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**Original
research paper**

Paper received: Apr 20 2022
Paper accepted: Mar 2 2023
Article Published: Jul 5 2023

The contribution of the visual narrative in manga to the development of reading competence at the initial level of German language learning

Extended summary

Taking into consideration the scarcity of empirical evidence on the interrelatedness of images and text comprehension in foreign language classrooms, this paper aims at shedding some light on this under-researched aspect of glottodidactics (i.e. foreign language teaching methodology). The interest in researching manga didactic potentials stems from the fact that this genre of comics has become an integral part of the popular culture among adolescents in elementary schools, mainly via anime. In addition, the current literature on foreign language teaching has not only included visual literacy as the fifth language competence (in addition to reading, listening, writing, and speaking), but has also presented it as one of the key competencies for the 21st century. In that sense, the glottodidactic potential of manga is based on combining static texts and dynamic images, which are both immanent components of its discourse. This paper aims at examining the contributions of the complementary use of verbal- iconic elements to reading competence development during the beginner stages of learning the German language. For this particular purpose, we shall examine the attitudes towards reading Japanese comics in eight-graders by focusing on affective aspects and communicative and semiotic functions of the given textual-picture elements. The affective aspect primarily refers to the students' motivations to read manga, but the paper shall also strive to identify similarities and differences between manga and textbook reading activities. Communicative function pertains to the ways in which students "read" pictures and establish associations with the given

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text. Taking into consideration the specific style of the animation (i.e. large eyes, frame size and design, changes of text clouds at the margins, etc.) which opens the discussion on the semiotic aspects of communication, the paper investigates the impact of semiotic elements on meaning construction. Fourteen eight-graders participated in this research which was conducted in one elementary school located in Kragujevac. A semi-structured group interview was used as a data collection technique in this quantitative analysis. The relevant elements of the students' statements were classified into adequate categories and sub-categories which constitute the analytical apparatus of this research: (1) students' attitudes toward reading manga (anime and manga; the affective potentials of manga – motivation, self-identification, affective reading strategies; comparing and contrasting manga and traditional textbook texts) and (2) visual narratives in manga (communicative function; cognitive reading strategies and styles; semiotic functions; iconic elements in manga and textbooks). The findings indicate that there is a subculture of early adolescents which revolves around Japanese comics and that these comics participate in the formation of students' identity, in addition to the identity created by (educational and social) institutions. Based on the manga animation trends, this movement in comics industry has become globally popular due its relatable content that its recipients can identify with based on their own everyday lives and interests. The positive attitudes toward animation series and manga watched in students' mother tongue reflect on their intrinsic motivation to read the similar content in a foreign language. In addition to having a huge potential in terms of applying affective strategies, texts enriched with vivid and picturesque images and ellipses provide an opportunity for students to use global, problem-solving, and compensatory reading strategies. Visual narratives also make a significant contribution in terms of esthetic sensibility, they support the development of esthetic competence and they facilitate the comprehension and meaning-formation processes. Manga has been already recognized as a suitable didactic tool for developing informal logic during reading since visual content facilitates the comprehension of textual content. Since text meaning and its interpretation stem from pictures, the interpretation of iconic elements is considered the first phase in mastering reading in a foreign language. Moreover, visual narratives are seen as a real requisite for the contemporary, visual generations of students. Taking into consideration the aforementioned facts, one cannot help but wonder whether manga is a mere simplified story presented through images or a priceless teaching tool for the future.

Keywords: manga, teaching German as a foreign language, image function, text-image relationship, reading in German

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