quite reasonable for the target students: more condensed messages in the comic strips, more complex in those in the last two sets.

Cultural and literary background is a relevant aspect too, as students may find some literary works too far away from them (both in space and time) to actually profit from their use. It is necessary, however, to point out, as Lazar (1993) notes, that texts from unknown or remote cultures/countries (remote from the point of view of the

students, that is), may carry an special allure for some readers, by stirring their curiosity about the "otherness" in any of its forms. That is one of the reasons for the inclusion of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*: it is an interesting take on a crucial time in the history of Iran, and it compensates for the fact that it was originally written in French and is therefore not as authentic as the rest of the texts. The rest of the comics are quite close to our time and culture The (chronological) exception may be Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*, but its paramount importance in the history of comic strips makes its inclusion advisable.

Finally, the purpose behind the choice of the materials used in the activities is tied to two of the features described before as pertaining to comics: ownership of meaning making and comics as gateways. Concerning the former, it is reflected in those activities in which students are encouraged to draw on comics to create stories of their own (as comics offer material that can be quickly grasped, in the form of images, they usually lend themselves more easily to this process than purely written texts). Regarding the latter, we previously described how comics may encourage further research on many topics: sets three and four were designed with that in mind (as they present topics such as contemporary history, politics and war).

4.5. Activities

The division of the activities in four set is meant to function as a sort of classification, with the type of comics used in each set being the main criteria for their grouping. Set 1 uses comic strips, which are short and usually easy to understand, as a first step for the student to familiarize with comics. Set 2 keeps using comic strips, but its activities focus more on the students expressing themselves, and ask them to speak/write about personal experiences. Set 3 and 4 are instances of what we described as "comics as gateways"; here they are used to introduce the students to a country and a culture (Iran) or to historical events (World War II and Vietnam War), and they can be adapted to other countries or History-related topics, provided there is some material to work with.

4.5.1. Set 1 – Comic strips

Activity 1 – Introduction – What do you know about comics?

Timing: 10-15 minutes.

Materials: No materials needed

Classroom management: as usual.

The teacher asks the students about comics; first he asks the class as a whole, then he asks specific students. He starts with general questions (what is a comic? Do you like comics?), then he probes what they know about comics, asking them about some title they like or remember. After this, it is time to make students speak a little more. From those who do know some example of comics, the teacher requests more information: a title, a genre, why they like it, what they would recommend. To those who do not know (or say that they do not like) comic, the teacher asks why. The main point is that in all cases students must justify their answers.

Activity 2 – Scrambled stories.

Timing: 25 minutes.

Materials: some comic strips, (wordless, panels scrambled), paper sheets.

Class management: students arranged in groups of two or three.

The teacher hands out to the students a Calvin & Hobbes comic strip per group. The strip must be wordless (some Calvin & Hobbes strips are) and have their panels scrambled. There are two options as to how to prepare this: the teacher may scramble the panels with a computer program, then print the copies needed and number the panels, so the students can write the correct series of numbers. Alternatively, the teacher may print copies of the original, cut each panel separately and hand a stack of panels to every group. The students have 25 minutes to order the panels and write (also in groups) a story that narrates what happens in the story they have arranged. The story must be told as an event of the past, using the corresponding tenses. It is important to notice that the teacher does not, in any moment, indicate the students the correct order of the panels, he just lets the students arrange them as they think most appropriate and write a

story accordingly (although he may solve doubts if the students cannot discern the content of a panel). The aim of this activity is to see if students can arrange a coherent story and tell it properly (see appendix for examples of wordless strips to use).

Activity 3 – Good ol'Charlie Brown

Timing: 10 minutes

Materials: *Peanuts* strips, paper sheets

Class management: students work individually

The teacher hands out one copy of the comic strip (figure 3) to each student, and give a brief explanation about Peanuts, its main character, Charlie Brown and its author Charles Schulz. Afterwards, he asks the students to write their own dialogues for the balloons. It is not necessary that they achieve a humorous effect; they can devise a dramatic dialogue, for example. This activity is intends to see how students manage very short stories with only a few lines, and how well they can convey a full message through them. Alternatively, the strip from figure 4 may be used.

Figure 3 – Peanuts strip.

Figure 4 – Peanuts strip.

Activity 4 – Baby Blues role-playing

Timing: 30 minutes

Materials: Computer and projector.

Class management: as usual.

The teacher shows some comic *Baby Blues* strips to the class, using the projector (they can be accessed freely on the internet). After making sure that everybody understands them, students come to the front of the classroom in pairs and act out situations linked to the comic strips, which describe in a humorous the daily life of a couple with three little children. Thus, one student takes the role of the father and

another takes that of the mother. The teacher proposes a situation they may face concerning their children, and both students discuss what to do. This activity also serves as a first contact with colloquial language, which will be the core of activity 5 (see appendix for examples of *Baby Blues* strips).

4.5.1. Set 2 – Teenage years

Activity 5 – Informal language
Timing: 25 minutes + homework (due the following session).
Materials: computer and projector, *Zits* comic strips
Class management: as usual.

The teacher projects some Zits strips for the class, all of which contain at least one example of colloquial language. He asks the students to identify such tokens, and he works jointly with the class to explain them to those who are less familiar with colloquial language. The teacher will prefer that some classmate explains the meanings, and he will only solve the doubts himself if no one is able to. Once the strips are properly understood, the teacher explains briefly some basic concepts about colloquial language, together with examples, i.e. colloquial nouns like *dude, beef, crush, roast* or verbal forms like *ain't, gonna, wanna,* or specific syntactic structures. He also shows the students how to use the online resource *Urbandictionary.com*. Finally, the teacher asks the students to write a brief (100 words) dialogue using colloquial language (see appendix for examples of *Zits* strips).

Activity 6 – The right questions

Timing: 40 minutes

Materials: computer, projector, *Zits* comic strip

Class management: as usual.

The teacher projects the strip in Figure 5 for the class to see. Then he asks the students to share their experiences. Have they ever been asked any of those questions by their parents? On what situations? Are parents the same in the US and in Spain? The teacher encourages the students to try to take their parents' point of view and to share experiences. He may also play the part of a parent to act out hypothetical situations and elicit more responses from the students.

Figure 5 – Zits strip.

Activity 7 –Your life in comics

Timing: 30 minutes

Materials: computer, projector *Zits* comic strips used in activity 5.

Class management: as usual

The teacher shows the students some *Zits* comic strips (he may use those from activity five or pick new ones). He then asks the students to write a brief composition (150-250 words) on the following topic: *What kind of comic book character would I be?*

As the title suggests, the composition should be written using conditional tenses. Students may use the strips shown in class as a base or may create a character from scratch (see appendix for examples of *Zits* strips).

Activity 8 –Time

Timing: 5 minutes (instructions) + homework (due the following week) + 15 minutes (debate)

Materials: *Zits* comic strips

Class management: as usual (core of the activity is to be done at home).

The teacher hands out two *Zits* comic strips (figures 6 and 7). The common topic of both of them is the passage of time, and the transition from childhood to the teenage years. He then gives instructions to them: they have to write a composition (350-500 words) on those topics, from a personal point of view: how they think they have changed, how they feel now compared to then, things that they have learned, etc. Compositions will be handed back in the following week, and once they are corrected, the teacher will select some ideas he considers apt for debate and present them (anonymously) to the class for a brief discussion.
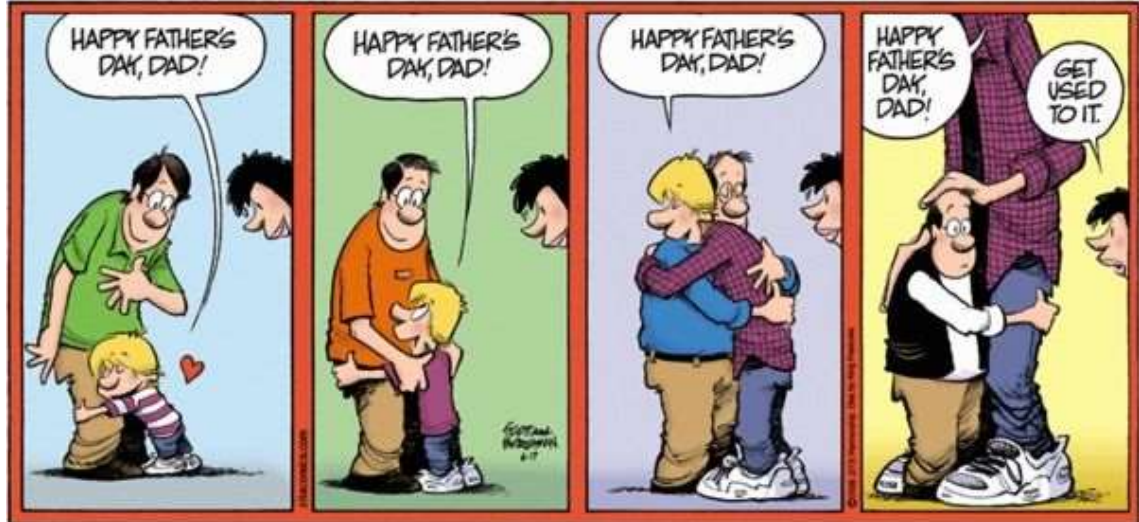

Figure 6 – Zits strip

Figure 7 – Zits strip.

4.5.1. Set 3 – Other cultures

Activity 9 – Getting to know Iran

Timing: 10 minutes

Materials: computer and projector

Class management: as usual.

The teacher, as a warm-up, asks the students what they know about Iran. He lets them talk freely, simply gathering information during the first minutes. Afterwards, he intervenes more actively, trying to clear the misconceptions on the issue (for instance, some people includes Iran among the "Arab countries", when they are Persian and have a distinctive language, etc.). The teacher then introduces the reading that they do in the following days.

Activity 10 - Persepolis

Timing: homework + 30 minutes

Materials: excerpt from *Persepolis*, paper sheets.

Class management: as usual

The teacher hands out copies of an excerpt of M. Satrapi's *Persepolis,* and gives instructions to the class: they have to read it for the next week and write a short composition (about 250 words) taking into account about the events depicted in that excerpt (the 1978 -79 Islamic Revolution in Iran, as seen by a little girl), but with a change in the point of view: they have to imagine how they would feel if that happened in today's Spain.

Activity 11 – Interview to Marjane Satrapi

Timing: 10 minutes (listening) + 10 minutes (note-checking)

Materials: computer, speakers, and projector.

Class management: students arranged in groups of 3-4 people.

The class listens to a brief interview with Marjane Satrapi, author of Persepolis, available at this link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9onZpQix_w

During the interview, students should take notes about the main points mentioned by the author. Once the two listenings are finished, the teacher will allow five minutes for groups to check their notes and put them in common, and decide whether they agree or not with the issues presented by Satrapi.

Activity 12 - Discussion

Timing: 25 minutes

Materials: notes from activity 11

Class management: students arranged in groups of 3-4 people.

Using the notes taken in the previous activity, the groups will take turns describing any of the topics presented by Satrapi and stating whether they agree or not (it may be the case that there are different opinions inside one group, which is not a problem at all).Students are expected to back and justify their views.

4.5.1. Set 4 - History

Activity 13 - Vietnam

Timing: homework + 15 minutes

Materials: excerpt from *Last day in Vietnam*

Class management: as usual.

The students are handed out copies of the short story *Last day in Vietnam,* taken from the homonymous comic. The teacher asks them to read it at home for the following lesson, and prepares a small quiz for them to fill, to see if they have properly understood the story. This quiz should not have very direct questions, but rather more oblique ones: students should be able to deduce things from the short story, and not only be asked about the mere facts in it. For example, students should be asked *What is the narrator's job?* or *Who are the three men the helicopter picks up from the jungle?* (questions whose answers are insinuated in the story) rather than *What is the name of the base they are going to?* (which is explicitly stated).

Activity 14 – What would you do?

Timing: homework + 50 minutes

Materials: excerpt from *Maus*, notes

Class management: as usual.

The teacher hands out copies of the third chapter of *Maus*, which details the increasing difficulties the main character, a Jewish man from Poland, faces when trying to outsmart the Nazis, during the beginning of the 1940s. Students are asked to read it for the following week, and the teacher poses some questions: what would you do in his place? How would you keep one step ahead of the Nazis? Would you run away, go into exile, fight back? Considering these questions, students have to think about what they would do if faced with such a situation. They are expected to answer with some degree of reasoning; they must describe a plan of action, a clear purpose, and justify it. The students may ask each other questions about what they say, and the teacher may do so too, but should give priority to the students interacting with each other. They are

allowed to bring notes taken while reading the excerpt of *Maus*, to aid themselves while presenting their answers to the class.

Activity 15 – War report
Timing: homework
Materials: excerpt from *Last Day in Vietnam*
Class management: as usual

Students are handed out another excerpt from *Last Day in Vietnam*. This time is the story *The Periphery*, which depicts the life of war journalists in Vietnam. The teacher asks them to write a short composition, 150-200 words, in which they must act as if they were war correspondents. They are encouraged to do some research on the war and write their composition as if they were a new dispatch. The teacher should suggest them to think about the kind of readership they are going to write for (military, civilian, national, foreigner), and how that may affect the content and style of their writing. He may also provide them with some basic information about Vietnam War so the students have a basis to work with. The composition is handed in two sessions later.

Activity 16 – Final
Timing: 40 minutes
Materials: none
Class management: students speak in turns throughout the session, in groups of 2-3 people.

For this activity, students are asked to form groups of 2-3 people (the teacher may let them choose classmates or do it randomly). They are asked to reflect on the activities of this proposal, to note down their impressions and suggestions and to tell the rest of the class about them, following turns. They do not have to stand up in front of the class. This activity is intended to be a way for the teacher of having some feedback on the activities, and it is also a chance for students to express their opinions on the matter. The teacher should ask the students to justify their views, whether positive or negative; they should do more than simply pointing out which activities they liked or not.

5. Conclusion

It is in the best interest of the students that literature be included in English (or other language) lessons. This does not mean that literary materials are completely bereft of setbacks: they may be a liability in some occasions, especially when the selection process is not done properly; a process whose importance has been emphasized enough throughout this dissertation. Disadvantages, however, are in this case bound to be swiftly overcome by benefits, and benefits of a varied nature, for literature may be as useful for students' linguistic proficiency as it is for their culture or their personal development. Devoting a little time to a proper selection process will be definitely worth any teacher's time.

Regarding the role of comics in the teaching of English, even the advocates of their inclusion should admit that they too may pose some problems (it is not infrequent to hear that comics will drive students away from proper literature) again, these pale when compared to the benefits. As discussed in the previous pages, comics may play an important role as gateways to other cultural tokens (and this does not deny their own status as a cultural item); they should coexist, not replace them. It is important to notice, too, that comics possess a code of their own, a very characteristic blend of image and text that may prove valuable for the development of comprehension and symbolic skills. Lastly, we cannot leave aside the fact that comics (like the rest of literature) may be quite enjoyable to read and work with, and this should be kept in mind by teachers and learners alike. This dissertation presents but a very small sample of what can be done with comics in the English classrooms, and aims to show some basic uses concerning the matter: just as comics can be used to introduce the students to a country and its culture, they can be used to do the same with historical figures and events, or scientific knowledge. On the other hand, some of the activities presented here are meant to be a stimulus for students to create and to develop their linguistic skills, be it by modifying the stories they read in comics, or inventing their own. If this proposal, like comics themselves, serves as a gateway to further research, then its purpose is fulfilled.

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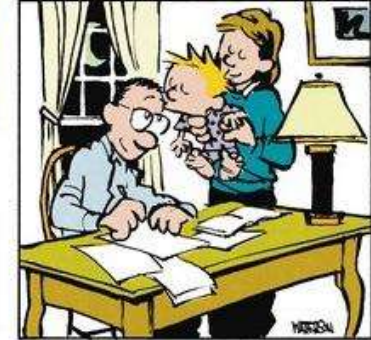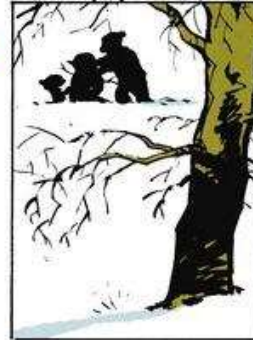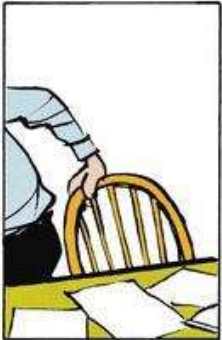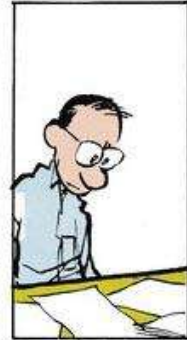
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7. Appendix

Activity 2- Comic strips for scrambling (different levels of difficulty).

Activity 4 – *Baby Blues* sample strips

Activities 5 and 7 – *Zits* sample strips.

Zits