Manga as a Teaching Tool: Comic Books Without Borders

Ikue Kunai, California State University, East Bay

Clarissa C. S. Ryan, California State University, East Bay

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The [manga] titles are flying off the shelves.

Students who were not interested in EFL have suddenly become avid readers

...students get hooked and read [a] whole series within days.

(E. Kane, personal communication, January 17, 2007)

For Americans, it may be difficult to comprehend the prominence of *manga*, or comic books, East Asia.[1]. Most East Asian nations both produce their own comics and publish translated Japanese manga, so Japanese publications are popular across the region and beyond. Japan is well-known as a highly literate society; what is less well-known is the role that manga plays in Japanese text consumption (Consulate General of Japan in San Francisco). 37% of all publications sold in Japan are manga of one form or another, including monthly magazines, collections, etc. (Japan External Trade Organization [JETRO], 2006). Although Japan has less than half the population of the United States, manga in all formats amounted to sales within Japan of around 4 billion dollars in 2005 (JETRO, 2006). This total is about seven times the United States' 2005 total comic book, manga, and graphic novel sales of 565 million dollars (Publisher's Weekly, 2007a, 2007b). Additionally, manga is closely connected to the Japanese animation industry, as most *anime*[2] television series and films are based on manga; manga also provides inspiration for Japan's thriving video game industry.

Thus, teachers of international students are likely to discover that many of their Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Korean students are consumers of manga, or were when they were

1 IPA: /'maŋ-ga/, /'man-ga/, which is the Japanese term for comic books and comic strips in general. The same word is *mànhuà* in Mandarin Chinese and *manhwa* in Korean.

2 IPA: /'a-ni-”me/, which is the Japanese term (coming from an English loanword) for all animation, but as re-imported in English, usually denotes specifically Japanese or Japanese-influenced animation. This sometimes causes confusion between Japanese students, who consider Disney works to be *anime*, and other students.

younger. However, the popularity of manga extends beyond East Asia. Stories from the Japanese manga magazine *Shounen Jump* are published not only in Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand, but also in the United States, Sweden, Norway, Germany, etc. Major manga markets include France and Italy, which discovered manga years before the USA did (JETRO, 2006).

The Appeal of Manga

Despite the common American assumption that comics are only for young boys, manga has gained popularity among a wide range of readers irrespective of gender, nationality, and age. In Asia, not only young boys, but also young girls and both men and women in their twenties read manga. For instance, some mainstream Asian fashion magazines that target women in their twenties—the equivalent of *Cosmopolitan*—contain manga at the end of each issue. A variety of appropriate titles exists for most demographic groups and in most genres—as many or more genres as found in Hollywood. The English-language press tends to erroneously refer to manga as a single genre and art style, rather than a medium; this over-simplification probably occurs partly because only a small (but growing) selection of manga genres and art styles tend to be published in English. In Japan, readers can choose not only from stories about "funny animals," superheroes, crime-fighters, science-fiction, and fantasy adventures, but also from titles in the categories of business, cooking, politics, romance, horror, travel, suspense, sports, child-raising, and more—genres which have largely disappeared or never existed in English-language comics.

In addition to the variety of genres available, another reason for manga's popularity may lie in the fact that the industry has been pursuing a higher quality of both illustration and writing, to the extent of making it a fine art. Manga is no longer a simple four-panel cartoon that even children can draw, but may even require image processing for higher quality in order for

characters to look realistic. This high-quality artwork is attractive enough to engage readers' imaginations. Likewise, manga does not necessarily simplify its storylines. Stories are complex and may reflect readers' real lives. The plots elicit the sympathy of the reader, such as in *Nana,* which deals with conventional topics such as love but does not avoid harsh realities such as unwanted pregnancy.

Finally, the ultimate reason why manga has become so popular all over the world may be its availability. In Asia and many other regions, the price of one volume or magazine is relatively inexpensive, so that readers of most ages and income levels can afford it. Readers can also download manga from the internet onto their computers or cell phones.

Theoretical Background

Administrators, parents, other faculty, and some students may need convincing of the benefits of using manga in class. Fortunately, there is a wealth of research supporting the use of comic books—Stephen Krashen devotes more than twenty pages to promoting the advantages of comic-book reading and debunking common objections in *The Power of Reading* (2004). According to Krashen, pleasure reading is one of the only methods for increasing spelling skills and vocabularies: "Large quantities of light, 'low risk' reading, ... in which they [students] can skip words without fear of missing anything that affects their grade, will result in vocabulary growth and overall language competence" (1989, p. 455). This, he points out, will make academic reading easier in the long run. Pleasure reading may help develop native-like instincts for idiomatic and problematic areas such as articles and prepositions, as well as sentence structure and general syntax (p. 443). Krashen goes so far as to suggest that students actively study "popular literature," including comic books, in order to provide the students with literature

that they may find more "interesting and comprehensible" compared to starting with the classics (2004, p. 3). This popular literature should not be presented as cut-rate, starter, throwaway material, but "discussed in class with the same seriousness we devote to the classics" (p. 3). As noted below in the Lesson Planning section, there is a wealth of material to analyze in manga—character motivation, dialogue, plot, narration, and all the other features of classic literature.

Manga translations are authentic English literature despite their origins. The translations are aimed at American audiences, and are often written by a team including a bilingual Japanese-English translator and a native English-speaking translator-editor, who ensures that the text is natural and meaningful (Carlson, 2006). It is true that the pages of most translated manga are turned from right to left in the order of Japanese text (preserving the original art without reversing it), but the English text is written left to right.[3] Although Stephen Cary writes in *Going Graphic* that this may reduce the usefulness of manga compared to other comics, it is the authors' experience that the directional issue quickly becomes non-existent for most readers.

While textbooks are admittedly useful, particularly in EFL classrooms, they often contain vocabulary or expressions that are too formal or old-fashioned and rarely used in daily life. In contrast, manga stories tend to reflect daily life (even if the story takes place in a fantastic setting) and contain authentic dialogue, even slang. In this sense, manga can serve as a useful source of authentic English, especially in EFL contexts where there is limited access to non-textbook English.

Built-in scaffolding is another potential benefit of using manga. Since manga has gained such popularity, we can assume that many learners of English have read some manga in their

3 "Flipping" the artwork, which was standard practice a few years ago, results in an abundance of left-handed characters, cars on the wrong side of the road, and other disconcerting anomalies.

first language. They may be familiar with a particular title in their native languages, so that even if they do not remember it in detail, they already have background knowledge about it. By reading the same story in English, students may be less anxious and be more comfortable guessing the meanings of unfamiliar words from context. The visual aspect should also help support reading comprehension for all students, even those who are totally unfamiliar with manga. In addition, as some researchers have identified visual input and verbal (textual) input as two separate learning styles (rather than a single sight-based preference), the integrated text and illustrations of manga should help both visual and verbal learners (Mayer & Masser, 2003).

Compared to conventional books, which may overwhelm students with the sheer number of words, the text in manga is separated into panels, which allows readers to pause before they go to the next one. Because of this reduced level of information, readers may not be discouraged to keep reading as they would be by large blocks of text. While students may be reluctant to reread thick textbooks, since reading manga brings little fear, pressure, or anxiety, but instead brings entertainment, students are more likely to enjoy reading again and again. This repetition may help students learn vocabulary in context.

Using manga should help reluctant readers: both those who are good first-language readers, but are stressed by reading full-length English books and articles, and also those who are not skilled first-languge readers. Reading manga is likely to give students less stress than reading textbooks, novels, or articles, particularly since many students have previously read manga for fun and thus associate manga with something exciting rather than something tedious. This image helps readers not be so anxious about their learning; rather, it increases students' interest and motivation. A college instructor in Japan, quoted at the beginning of this paper, reports amazing

increases in motivation by her students, who take English as a requirement and therefore are not generally enthusiastic (Kane, 2007). Since she introduced manga as an option for sustained silent reading, students keep the books constantly checked out from her office.

Manga also can give international students interest in common with other students, which they may not have realized existed. Integrally-motivated international students may be able to connect with local students and each other by participating in manga or anime clubs, found at many high schools, universities, and libraries. They may also enjoy attending conventions, which can be found in most metropolitan areas and may have over 10,000 attendees in a weekend.[4]

Lesson-Planning

The opportunities for incorporating manga into lesson-planning are almost endless, as single activities or as an entire class theme. Students could interview each other while role-playing specific characters, possibly reducing the anxiety of speaking in front of an audience. Students' favorite titles could form a motivating basis for projects such as multimedia presentations. Writing, revising, and mailing a letter to a manga publisher could serve as a framework for discussing politeness, persuasion, and making comparisons. A class could start a group blog in which they post reviews of each volume that they finish reading, complete with comparisons to the original or other translations with which they might be familiar.

Additional ideas include having students start a manga reading club, write their own manga, change the content of speech bubbles on a copied page, predict the next page, discuss differences between translations, study slang and reduced speech, look at paralinguistic items and sound effects, highlight the difference between oral speech and written text, act out a scene,

4 Students in California are at a particular advantage, because several major conventions are in California. FanimeCon in San Jose reported 10,000 attendees in 2006, and Anaheim's Anime Expo is the largest Japanese pop culture convention in the United States, with over 40,000 attendees in 2006 and an array of concerts, signings, and other events (Animecons.com, 2007).

write a biography of a manga creator, convert dialogue to reported speech and narrative, write essays comparing their own lives to a manga, write about the differences between a manga and an anime of the same title, or research a historical period in which a manga is set. Classes could also incorporate and compare original English-language graphic novels. More lessons can be adapted from the American-comics-based lesson plans in Cary's *Going Graphic*.

Learning More About Manga

Teachers may wish to familiarize themselves more with the history and context of manga and comic books. There are many excellent titles available, a few of which are listed below:

Understanding Manga and Anime, Robin Brenner
Dreamland Japan and *Manga! Manga!*, Frederik L. Schodt
Understanding Comics and *Making Comics*, Scott McCloud

An extended, periodically updated version of this list, with additional books, research papers, and online resources, is available at http://www.sharedwing.net/tesol/manga/.

Manga can be bought at most online and local bookstores, in addition to comic book shops. Most public libraries also have manga, though it may be located in several sections (children's, adults', graphic novels, etc.), which will vary by library. Most libraries have a manga fan on their staff, and this person can be an invaluable resource in helping teachers find appropriate titles for their classes. Otherwise, teachers can check the ratings, which are voluntarily listed on most books, and check the American Library Association's online recommendations. It is important to check the contents if a particular title is going to be assigned, because Japanese standards of age-appropriate content may differ from the standards of students (or parents) from other cultures. Of course, the best way for teachers to become familiar with manga is to read it ourselves. With luck, we will be able to share in our students' enthusiasm.

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