L2 Learners' Perceptions of a Comic Strip in an ESP Classroom

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Abstract

This article reports on the results of a qualitative interpretive pilot study investigating the role of comic strips on tertiary ESP learners' motivation and discipline-specific language learning. The participants were 10 third-year students enrolled in two discipline-specific English courses at a university in Hong Kong. The results show that integrating multimodality through comic strips helped to transform the traditional delivery of instruction and also motivated and facilitated learners' understanding of discipline-specific concepts and vocabulary. Participants also indicated that technology contributed to more student agency and fostered language creativity as they expended more effort in their learning. The findings suggest the need for ESP teachers to explore technology and integrate creativity and multimodality in the delivery of discipline-specific course content.

Keywords: Comic Strips; Discipline-Specific, ESP; Hong Kong; L2; Learners; Motivation; Tertiary; Technology; Perception

Introduction

In the field of English for Specific Purposes (hereafter described as "ESP"), it is widely agreed that course design and teaching should always be based on learners' needs (Woodrow, 2018). Specifically, such forms of learning should emphasise – and factor in – each learner's specialization by preparing and disseminating discipline-specific content, promoting the development of skills that pertain to learners' particular workplace settings (Hyland, 2012). As such, ESP courses attempt to address learners' specific needs and interests by "tailoring instruction to specific rather than general learning purposes" (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 2). Learners are, thus, able to transfer the knowledge and skills that they have acquired and developed as a result of undertaking such studies to their current and future workplace settings (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). The adoption of such an approach would suggest that ESP students may well be more motivated than students who embark on English for General Purposes ("EGP") programmes; for the former, their course content is structured according to their specific needs. However, ESP still faces its own pedagogical challenges in terms of how to present the target languages in motivating ways so that learners will be engaged in their classes.

In today's tertiary education sector, multimodal texts – including images, graphs, drawings, and photographs – have become prevalent components of students' assignments (Molle & Prior, 2008; Parkinson, 2019). Hafner and Miller (2018) suggest that introducing multimodal forms of teaching resources to ESP programmes serves to prepare learners for authentic scenarios of discipline-specific communication. Students live and work in a world that is rich in multimodal resources; ESP teachers should, as such, take advantage of the cultural climate by incorporating visual aids – and providing relevant contextual information about them – into their teaching so as to help learners. Comic strips constitute just one form of visualisation that can communicate discipline-specific meanings. By combining just a few words and images, comic strips can capture a student's attention and, thus, increase their levels of motivation and their interest in learning (Schwarts & Rubinistein-Avila, 2006; Williams & Williams, 2011). Furthermore, by incorporating the consideration of comic strips into our teaching, we promote student-centred teaching and allow learners to embrace their own creativity while using multimodal resources in the ESP classroom (Parkinson, 2019). Discipline-specific teaching – that incorporates the use of visual components – should be considered to be an integral part of ESP courses.

In this study, I aim to provide insights – from the perspective of an ESP teacher – into the impact and effective implementation of comic strips as a pedagogical tool in a discipline-specific course at a university in Hong Kong. In particular, I explore the ways in which such resources can aid students to better comprehend useful discipline-specific concepts and vocabularies in realistic contexts. By utilising teaching materials that incorporate visual elements rather than solely relying on textual and literary forms, learners may perceive the content as being easier to learn. This may, in turn, improve their attentiveness, thereby leading to improved learning performance. In this interpretive study, I have undertaken my research process within the framework of a broad research question:

> RQ: Which elements of comics strips do students in the tertiary education sector find to be the most motivational and effective in assisting them in the acquisition of knowledge throughout their ESP course?

My analysis of the findings can provide ESP practitioners and researchers with useful information on how to incorporate new forms of multimodal teaching in their pedagogical practices which will, in doing so, serve to engage and motivate today's multimodal learners.

Literature Review

As a result of globalization, English has become the predominant *lingua franca* in the workplace (Crystal, 2003). Learners enrol on ESP courses for particular reasons (Viana, Bocorny, & Sarmento, 2018). These reasons often relate to one of two main interests: one's profession or one's academic studies (Dudley-Evans, 2001). ESP courses focus on that which L2 learners need to know in order to be able to communicate effectively in professional contexts; specifically, students are taught about the register, lexis, grammar, discourse, and genre of key phrases and texts (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Teachers place a strong emphasis upon learners being able to communicate effectively in the context of their individual disciplines; less emphasis is placed upon mastering field-specific vocabulary (Smoak, 2003). L2 students are, however, still expected to have a sound understanding of specialised discourse so that they may succeed in their course and in their workplace (Hyland & Tse, 2007; Woodward-Kron, 2008).

Pedagogically, in the classroom, a symbiotic relationship exists between teachers and learners; they complement each other. The former are language specialists whereas the latter often have considerable knowledge of a particular professional field. A productive partnership forms

between teacher and learner inside the ESP classroom as both parties work hard to close the information gap between them and, in the process of doing so, increasingly strengthen the quality of the communication between them (Viana et al., 2018). In the context of ESP programmes, teachers are particularly eager to use authentic materials in their classes and to set tasks which engage with learners' real-life work situations (Li, 2018). Therefore, an essential pedagogical component of ESP teaching is that teachers conduct a "needs analysis" of their learners prior to the commencement of the course and before creating or, if necessary, adapting materials to reflect the specific learner needs that have been identified (Belcher, 2004). It is important to do so if one hopes to provide realistic material to learners that will interest and motivate them.

ESP Learner Motivation

The motivating factors that drive English language learners in their studies have been explored widely in existing scholarship. Gardner and Lambert (1972) proposed the notion of "integrative motivation": a term that describes L2 learners' feelings of motivation with regard to developing their language skills so that they can participate in – and contribute effectively to – the L2 community. Another key concept was introduced by Dörnyei (1990): the idea that L2 learners become motivated to undertake their studies when they do so specifically to gain something. Such benefits could be, for example, financial rewards or better employment opportunities. Both strategies can be considered as being appropriate for and effective in increasing learners' levels of motivation and sustaining their goal-oriented behaviours (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008).

While few studies into motivational factors have, to date, focused on ESP students, several researchers have explored the field in greater detail. Cerqueira's and Badger's (2015) study of Brazilian learners aligns with Gardner's (1985) finding that students who maintain a positive attitude towards the English-speaking community are typically more motivated to learn. Correspondingly, Komiyama (2013) discovered that learners' extrinsic motivations contributed to their learning. In Huang's (2006) research into learners' levels of engagement with textual study, language difficulty was shown to be a major factor that influenced learners' levels of motivation. Indeed, Huang's study indicated that texts which included illustrations – and highlighted accessible vocabulary and grammar – served to increase students' levels of motivation. In light of these findings, it is essential to conduct further, detailed investigations into how visual elements could motivate ESP learners and enhance the quality of their learning.

ESP and Technology

In English language teaching today, technology is an integral part of the delivery of learning and teaching (Healey, 2018). As such, technology has impacted all areas of ESP teaching. Previous studies have proven the benefits of integrating technology into the process of second language acquisition (Cardenas-Claros & Oyanedel, 2015; Chappelle & Sauro, 2017). Technology provides ESP teachers with numerous tools with which they can address the specific needs of their learners. Specifically, technological tools and devices afford learners with the means to participate in professional virtual communities and to access up-to-date information that is relevant to their disciplines; teachers, meanwhile, are able to create suitable materials and to provide appropriate environments in which language learning may take place (Arnó-Macià, 2012). ESP teachers must carefully consider the forms of technology that they adopt to optimise the quality of their teaching. Moreover, teachers need to decide which types of writing or printed material are best supported by technology as well as thinking about how different forms of technology may be used most effectively in educational contexts (Chappelle & Sauro, 2017). Such decisions must, of course, be made in accordance with the needs of the specific learners with whom the teacher is working. Technology has the potential to be an invaluable component of ESP courses in that it can enrich learners' experiences and facilitate authentic language usage so that learners can experience – rather than simply acquiring – the language in a particular context (Li, 2018).

Among the key benefits of using technology is the educational autonomy and ownership with which it provides learners. Previous studies have established that learners should positively participate in learning activities by choosing content themselves, evaluating their own progress, and honing their knowledge and skills by taking responsibility for their own learning process (Nunan 1997). This model for self-directed learning is an integral component of ESP courses (Carter, 1983). Digital learning environments offer valuable educational opportunities to learners through which they may engage in language learning by undertaking context-rich, authentic tasks – that offer many visual aids – in the target language.

Visuals and Comic Strips

English language teaching materials tend to incorporate visually-rich components such as photos, cartoons, and charts in order to make the content more appealing and to activate learners' individual schemata (Kiss & Weninger, 2017; Mitsikopoulou, 2015). Comic strips

provide effective means of and opportunities for bringing authentic examples of the target language into the classroom (Kohnke, 2019). Studies that illustrate the ways in which comic strips can increase learners' levels of interest and motivation (Schwarts & Rubinistein-Avila, 2006) have been of particular interest to me in the context of this research. Likewise, this study has especially been keen to consider scholarship that shows how such resources may encourage learners to become more skilled at critically engaging with texts that examine complex concepts: both in terms of analysing texts and in producing their own (Khan, 2019; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002). A comic strip is a useful yet simple visual medium; it consists of words, phrases, and short sentences for the purposes of telling a story. The expressive potential of comic strips lies in their authors' skilful utilisation of both words and images to create realistic situations. Visual aids in the classroom are vital resources that serve to connect ESP learners with discipline-specific vocabulary and contexts. Despite visual aids constituting a significant component of language teaching, little research has been undertaken hitherto to examine the ways in which learners engage with comic strips. As noted by Tomlinson (2012), "There seems to be very little published on what teachers and learners actually do with materials in the classroom" (p. 156). Therefore, more research is needed so that we can investigate the extent to which learners' levels engagement and motivation are affected when online comic strips are integrated into the course design of ESP programmes.

Methodology

In undertaking this pilot study, I have investigated learners' perceptions of the benefits of incorporating comic strips into the course design of two ESP courses at a university in Hong Kong. This study is emergent in nature. I have adopted a qualitative research design in undertaking this research. I have conducted semi-structured interviews within an interpretive paradigm to gain a rich and complete understanding of participants' experiences of their programmes (Geertz, 1973). In line with interpretivist research, I have outlined the context and description below, and each reader will decide the relevance and value to his or her own context (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To convey the content of participants' responses as accurately and effectively as possible, I present a thematic analysis in this paper.

Pixton: Comic Strip Maker

I have used *Pixton* (www.pixton.com) for the purposes of this study. I define a "comic strip" as being a series of pictures – which are presented inside boxes – that tell a story. With regard

to the learners whom I interviewed for this study, *Pixton* helped them to improve their understanding of discipline-specific vocabulary and concepts. The website comes with pre-made templates and characters, thereby making the visual material relatively easy to navigate. As such, *Pixton* exemplifies the ways in which comic strips can be customized for learners – who are at different levels and are of varied abilities – within a single classroom. Neither teachers nor students need to possess any particular pedagogical skills in order to optimise their use of *Pixton*'s comic strips for educational purposes. I deemed the software to be suitable for the objectives of the study due to its simplicity and adaptability. A teacher can develop several frames (e.g., single panel/drawing) by using the free version of the software. As the study used *Pixton* throughout the semester a paid licence was acquired.

Course Content and Procedure

I introduced comic strips in the very first week of the "English for Digital Media" and "English for Interactive Media" courses at the university in order to help students to be able to understand new concepts and to promote their use of the target language through student-centred work (e.g. student discovery, group discussion, role-play). Each week, I used comic strips to explain and expand on various concepts and as key components of our activities in class. Activities included: jigsaws; grammar and vocabulary cloze exercise; adding panels; adding dialogue bubbles (target vocabulary, phrases); and re-telling comic strip segments by supplying alternative endings so as to encourage a more creative and learner-centred environment. These activities helped the students to develop and to practice their use of the target language. I also asked students to create their own comics, working both in pairs and individually, by way of demonstrating their levels of understanding of discipline-specific concepts such as creative strategy and treatments. I then posted these comic strips on our course learning management platform so as to illustrate students' levels of understanding of specific concepts as well as the target language more broadly. Moreover, at the end of each week, I created a two- or three-frame comic strip to reinforce and consolidate the learners' knowledge of the key concepts that we had already discussed in class. From my perspective as a teacher, comics strips provided productive means and opportunities to bring authentic instances of the target language into the classroom.

Research Participants in the Pilot Study

Ten participants volunteered to take part in this study: five males and five females. All the participants were enrolled in two discipline-specific courses, and all were in their third year of undergraduate study. Their ages ranged from 20-21 years old. The participants were culturally and linguistically homogenous; Chinese was their L1 and English was their L2. All the participants had previously completed an English for Academic Purposes course during the first year of their university studies. In formulating my sampling strategy, I included both purposeful and convenience elements involving information-rich cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). All the students who were enrolled in the two courses were invited to participate in the study; as a teacher of one of the courses, I had already taught a few of the participants. To ensure that all the participants understood the purpose of the study, how the data I collected from them would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time, I explained all of the information to them verbally before asking them to sign consent forms. All the participants were assured that their names and answers would be kept secret; I then assigned them pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview. The interviews ranged from approximately 34-51 minutes in duration; I recorded each of them and transcribed the content afterwards. I prepared an interview guide in advance of conducting the interviews to ensure that I requested and collected exactly the same information from each participant (Kvale, 2006). In asking my interview questions, I sought to explore the following topics: how learners had found their experiences of reading comic strips throughout the course; how useful learners had found the use of comic strips in helping them to understand course content; what learners had found the most interesting aspects of using comic strips throughout the course. My aim in doing so was to generate "a thicker and richer narrative of [participants'] experience" (Hostetler, 2005, p. 17) and their perceptions of comic strips, and how these perceptions had been used to facilitate learning in their discipline-specific courses.

I asked the participants to perform two member checks. Firstly, I provided all participants with a copy of their transcripts and asked them to verify whether or not the transcripts accurately reflected their experiences. Then, I coded the transcripts and categorized them manually in accordance with the six steps that Braun and Clark (2006) recommended for thematic analysis.

A key strength of this approach is its flexibility (Reicher & Taylor, 2005); the analysis is guided by the key ideas and perspectives of the researcher (Gibbs, 2007; Kelle, 1997) which helps to generate a rich, complete, and complex account of the data. Finally, I presented the participants with a final draft of my thematic analysis and quotations from my interviews with them so that they would have an opportunity to verify that the information that is presented in this report accurately reflects their experiences. None of the participants suggested any additions or revisions in either of the member checks.

Results and Discussion

I have organised my findings in accordance with the guiding research question. Each italicised heading introduces a theme that consists of discussions of, and answers to, the question. In the data that I have presented below, I have introduced the participants' responses to the interview questions as direct *verbatim* quotations in order to illustrate the participants' experiences of using comic strips as accurately as possible, enabling them to give their own, rich accounts of their programmes.

> RQ: Which elements of comics strips do students in the tertiary education sector
> find to be the most motivational and effective in assisting them in the acquisition
> of knowledge throughout their ESP course?

Breaking Down Complex Concepts

This response was a common one among participants. Indeed, it appeared in all the interviews, as participants perceived this as a key benefit of using comics for educational purposes. Although the use of comic strips may initially seem somewhat juvenile for pedagogical purposes at the tertiary level of education, as expressed by Julie: "I'm 20 years old and attending university." Like Julie, Zoe was at first was also hesitant in using comic strips, which she though oversimplified concepts and made learning rather superficial:

> We are only learning some words or phrases in the comic strips. What about the
> big picture? I can't see how it will help us.

This comment highlights that some may initially consider incorporating comic strips unfitting for tertiary students, and that not all students will see the benefits in the learning process.

However, most participants asserted that comic strips presented and broke down complex ideas in a simple, effective and comprehensible manner:

> The speech bubbles really helped me to understand the creative strategy, especially when the first character asked a question and then his friend answered. Actually, this is all the information I needed, and I understood how to complete the task. (Jessica)

> Normally, we have to read a passage and I would have trouble to follow [*sic*], I would talk to my classmates afterward[s]. But the comic strips make it … so simple, and all the main points are right there. I knew what I should be doing. (Ken)

Comic strips present visual language with both simplification and exaggeration. Concepts are deconstructed and simplified through the economy of expression that defines the comic strip as a form (Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002). However, most students consider that this aspect of comics greatly helps them to undertake and complete tasks throughout the course. Since an inadequate understanding of key concepts can lead to a learner's inability to carry out a task – thus diminishing his or her learning progress (Nunan, 1997) – it is crucial that the chosen comic strip represents the "one thing" that students should understand as a result of completing a topic. The following excerpt illustrates the specific ways in which students benefited from the use of comic strips:

> First, I was really hesitant, I mean, this seems a little bit childish, and I didn't believe [that] they [comic strips] could provide me with enough information. But, after a while, I really started to understand the concept [that] our teacher introduced quicker [*sic*], especially [as] the pre- and post-class comics made me more willing to actually complete the tasks. It didn't seem so boring! (Tom)

Others reiterated this point in their interviews with me. Thus, comic strips were eventually seen as beneficial in the ESP classroom, bridging the gap between learner needs – in terms of functional understanding – and the theoretical needs of the teacher. The interactive nature and, perhaps, the ostensibly more informal, relaxed register of comics brought learning to life. As Tom mentioned, comic strips transformed students from passive reluctant learners into active co-creators.

Visual Elements Are Engaging and Fun

Seven interviewees reported that they found the dialogue balloons in comic strips more fun and engaging than traditional paragraphs and teacher-led or written instructions. This is a very pertinent finding, as these students are naturally visual learners and they tend to be unmotivated to complete reading tasks; breaking down complex concepts in this way while making learning more engaging and fun will lead to better learning outcomes (Williams & Williams, 2015). Daisy, Sue, and Ben offered the following comments on this subject:

> It is so much more fun reading comic strips than boring academic texts. I feel I can understand the concept easier. I feel I don't have to keep pushing myself as hard, but I still accomplish the goal our teacher set for us. (Daisy)

> Yes, I actually enjoyed the classes more! The pictures [comics] showed how something actually worked, what language we should use, and it made it all [seem] so easy. (Sue)

> I felt it like a step-by-step approach, first this comic, then the next one and, finally, I got it. Instead of getting everything at once, here it was presented as a visual process, broken down with the key ideas illustrated. (Ben)

As these quotations illustrate, certain elements of comics – such as the "fun factor" – can aid and motivate learners and, in this context, they were certainly conducive to effective learning practices (Cary, 2004). Comics were particularly useful for Ken, who enjoyed reading and reviewing the comics before and after his lessons respectively. This correlates with Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis that if students are engaged in their reading, they are more likely to perform well. Other participants reiterated this point: that comics break complex concepts down into manageable, bite-sized learning chunks. Previous studies have also found that comic strips have an innate power to motivate students to read, learn and engage with texts (Carter, 2009; Norton, 2003).

Positive Attitudes Toward English

Key skills that learners should gain and develop throughout the process of embarking on ESP courses include their motivation to learn the language, being able to communicate using discipline-specific vocabulary, and developing the confidence to participate in the community

(Li & Gong, 2019; Woodrow, 2018). While conducting this study, I found that the simplicity of the comic medium undoubtedly made students more confident and eager to contribute to discussions – both inside and outside their classes. Michael commented that, as a result of learning with comics, he felt more secure and relaxed about using discipline-related words accurately while communicating both in class and during professional internships. He stated:

> Having seen how the word could be used in a simple conversation, I realized it doesn't have to be so complicated. Actually, as long as I can use the word, I don't have to make it sound super academic.

Other interviewees agreed that comic strips provided an instrumental source of motivation. Though, one participant, Tom, was not confident that the skills he had acquired through the comic-based learning would help her to obtain better employment opportunities. However, most students disagreed with this notion, as stated by Julie: "the illustrations and simple vocabulary and grammar make me more confident to speak to potential clients".

Thus, generally, comic strips enabled students to feel a stronger sense of belonging within the L2 community (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) as well as encouraging them to be more confident in seeking and securing future occupational rewards (Dörnyei, 1990). As these quotations suggest, having opportunities to encounter complex concepts and challenging words through plain English – with the support of visual aids – enhanced learners' levels of motivation and increased their willingness to participate in the discourse among members of their professional communities. The use of the aforementioned technology facilitated the delivery of key knowledge to the students and transformed their learning opportunities from seemingly complicated ones into simple, active forms of learning.

Technology as a Tool

The findings of this study show that students enjoyed the experience of using *Pixton* to create comic strips to illustrate their understanding of concepts. As previous studies have shown, technology provides ESP students with important tools with which they may facilitate their acquisition of linguistic and content-specific knowledge (Macaro, Handley, & Walter, 2012). The interviewees mentioned that, by being able to illustrate discipline-specific content in frames with visual aids, they were better able to show their understanding of the course's learning objectives. Adam and Zoe remarked:

Instead of writing a short paragraph on "treatment" for my storyline, I could instead create a four-frame comic strip, explaining it in a visual manner. (Adam)

This is more helpful in learning how to present specific information. We learn how to be more precise and present our ideas with few words using technology. (Zoe)

Other learners made similar comments, noting that the use of technology was an integral part of their learning and it facilitated discipline-specific vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, Jessica thought that using comics was "enjoyable and helped [me to] recall specific words and concepts better than traditional materials". Integrating technology as a multimodal tool in the ESP course was something all participants found helpful. These findings echo previous studies that have found that technology is a vital component of contemporary English language teaching (Healay, 2018). The integration of technology and multimodality in ESP teaching and learning means that concepts, thoughts and ideas can be conveyed to learners through interactive visuals (Li, 2014).

Technology as a Space for Communication

Technology is constantly changing and evolving. Today, it is a communicative tool that allows learners to collaborate and facilitates the acquisition of discipline-specific knowledge (Li, 2018). While I was conducting this study, it became clear to me that the interviewees preferred to create comic strips as a follow-up activity to explain a new concept introduced in class or as a response to the comic strips their classmates had produced. As Michael explained:

When I see my classmates posting one or two frames on Blackboard, instead of just replying with a sentence, I can create my own response using a comic with fun colours, speech bubbles and expressions. It really shows more what I think, and I also think everyone likes it more.

Another participant, Tom, expanded on this point:

I can access the comic strips on Blackboard multiple times at my own pace. I can think about what I really feel and take time to create something which shows my ideas. I don't mind the extra work.

As the two quotations above illustrate, learners feel motivated to engage in self-directed learning when they have the freedom, opportunity and resources to produce responses that demonstrate their level of understanding as well as their feelings. This correlates with previous studies in ESP and learner motivation (Hamzaoui-Elachachi & Graia, 2014) and university culture in Hong Kong (Lau, 2018). Moreover, as Michael and Tom highlighted, technology allows students to have more agency – to feel that they have more control – and this has the effect of engaging and motivating students, fostering creativity in their learning.

Conclusion and Implications

In this small pilot study, I have explored the potential impact of using comic strips as pedagogical tools in discipline-specific courses by reporting participants' perceptions of comic strips and the ways they affect learners' levels of motivation. The findings of this study revealed a positive effect on the levels of motivation and self-directed learning amongst 10 L2 tertiary students at a university in Hong Kong. The use of comic strips contributed to the creation of an environment that was conducive to learning. In spite of their initial hesitancy, participants found that the strategy of incorporating comic strips into learning served to motivate them and facilitated their understanding of complex concepts through a simple medium. Moreover, the results illustrate that well-designed comic strips may increase the willingness of learners actively to participate in and take responsibility for their learning, leading to improved learning performance. This study enhances the broader knowledge among educators of how a simple comic strip – a visual connection between images and discipline-specific vocabulary – can be presented in a practical way to connect students' concrete and abstract thinking.

Another important implication of these findings is the clear need for multimodality in the presentation of materials to ESP learners. Teachers should take into account which type of visual aid works better for an individual learner's level of proficiency. The goal of ESP courses should be to address learners' specific needs and interests. Rather than forcing students to read long paragraphs of text, comic strips can transform the presentation of a text's critical information from a literary form to a more visually memorable form. Rather than being driven by traditional learning materials, multimodality is a new approach with which we might aid students in their endeavours to learn discipline-specific vocabulary and concepts. Moreover, multimodality can help students to develop their levels of confidence and to increase their exposure to the target language in the context of a low-stakes environment.

Comic strips allow learners to foster and exploit their own creativity while exploring discipline-specific vocabulary and concepts. One advantage of incorporating multimodality into ESP classrooms is that learners are creatively engaged while applying their knowledge in more dynamic, flexible ways. Learners acquire specific vocabulary and improve their knowledge of grammar in a more organic way when doing so through the use of comics. Elements of multimodality improve L2 learners' skills in vocabulary acquisition, visual literacy and reading comprehension. Furthermore, the results of this initial study indicate that comic strips are incredibly effective in engaging learners in the learning process.

While this study focused exclusively on the use of comic strips by ESP students, there are other multimodal forms – for example, cartoons, illustrations, photographs, and maps – that could have different, greater or lesser results on L2 learners' levels of motivation and engagement. Although the current study suggests that comic strips have a positive effect on L2 learners' levels of motivation and language acquisition, the impact of using comic strips for pedagogical purposes on the retention rates of L2 learners was not investigated. Moreover, interviews were the only form of data collection, and the sample size for this pilot study was relatively small. Thus, the results may not be generalizable to L2 learners in different contexts. The full study will employ multiple data collection methods including questionnaires, discourse analysis, and interviews to better understand the pedagogical use of comic strips can have on learners' levels of academic success. In addition, the full study aims to test comic strips' effect on ESP learners' discipline-specific vocabulary retention using recall protocols and scoring measurements. Another finding of this pilot study revealed that comic strips helped students to undertake tasks and to explain key concepts in a functional manner. As for future research directions, it would be worthwhile to investigate how ESP textbook and material designers can make informed decisions in regard to linguistic complexity when selecting and creating comic strips for ESP learners in terms of processing linguistic inputs and retrieving the necessary information for output.

In summary, learner motivation is an integral component of ESP courses., I have shown in this initial explorative study how the pedagogical use of comic strips in tertiary education afforded a sample group of students with engaging and motivational language practice – both inside and outside the classroom – by using authentic, realistic examples of discourse, with visual aids, in the target language. Due to the use of comic strips, these 10 learners invested more effort in learning English and course content; indeed, they developed more positive attitudes towards

learning overall. ESP teachers need to prepare for today's diverse multimodal learners by weaving both texts and visual aids of all types into the learning environment and the curriculum for language courses. This initial study established that comic strips offered ESP students a stronger sense of belonging within the L2 community and facilitated their understanding of complex concepts. It offers a feasible way to increase authentic exposure to target language input.

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