

THE USE OF COMICS TO STRENGTHEN STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

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Abstract

In this globalized, competitive world, being able to think critically is a crucial requirement to succeed in studies and career. The skill, however, does not come easily for most people, especially when one has to think and explain his/her thoughts in a foreign language. The critical thinking skills are also included in the 2013 Curriculum of Indonesia, where one of the ways is through the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions that teachers must develop in the teaching-learning process. Most of the teaching and learning processes, however, are considered burdensome for the students, mainly because they find the lessons boring. This paper proposes ways in which comics can be employed to teach critical thinking while students read and learn language, in this case English, in joyful atmosphere.

Key words: comics, critical thinking, HOTS

Abstrak

Dalam dunia global yang serba kompetitif ini, kemampuan berpikir kritis merupakan salah satu persyaratan yang sangat penting untuk kesuksesan dalam pembelajaran dan karir. Namun keterampilan berpikir kritis itu tidak begitu saja dimiliki oleh sebagian besar orang, terutama jika seseorang harus berpikir dan kemudian menjelaskan pikirannya dalam bahasa asing. Keterampilan berpikir kritis ini juga tercantum di dalam Kurikulum 2013 di Indonesia, dan dicantumkan juga bahwa salah satu cara menumbuhkan keterampilan ini adalah dengan memberikan pertanyaan tingkat tinggi, atau Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) dalam proses pembelajaran. Namun demikian, sebagian besar proses belajar-mengajar dirasakan membosankan oleh siswa. Makalah ini memberikan beberapa usulan untuk menggunakan komik untuk mengajarkan keterampilan berpikir kritis dalam pembelajaran bahasa, sehingga suasana kelas terasa menyenangkan.

Kata kunci: komik, berpikir kritis, HOTS

1. INTRODUCTION

As many have stated, we, as teachers, who are now living in the middle of the 21st Century, have to familiarize ourselves with techniques of teaching the 21st century skills, one of which is literacy. A few years back, people thought of literacy as the ability to read and write; nowadays, however, there are various kinds of literacy, such as media literacy and IT literacy. Basically, literacy skills refers to the ability to gain knowledge as well as using media and technology (<https://k12.thoughtfullearning.com>) These skills also enable learners to create knowledge through their written works as well as developing media and technology. In the 21st Century education, there are at least three kinds of literacies that learners should have: information literacy, media literacy, and technology literacy.

Information literacy involves traditional skills such as reading, researching and writing, but “new ways to read and write have also introduced new skills”. What is meant by new ways to read and write has something to do with consuming information (reading), and producing information (writing). In consuming information, students have to be trained to edit and cross-check any information they receive, to watch out for bias, datedness, or errors. They have to be able to

perceive any text as the product of a communication situation, with particular senders, subjects, purposes, and media.

In producing information, on the other hand, students should be able to see that writing today is a very authentic communicative activity. They should be aware that what they write can have profound effects, either good or bad; and how they write determines how powerful their words are.

It is in these two aspects of information literacy that critical thinking skills of the students should be trained. In perusing texts, students should always be critical, and so should they be in writing their own pieces of compositions.

Burmack (2002) introduces yet another kind of literacy, that is visual literacy; she claims that with image-rich curriculum, accessed through print materials,... “ more students can be reached and taught more quickly and meaningfully”, rather than through “traditional written reports and text-based verbal instructions”. She then goes on to say that visual literacy demands students to have critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Through the materials and media which are rich in pictures and images, students can be trained to use their reasoning more effectively, to ask sharper questions in order to solve problems, to analyze and evaluate alternative points of view, and finally to reflect critically on their decisions. This kind of literacy can also be combined with critical literacy, which refers to the ability “to read texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships” (Coffey, 2009)

In light of the above trends of literacy needed for the 21st century education, I would like to propose the use of comics to strengthen students’ critical thinking skills, which will be integrated with several kinds of literacy. It is my hope that the ideas proposed here will prove beneficial for teachers of English, especially in secondary schools.

Whenever people hear the idea of using comic for teaching, many would respond in similar ways: what can you learn from comics? “The language level and reading level are too low, the stories are too violent”, to mention but a few (Haines, 2017). To most students, however, comics are much preferred to long essays; the task of reading them seems so daunting, let alone finish them and make summary of the contents. With comic, students feel that the task at hand is manageable, with small portions of language to be handled at each frame of the story. There are a plethora of challenging, insightful, and age-appropriate comic books in the market today; and thus they can be very valuable teaching tools.

Regarding the use of comics to teach in this 21st Century, Shaw (2015) states that they can be categorized as belonging to Arts and Creative Literacies. By using comic as a medium in teaching English, we are integrating the arts with the curriculum, and she claims that by doing so we develop in the students their global competences by: 1) observing and investigating the world around them and farther away, 2) employing works of arts to be aware of their own and others’ perspectives, 3) using the arts to communicate their ideas to various audiences, and 4) using the arts to transform their ideas into actions.

Along with the various kinds of literacies, the 21st Century education puts very high value on the 4Cs, one of which is Critical thinking. Through comics, students’ competences in visual, information and the Arts and creative literacies are put into action with activities which require critical thinking. But what actually is critical thinking skill? Finley (2014), in referring to Robert Weissberg, gives one definition, that is the ability to use reason to move beyond the acquisition of facts to uncover deep meaning. What does a critical thinker do, then? Lau (2015) delineates six things that a critical thinker does:

1. understand logical connections between ideas
2. identify, construct, and evaluate progress
3. detect inconsistencies and common mistakes in reasoning
4. solve problems systematically

5. identify the relevance and importance of ideas
6. reflect on the justification of their own beliefs and values

Those activities can be formed and trained to students with the use of comics or comic strips. The BBC website proposes some activities for using comic strips, as follows:

- tell a complex story
- provide comments and provoking thoughts
- give an example of vocabulary related to the current topic under discussion
- provide identifiable characters, and
- insert the teaching of culture

Haines (2017) further states that the use of comic in the classroom can enhance students' critical thinking skills, in the form of activities, for instance; she says that discussions on imagery and characterization, for instance, can also engage the students' higher levels of critical thinking.

So far, most of the discussions on the use of comics to teach language have mainly been focused on improving students' linguistic competence. Sources have listed ways that comics can improve vocabulary, enhance speaking skills through retelling activities, to name but a few. This paper, however, proposes ways that comics can be used mainly to train students' critical thinking skills, especially as it is now gaining more attention from the Government of the Republic of Indonesia in the 2013 Curriculum for schools at all levels (primary to upper secondary).

The comics that I will describe here are the ones created by my son, Bonni Rambatan. The series, entitled *The Adventures of Bunny and Nao*, are still being developed, but I will provide some examples of the comic strips that are ready, that can be used to teach critical thinking skills.



1.1 The Characters

Nao and Bunny are best friends with very different personalities. Nao is calm, quiet, well-mannered, but often misunderstood as cold and a little weird. She has a strong artistic talent, she wants to go to arts school, but her parents do not allow her; that causes her to get into a fight with her parents.

Bunny is smart, somewhat a nerd, but a very outgoing and strong-willed girl, and sometimes bossy. However, she is easily frustrated and often blames herself for every bad luck in her life. She lost her father who disappeared while on a mission a few years back.

1.2 The Story

Bunny's father disappeared while he was doing some research on an ancient journal. Considering his reputation as a well-known scientist, none of his colleagues believed the journal even existed, and his conviction made all his colleagues laugh at him and mock him. Then one day he just disappeared while working on an island. Actually, that search was also to prove himself worthy of his wife's and daughter's respect, and that is why Bunny feels guilty of his disappearance.

The two girls are on a quest to find the ancient journal and that is the conflict around which the story/ the plot of this comic is developed. In the page I choose above, the situation, as we can see,

is that the two girls are in a cafe, and all of a sudden Nao leaps and gasps as if awoken from a bad dream. In fact, when Bunny asks her what happens, that is the answer she gives: “just another bad dream”...indicating that that is not the first time it happens.

As it is still raining very hard outside the cafe, Nao and Bunny decides to stay a while longer and order another cup of coffee (vanilla latte). The waiter, Reggie, takes their order, and also talks about his father. Meanwhile, there is loud banging on the roof of the cafe and they are all wondering what the sound is.

1.3 Some benefits of using comics

Haines (2017) in her article “Developing Critical thinking Through Comics” states that the application level (in Bloom’s taxonomy) is utilized when students use what they get and understand about human emotions in real life, and apply it to exploring and “examining characterization in comics”.

In another source, Ontesol (2013), it is stated that comic strips can be a fast way to lead a discussion activity. Apart from those applications, however, there are several reasons why it is a good thing to use comics to teach and learn English. Comics English lists the following benefits:

- to use authentic materials
- to have fun and motivate learners
- to learn about different cultures
- to facilitate vocabulary acquisition
- to develop reading skills
- to develop analytical skills
- to develop writing skills

1.4 Enhancing the critical thinking skills

In line with improving students’ literacies, using comics can also be used to improve one of the 4Cs of the 21st Century education, that is Critical thinking. In the current curriculum for the schools in Indonesia, Critical thinking is one of the points of priority which schools should cultivate in the students. As is stated in the 2013 curriculum, teachers should train students to think beyond the factual questions, and move to the higher levels of cognition, which we call the HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills) questions. In the documents supplementing the 2013 curriculum, HOTS is elaborated as follows: there are areas where the Higher Order thinking skills should be cultivated, they are 1) the ability to learn and inovate, which, among others, involves thinking critically and solving problems; 2) digital literacy, 3) life skills, and 4) character. In language arts, particularly, the critical thinking involves selecting and using strategies to understand words and texts, and to make and confirm inferences from what is read (the Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016).

1.5 Using “The Adventures of Bunny and Nao” in the classroom.

Still with the picture from the comics, I would like to propose activities to be done in class.

1. After the usual greetings and roll-call, the teacher distributes the page from the comic, and asks the students to read it.
2. Students make sure that they understand the story fragment, eventhough they might not know the meaning of each and every word
3. Students are then put into groups of 4-5 to discuss the story, inasmuch as they can guess from the page.
4. The teacher explains that the page belongs to a comic book entitled “the Adventures of Bunny and Nao”, and then she reads the synopsis of the story while the students listen carefully
5. The students are then asked to discuss in their groups and agree on the answer to some

- questions
6. The teacher then calls one of the groups randomly to present the results of their discussion. Other groups may respond, or give additional views.
 7. Here are the questions the teacher can ask:
 - a. What do you think about the girls, Bunny and Nao? Give reasons for your answer.
 - b. When Nao suddenly sits up straight, and gasps, what does Bunny do? What can that tell you about the two girls?
 - c. If you were Bunny, and your best friend is having bad dreams about disasters, what would you do?
 8. The teacher, together with the students, then concludes the lesson, and invites anyone who would like to give opinions, or maybe share their own experiences.

As I describe above, one page of comic can be explored to conduct elaborate discussions on the characters' personality, the clues that students can use to infer about the girls' relationship, and to apply their own knowledge and understanding of human emotions and friendship to solve problems.

With sufficient instructions students can then conduct their group discussions and arrive at an agreement on the answers to the questions. However, if they come to a point where the group members cannot reach an agreement, it is the teacher's responsibility to mediate and make sure that students can accept differences (this, too, is a lesson worth learning).

2. CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed some ways that comic can be used to teach critical thinking skills, while teaching language (in this case, English) at the same time. As comics are very close to most students' life, its use can create an interesting atmosphere in the classroom, a break from the usual essay-based lessons, while teaching the literacy skills as well. The step-by-step instruction using comic can train the students to apply their knowledge and experiences in solving real-world problems. Where language is concerned, the teacher can teach the kind of language which is actually used in the society (see the language in the comic sample page). Overall, comic can be a rewarding tool to get the students' attention and make them learn in joyful atmosphere. It should be borne in mind, however, that what I mean by comic here does not always mean funny stories; in fact, the one I use for the sample is quite a serious one.

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