

## Presenation 2

### Extensive Reading with Comic Books

Ingrid Zwaal (Jeonju Nat'l Univ. of Education)

#### I. Why use comic books?

I will start off with a personal anecdote. I love reading. Rare are the moments when I am not carrying a book. When I studied French I tried to read books. That was how I learned to read English before I was five, by my immigrant mother who read to me because she did not trust her English ability. She had only started to learn English, her fourth language, for several years before I was born. So I thought I could learn improve my French the same way. But the books that could be interesting were too hard and children's books in French were expensive, difficult to find where I lived and a little boring. Seeing my difficulty, my French teacher dropped an Asterix and Obelix comic book on my desk. Yes, I read it. I love comic books, too. So I was willing to try harder to read it. Plus I had the pictures to help me understand the words I did not know and so I looked up a lot less words. It also gave me confidence and I enjoyed studying French for a change.

But would students in Korea read English comic books? I had two indicators that this was highly likely. The first was the existence of comic book rental stores. There are a lot of them and when I was a hagwon teacher, I had to pry them out of my students' hands constantly. So there already was a strong interest in comic books. The other reason was anecdotal. I was interviewing students who wished to travel overseas to study English which would be supported by the Chollabuk-do government. One of the interview questions was "If you had ten dollars to spend on anything you want, what would you buy?" The overwhelming and surprising answer was "English comic books". So I felt the interest was there and a study was warranted.

#### II. Managing the study

I decided that perhaps the language in comic books would be too difficult for elementary students but I teach university so finding younger students might be difficult. I reached out to my best friend, who runs a language institute in Junghwasan Dong, Jeonju. She advertised the study and since it was free, even though it was on Sunday afternoons, I started with over ten subjects and the number increased over the weeks. What was surprising was that I had only middle school and elementary school students. I did not think that elementary students would be able to actively participate but I let them try. We decided to meet every other Sunday from 1 to 3pm. I had comic books of my own: Archie, Calvin and Hobbs, Foxtrot, the Simpsons, Batman, and a handful of superhero comic books given to me by a friend. I gave each participant a questionnaire in English and I allowed my friend to translate any questions they did not understand. It was basic information questions regarding their age, comic book interests and previous exposure to reading English before this study. I put the comic books in a classroom and the students were free to sit where they wanted, choose any book they wanted. I made it clear if they did not like a book they did not have to finish it, but could exchange it for another book. Sustained reading for an hour was more important than finishing a number of books. At the end of the hour each student brought one of the books to me for an interview. Depending on the student's ability was if I did this alone or with my friend. Attendance was not compulsory because it was held on Sunday afternoons but most attended faithfully.

### **III. My difficulties**

After the first session I found I was going to be seriously short of comic books and there was a definite preference for the Simpsons and some of superhero books. So I went to a used book store in Seoul and brought back many more comic books and of a greater variety. I found some graphic novels which I decided to include and some Japanese comic books and graphic novels translated to English. I also found more comic books with female protagonists as I had as many females and males participating in the study and I did not want them to feel they had to read books with only male or primarily male characters. I already knew of a place that sold used comic books otherwise I would not have been able to run this study for lack of materials. The costs were a little prohibitive, but not as bad as if I had to buy them new. But still less than graded readers or new novels would have cost me.

### **IV. Difficulties Students Faced**

## Extensive Reading and Listening: Why, What and How?

Culture was less of a problem than I anticipated. Most of the stories followed regular comic book conventions, especially the superhero books. I thought perhaps the Simpsons would prove difficult as they do not represent a typical family but the students were already familiar with them from TV so they were actually fairly comfortable with them. There was almost a preference for them. I had included a few Peanuts and Beetle Bailey books which were translated in Korean on every page. In the beginning a few students clung to these books, even the much better speakers because they wanted to understand the jokes better because rather than stories, these were strip comics which ended in three or four panels. I allowed this to help them gain confidence. They all moved on to the English only comic books after reading them the first or second week.

Reading at first was difficult. In English comic books all words are written by hand and in capital letters, so reading was a little slower until they got used to reading this style, but sometimes there were still words they could not read because the style of printing was not clear.

### **V. The Interviews**

At the end of the hour each student should come to me to be interviewed individually. I asked questions about the story, the characters, if they liked the story or the characters, the ending, the genre. If they read a book of comic strips they had to explain the strip and the joke, and why it was funny. Sometimes they did not understand the jokes exactly for culture or language problems but as long as they understood the circumstances I was satisfied.

In the interviews some students could or would not speak to me in English. This is a little understandable since we were studying reading, not speaking. Others could not speak to me because they had not yet had a native speaker teacher so they were not used to speaking to a native speaker and those were quite nervous. Some knew the story but could not remember the English words they had just read. For those my friend sat in and helped them translate or just explain the story in Korean. After the first couple of weeks the students would be prepared for this part and remember characters' names and more details of the stories to share in English.

The pictures in the comic books made this process much easier for both the student and me. I would ask them to explain the story using the pictures when they could not find the words. This made them more confident and calm. I had planned to spend five minutes on

each student but too often I went over that time limit because some of them had a lot they wanted to say because they were enthusiastic but some stalled a bit for the reasons explained above.

## **VI. Early Conclusions**

One of the best reasons to use comic books is that I can follow what the students are telling me about the story by following the pictures so I don't need to have read and remembered all the stories, which I would have to do if I had used novels or other texts. One of the six sessions fell into their midterm exam periods and that Sunday my friend was called by many of the absent students or their parents asking me to add one more week because they had wanted to come but could not because they needed to study. This indicates to me an interest and possible enjoyment of reading the comic books that they cannot gain access to except by coming to my study.

It was said to me that perhaps the students would not be reading as much since they are comic books but they did not seem to spend much time on the pictures except to use them to help understand the text. I believe they read as much if not more than they would if they had been reading any other kind of text because of enthusiasm.

At the time of this writing I still have two weeks to go and have not had the chance to do the final survey or interview. I will cover my conclusions more completely during my presentation.

## **Biography**

Ingrid Zwaal has a BA in English and Drama from the University of Toronto and an MSED from Canisius College, Buffalo, N.Y. She works at Jeonju National University of Education and writes a weekly column for Sae Chunbuk Newspaper. She was a radio announcer in Canada for several years. Her hobbies include volleyball, writing, reading, photography and travel.