Teaching with Visual Narratives: A Practical Usage of English Language

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Abstract

An increasing curiosity in communication through visual narratives has been observed in recent years in multidisciplinary research. This paper is based on my own experience in the classroom about how English grammar is taught with the help of visual narratives. This teaching method can be considered an exclusive way of teaching grammar in context through the strategic fusion of language and literature rather than treating them as two separate entities of the English language. The linguistic sequential nature of comic strips or visual narratives displays an excellent source of teaching materials that would allow teachers and students to find novel approaches to language in an intriguing and creative way. With the help of a descriptive research method, this paper shows how to practice the formation of different word classes with the different tense forms and usage of modals through certain selected visual narratives.

Keywords: visual narratives, comics, ESL/EFL, teaching

Introduction

An increasing curiosity in communication through visual narratives has been observed in recent years in multidisciplinary research. This paper is based on how English grammar can be taught with the help of visual narratives or picture stories. The study contributes to the field of teaching English by its creative and

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innovative approach to language education. Teaching with the help of visual narratives provides us with a multimodal and entertaining way of teaching grammar that appeals to a diverse range of learning styles while also fostering deeper knowledge of the lexicon of grammatical ideas. This method does not only improve traditional practices of learning but also addresses the need for a more dynamic and culturally relevant teaching strategy in language education. This teaching method can also be considered an exclusive way of teaching grammar in context through the strategic fusion of language and literature rather than treating them as two separate entities of the English language. Furthermore, the effectiveness of visual narratives in teaching grammar, especially to ESL/EFL learners adds to the growing corpus of research on the confluence of visual literacy and language learning that should even broaden the discussion of various techniques for improving language acquisition and proficiency.

Art is an expression used by human imaginations and creative abilities; it demands visual perceptions; thereby, a unique comprehension takes place in each individual human brain. According to Locke (1690), the only things we perceive immediately are ideas. His understanding of knowledge of the external world within its broader epistemology and theoretical philosophy requires probing beyond his epistemology and the depths of its accounts of perception, representation, and contents of thoughts. Therefore, it seems that the real difference between humans and other animals is on the collective level. We rule the world because we can cooperate flexibly in large numbers, unlike other animals. This is again because human beings are the only organisms that live in a state of dual reality—a reality of ideas and conceptions along with the objective reality, like other animals (Harari, 2015). Human beings possess this dual reality because of the cognitive revolution (c. 70,000 BCE, when Sapiens evolved imagination). As a result of this, humans can form stories or ideas with the help of the social contexts present

around them, and eventually they give birth to creation. Art is a medium that has been our companion since time immemorial, and it plays an especially important role in human lives; it is a way of expressing human feelings. McCloud (1993) in his 'Understanding Comics' states that comics is a part of our historical tradition. It gives an in-depth look at the overall formal aspect of comics. He further discusses that the fundamental vocabularies and theoretical ideas constitute comics as a form of art and a medium to convey ideas and thoughts. He also talks about comics being an ancient way of conveying messages through cave paintings although it has a very modern outlook in the present time. Visual narratives or comics are a well-known and popular art form. Unfortunately, people are introduced to this art form in the cheap magazines of childhood or the funny pages of a newspaper. But nowadays, comics play a major part in documenting the rise of the world's civilization. Comics is a sequential art form that was coined by Will Eisner (1940). Modern research shows that ancient Egyptians documented in sequential wall paintings of the collection and taxing of crops. 'Beaux Tapestry' created in France in the 11th century CE, is a huge, embroidered wall hanging depicting the history of the Norman conquest of England (McCloud, 1993).

'In addition to apply to the subfields of linguistics, visual language has the ability of being analyzed using nearly all types of linguistic schools: generative, cognitive, applied, computational, etc.' (Cohn, 2012). With the recent revolution of artificial intelligence (AI), it is to be kept in mind that teaching methods should also evolve to keep up the pace: This paper is based on my own experience in the classroom about how English grammar is taught with the help of visual narratives. Comics or visual narratives use both simple and complex vocabularies and grammatical structures that give a more vivid perception to the learners. Visual narratives are a popular medium perfectly suited to tell stories and as a result of it, they are

a very good source of teaching English to EFL/ESL students. Like an album of pictures that depicts all the moments in a trip, comic strips capture all the essence in a narrative. Speech balloons are dynamically drawn, and the algorithm is fairly simple but good enough (Alves et al., 2008). Comics is generally associated with American superheroes. It first originated in America with 'The Yellow Kid' which was first published in 1897 (Diep, 2019).

Visual narratives that feature heroic themes in particular appeal to a lot of young and adult readers. These visual narratives or comics frequently have superheroes or courageous individuals who go on thrilling adventures, engage in heroic battles with bad guys, and also overcome obstacles using their unique abilities. According to Cohn (2012), 'Truly, there seems to be an intuitive link between comics and language in the minds of the creators- a belief shared by several researchers of language who, with growing frequency, are discussing properties of comics in a linguistic light.' There is a natural relationship between comics and language. This link is underscored by numerous conversations about how comics can convey complicated ideas using both visuals and texts. Therefore, comics and other visual narratives do what exactly any other language would do- convey messages. But these visual narratives convey messages in such a way that we cannot do in our physical states (more in an exaggerated manner): If someone were angry, probably her head would be on fire; again, if someone were in love, his eyes would literally reveal it all by turning them into heart icons! It is also possible to expect a positive impact according to my own teaching experience that including grammatical information in a comic strip may help learners of the English language in several ways: the teacher could discuss the application of the grammatical rules using the favorable characters; the students will feel at ease and can enjoy the flow of explanation. Therefore, this teaching method can be considered an exclusive way of teaching grammar in context through the strategic

fusion of language and literature rather than treating them as two separate entities of the English language: Readers frequently read the story through to the conclusion, and because it requires participation in the activity, using comic strips to teach grammar may help students practice speaking in public (Derrick, 2008).

This study mainly focuses on the teacher's perspective, providing insights into the creative use of visual narratives in teaching English grammar with the help of 'Calvin and Hobbes.' However, it also takes into account the students' perspectives, which has a good impact on their learning experiences. Students who engage with visual narratives not only find grammar lectures more entertaining and accessible, but they also demonstrate better knowledge and memory of grammatical principles. This teaching approach combines language and literature in such a way that it provides students with a relevant and entertaining method to study, improve their general language skills, and instill a greater respect for both visual and textual storytelling.

Literature Review: The Structural and Functional Aspects of Visual Narratives

Linguistics has witnessed a considerable number of theories and each one has its distinct orientations, trends and subjects of study. Yet, Halliday's (1961) and Chomsky's (1957) traditions have been initiated by a large number of followers. Chomsky's (1957) transformational generative linguistics (TGL) and Halliday's (1961) systemic functional linguistics (SFL) have been deemed as two of the most influential and pivotal traditions in the linguistic academic field. Though both systems are distinct in many respects making the same impacts; there are a number of differences between these two systems:

For example, systemic functional grammar (SFG) studies the language through meaning (i.e., its function). While transformational generative grammar (TGG) is a fully influential and developed version of linguistics through form. Halliday (1961) theorized that

linguistics should describe actual sentences with many functions and without a deep structure. In addition, he was concerned with the function of the sentences, or in other words, the writer's purpose in writing the sentence (Almurashi, 2016).

On the other hand, Chomsky (1957) maintained that linguistics should go beyond merely describing syntactic structures, and his purpose is to elucidate why language is structured in the way that it is. To summarize, Chomsky (1957) characterized form independently of function and meaning, while Halliday (1961) had good reasons to believe that functional meaning can help shape form (Bavali & Sadighi, 2008).

In the case of visual narratives, both structural and functional aspects are needed. Without structure, we would not be able to comprehend the panels present in the visual narratives, be it comics, graphic novels, manhwa, manhua, manga or recent times' webtoons: these diverse forms of visual narratives present in various cultures combine art and text generally in sequential manners to convey stories, ideas and emotions. The comprehension of sequential images draws upon a narrative structure which is organized into constituents, analogous to grammatical structure in language (Cohn, 2014). If the panels are not in order or in a sequential manner, the function would get lost:
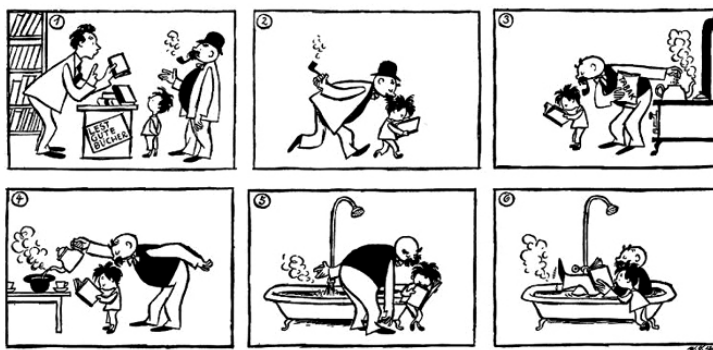

Figure 1. Picture Story 'The Captivating Book' by Erich Ohser-eoplauen

Here, the structure of comics (establisher, initial, peak and release) as established by Cohn (2014) conveys the function and gives the readers the whole story:

1) The comics starts with an establisher where the father is buying the book with his son;

2) In its initial stage, the father runs behind the son with his pipe reading the book with him;

3) In the third panel, which is the prolonged initial stage, the father keeps on reading with his son while making tea;

4) It reaches its peak when the father starts pouring the tea unmindfully into his hat instead of the cup while he still reads the book thus invoking our laughter;

5) The peak prolongs as the father enters the washroom dropping the 'hat of tea' in the bathtub while he is still reading a book along with his son;

6) The father finally gets into the bathtub instead of his son and takes the book himself in his hand while his son accompanies him in reading, considering a release to the tension and thereby coming to a conclusion.

We can take Chomsky's (1957) very famous sentence, 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously,' as an example of a sentence, here, whose grammar or structure is correct but whose meaning does not make any sense. It is the same when it comes to visual narratives: if pictures are placed randomly without following an order, then the whole picture story will be irrelevant to us, leading to the loss of all the functional aspects it could have had. Even though, from the surface level, it may look like it has a structure due to the presence of different panels divided by gutters and other visual narrative vocabularies, it will still require proper sequential ordering of pictures to have the flow of the story.

Hence, in visual narratives, both TGL and SFL are essential to establish a story out of the structure. Here, we want to point out

that one of the most unique human behaviours is creating stories in the mind, and therefore visual narratives or comics can be very effective in any language-related classroom.

Descriptive Research Design

This study employed qualitative descriptive research. A descriptive research design is a method or technique for gathering and evaluating data in order to describe the characteristics of a population or phenomenon. Though it is typically referred to as a form of quantitative research, yet, qualitative research can also be used for descriptive reasons (McCombes, 2023). In this method, the factors being researched are not influenced because researchers see participants in their natural context from a distance. Therefore, the teaching method described here has helped me elicit the behaviours of my students through the lessons in the English language with the help of visual narratives. This study has drawn relevant data from 'Calvin and Hobbes'; it primarily focuses on the narrative for teaching English to ESL/EFL learners. Since it is qualitative in nature, it relies mainly on observation and analyses of an ESL/EFL classroom from the teacher's point of view. Although the observations were solely mine, my co-authors contributed significantly to various aspects of this research. Together, we have analysed the teaching method with a focus on achieving the key objective.

Objective

This paper demonstrates through a few carefully chosen visual narratives from Watterson's (1988) 'Calvin and Hobbes' how to practice the production of the different word classes, the various tense forms, and the usage of modals. With the help of both structural and functional aspects of visual narratives which have already been discussed in Section 2, this teaching method can be viewed as a unique technique of the 21st century to teach grammar in context by strategically combining both English language and literature.

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Data Analysis

For this study, a few selected visual narratives from the popular comics, 'Calvin and Hobbes' were used as stimuli. The focus is on qualitative research by simply describing the data and its usage in the classroom through the bimodal form of visual narratives such as texts and images with the help of a descriptive method. This study also includes a brief section on understanding the students' perspective, which emphasizes the importance of visual narratives on their experience. Engaging with the amusing and relatable scenes in 'Calvin and Hobbes' helps learners enjoy and remember the process of studying grammatical ideas. This method was applied to high school students aged 16 to 18.

Word Classes

In reading and writing, it is crucial to make it apparent to the students who or what is most essential in a sentence. Using visual narratives, for various word classes allows students to create visual representations and helps them remember the vocabulary for further writing:

Noun

Figure 2.
Hobbes (Proper Noun, Panel 1), Mom (Proper Noun, Panel 2), Hat (Common Noun, Panel 3), One (Numeral Noun, Panel 3), Dad (Proper Noun, Panel 3)

Figure 3.
People (Panel 1), Mouths (Panel 1), Pacific Ocean (Panel 2), Explosion (Panel 3), Monster (Panel 3), Way (Panel 4), Coast (Panel 4), Japan (Panel 4)

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Pronoun

Figure 4.
You (Panel 2), Me (Panel 2), My (Panel 2), Him (Panel 2), Him (Panel 3), I (Panel 3), Him
(Panel 4), Him (Panel 4), I (Panel 4)
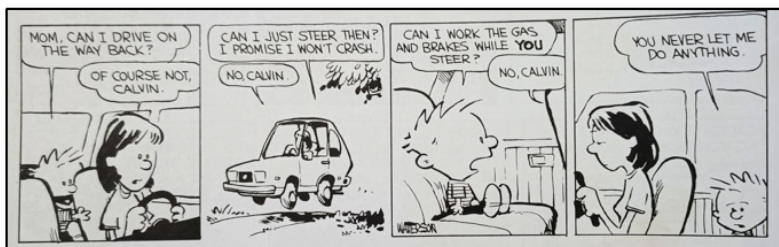

Figure 5.
He (Panel 2)

Verb

Figure 6.
Can (Panel 1), Drive (Panel 1), Can (Panel 2), Steer (Panel 2), Promise (Panel 2) Wo (Would,
Panel 2), Can (Panel 3), Work (Panel 3), Steer (Panel 3), Let (Panel 4), Do (Panel 4)
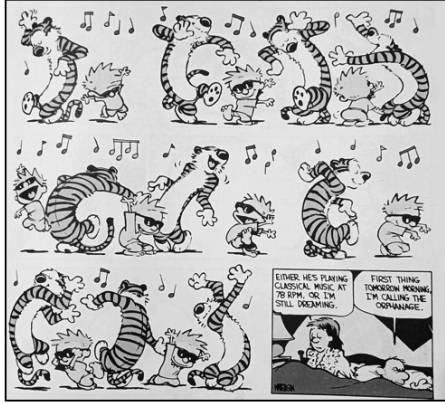
Figure 7.
Is ('s, Last Panel), Playing (Last Panel), Am ('m, Last Panel), Dreaming (Last Panel), Am ('m, Last Panel), Calling (Last Panel)

Adjective

Figure 8.
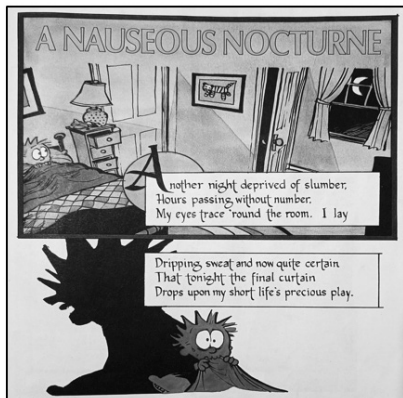Crummy (Panel 2), Dead (Panel 2), Insensitive (Panel 3)

Figure 9.
Nauseous (Textbox), Dripping (Narrative 2), Certain (Narrative 2), Final (Narrative 2), Short (Narrative 2), Precious (Narrative 2)
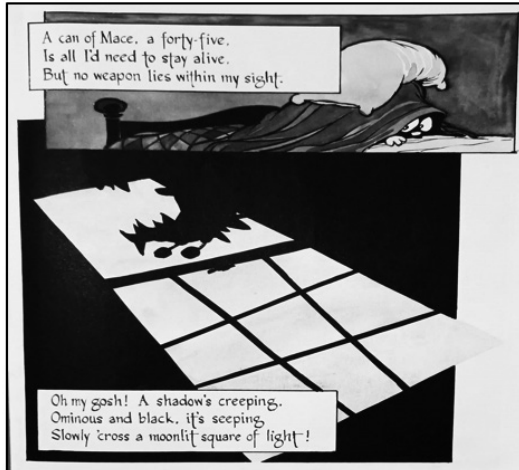
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Figure 10.
Alive (Narrative 1), Ominous (Narrative 2), Black (Narrative 2), Moonlit (Narrative 2)

Adverb

Figure 11.
First (Panel 1), Profusely (Panel 2), When (Panel 4), Altogether (Panel 4), Medically (Panel 5)

Figure 12.
Just

Preposition

Figure 13.
Under (Panel 2), In (Panel 3)

Figure 14.
In

Figure 15.
With

Conjunction

Figure 16.
And (Panel 1)

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Figure 17.
And (Panel 1, 2, 3, 4)

Interjection

Figure 18.
Every panel has an interjection.

Figure 19.
Gosh!

Tense Forms

Using comics in an ESL classroom is an effective and innovative method to teach verb tenses and help students relate language to real-life events:
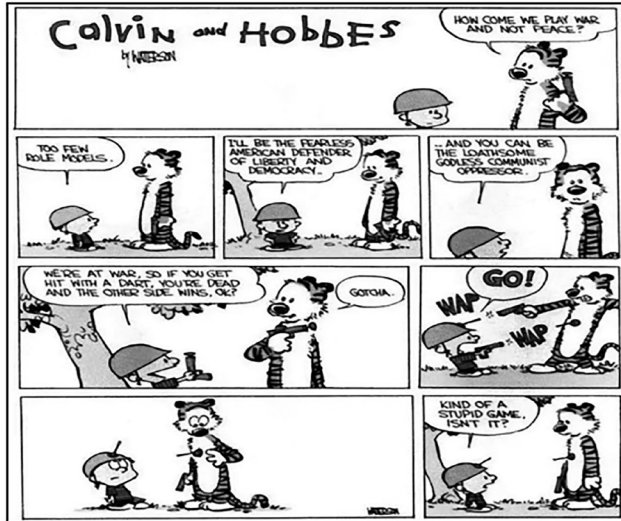

Figure 20.

Mixed tenses: Present (Panel 1), Present statement referring to Past (Panel 2), Future (Panel 3), Future- Subjunctive/ modal 'can' (Panel 4), Present- Conditional- Future tense/ Present verb (Panel 5), Present (Panel 6), Visual showing Present state (Panel 7), Present (Panel 8)

Figure 21.
Mixed tenses: Present (Panel 1), Past and Present (Panel 2)

Figure 22.
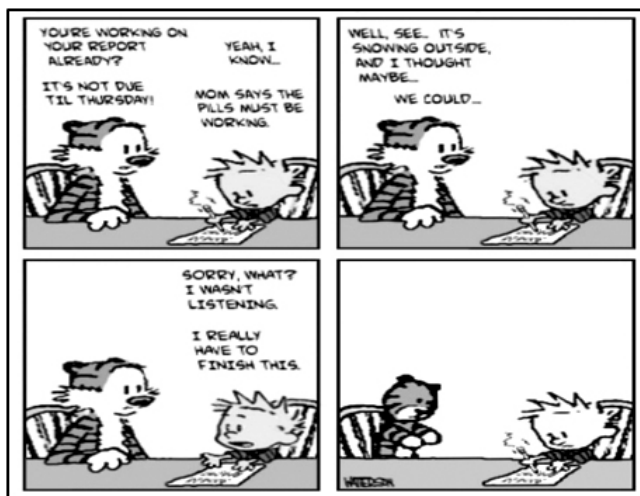*Mixed tenses: Future tense/ Past verb (Panel 1), Present- Supposition (Panel 2)*

Figure 23.
Mixed tenses: Statement in Present tense with a Future note/ Present verb/ Future tense- modal 'must' (Panel 1), Present/ Past/ Subjunctive (Panel 2), Present/ Past/ Subjunctive (Panel 3), Visual showing Present state

Usage of Modals

Teaching modals through visual narratives enables students to comprehend how language is utilised in context and can make learning more enjoyable and relatable for students.
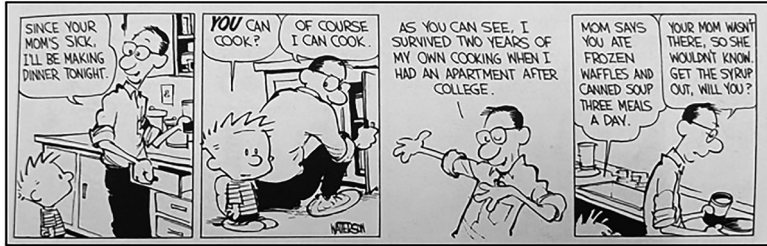
Figure 24.
Will<'ll (Panel 1), Can (2, Panel 2), Can (Panel 3), Would, Will (Panel 4)

Figure 25.
Could (Panel 1), Would (2, Panel 2), Can (Panel 3)

Figure 26.
Should (Panel 1), Can (Panel 2)

Possible Exercises

As teachers, we are supposed to introduce the comic strips and ask the students to identify the different word classes, tense forms, or modals. We can ask them to identify them categorically or

sometimes even omit certain grammatical words and ask them to fill in the blanks with their own vocabulary. It would definitely bring out a fun way of analyzing how adjectives describe the characters and settings (also with the vivid descriptions of the images), how verbs propel the action forward, or how interjections convey emotions. Instead of the word, 'ominous' in Figure 10, students may come up with words like 'spooky' or 'eerie.' To test their understanding, the class could also be asked to incorporate certain words and craft their own stories, which can certainly enhance their creative writing skills. One panel can also have several other word classes: for instance, in Figure 13, the last panel can come up with a sentence, 'the father is crawling slowly under the bed'- this sentence can teach so much with the picture as it contains a noun, a verb, an adverb and a preposition. Again, in Figure 7, we can teach them verbs with just visuals as for the verb, 'dancing'. This way we can also mix and match the comic strips and ask them to write in various forms. We can incorporate these visuals to make them interestingly understand grammar in context, rather than just teaching them about unrealistic aspects of tense. It is to be noted that the art of storytelling lies in the imaginations of human beings and when it is practiced with visuals, they create magic, and students eventually explore more on the topics.

The scopes described above are merely a few outlines of how an orientation of an ESL/EFL classroom with the help of visual narratives might proceed. Therefore, the following can include some possible questions based on visual narratives that could be asked in an ESL/EFL classroom (though not limited to):

- Can you classify the nouns as people, places, things, or ideas?
- How do the different word classes in the comics help to make the story?
- Fill in the blanks with appropriate word classes/ tenses or modals. (By omitting the nouns/verbs/adjectives/etc.)

- Create your own comics/story by incorporating the given word classes.
- How are the pronouns used to replace the nouns in the given visual narratives?
- Describe the actions or events that represent the verbs.
- How do the different word classes contribute to the story in the visual narrative?
- How do the interjections convey emotions?
- Make predictions about what is going to happen and what the characters will say or think. (By omitting the speech bubbles with texts already there.)
- Create dialogue (Ask the students to rework and recast the dialogue in different tenses.)
- Role-play (Ask the students to enact a role-play using the correct forms of different tenses.)
- Write out a story using direct and indirect speech with reference to the visual narratives.
- Examine why the character is using that particular modal verb.
- Rewrite and recast the speech bubbles with different modal verbs. (By omitting the already given ones.)

These questions would certainly help the students to understand the language better. Since visual narratives possess both structural and functional aspects, as already mentioned in section 2 with the help of Figure 1, it becomes easier for students in customized learning like this, as visual storytelling makes up a potentially versatile and adaptable educational tool. This tool fosters the creative thinking ability of students as the human lexicon can link with the external world using the visuals: mental imageries and visual perceptions suggest that the same occipital regions remain active perceiving objects and are similarly active while mentally 'simulating' visual images of objects (Lewis & Poeppel, 2014). Also, with my own experience, I have found out that students in

the classroom discuss these questions, and the discussion leads to collaboration, critical thinking, and the ability to share and consider different perspectives.

Students' Perspective

This method was applied to high school students aged 16 to 18 (in a few private schools in Kathmandu), who found it highly successful and engaging. Students reported that engaging with such amusing and almost relatable circumstances in 'Calvin and Hobbes' made learning grammar more interesting and memorable. Students were able to improve their comprehension, memory, and retention of grammar and its rules by categorizing distinct word classes, tense forms, and modals in the comic strips.

Furthermore, activities such as filling in the blanks with their own vocabulary, analyzing how adjectives define people and places, and creating their own stories using certain words enhanced creativity and deeper knowledge. They discovered that verbs propel actions and interjections convey emotions, visually helping them understand these ideas more efficiently.

These interactive and engaging activities, which included role-playing, altering dialogue, and predicting future events in the visual narrative of 'Calvin and Hobbes,' facilitated teamwork and critical thinking. Several students reported that this method not only enhanced their grammatical understanding but also made them wish they had been exposed to such an approach earlier in their education. They also reported that learning grammar through visual narratives would have greatly improved their grammatical foundations at a younger age, making their current comprehension of the English language more robust and complex.

Discussion

Using visual narratives to teach grammar can improve the learning experience and promote a positive attitude toward language learning. The presence of both structural and functional

aspects in visual narratives, as already mentioned in section 2, makes grammar easy to grasp: they provide a visual context for language to assist the students through the sequential storytelling manner that helps them understand the intended messages and grammatical structures. The facial expressions of the characters in the visuals also add to it; to identify the nature of the different grammatical categories, whether it is an adverb or an interjection, we get the actual essence of the words through the facial expressions or other gestures or signals by the characters. Comprehension of both structural and functional elements of visual language reveals information on how visual language is framed, how it works in communication or other social interactions, and how it influences factors like cognition, culture, and social identity:

The embedded structural and functional aspects in visual narratives help the students in metacognition, which can be considered an essential concept in pedagogy, especially in a language learning classroom. This could be applied effectively with the help of visual narratives to deal with the science (language) and art (literature) of the English language. As observed in my classrooms, it helps the students' abilities to think about their own thinking. Moreover, it is a process to reflect on their learning processes and to monitor and regulate their own comprehension of the English language through comics with the help of both visuals and texts. By developing their metacognitive abilities, students can understand better how they learn and identify their strengths and shortcomings. Additionally, students particularly appreciated how facial expressions and gestures in the images helped them identify the nature of different grammatical categories. This strategy improved their metacognitive capacities, allowing them to reflect on their own learning processes and more closely check their understanding of the English language as ESL learners.

Conclusion

From my own experience of teaching English in the classroom, I have observed that incorporating visual narratives in English grammar teaching is a very effective, dynamic and engaging strategy that not only works as entertainment for learners but also improves their knowledge of grammatical principles. Visual narratives provide a sequential and visual context with the linguistic norms of structural and functional aspects present in them, making learning more pleasant and memorable. The use of visual narratives to teach grammar provides valuable insights from both the teacher's and the students' viewpoints, respectively, based on key linguistic theories from Halliday (1961) and Chomsky (1957). Facilitators can efficiently bridge the gap between theory and application by employing this teaching method, allowing ESL/EFL learners to comprehend grammar in a practical and meaningful way. Language and literature are two entities of the English language, both in general terms and in pedagogy, but they can be effectively brought together employing visuality. The method can be viewed as an exclusive way of teaching grammar in context through the strategic merger of the two. Therefore, this unique perspective could be brought to any ESL/EFL classroom to make the students understand visual literacy by explaining to them the grammatical components and how different images convey meanings sequentially and contribute to a complete and comprehensive narrative, thereby making the English language more approachable to learn with both the inputs of language and literature. This method also promotes engagement, nurtures linguistic creativity, and eventually provides learners with the language skills that they need to communicate or apply in real-life circumstances. Altogether, visual narratives can act as both a mirror and a window for teaching English grammar, especially to ESL/EFL students. It can therefore serve as a dynamic medium to teach various other grammatical rules and how they vary in different contexts.

Visual narratives, according to the teacher (here, myself), are consistent with both systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and transformational generative linguistics (TGL). As Halliday's (1961) SFL emphasizes the significance of meaning and function in language, teachers can use the functional features of visual narratives to contextualize grammatical principles, making them more accessible and meaningful to students. On the other, Chomsky (1957) emphasized the importance of TGL's approach in visual narratives, which ensures that the sequencing and organization of panels transmit a coherent story. By combining structural and functional components, teachers may provide a more thorough and interesting learning experience. This method not only adheres to linguistic theories, but it also improves students' knowledge and use of grammar and its rules in a real-life setting.

On the other, students (in Kathmandu), particularly those aged 16-18, reported that employing visual narratives considerably improves their learning experience and creates a positive attitude towards language learning. Engaging with sequential storytelling in 'Calvin and Hobbes' allowed them to comprehend difficult grammatical patterns with ease.

Therefore, visual narratives offer quite an engaging platform for learning grammar that includes various visual representations, context-based learning, multimodal learning experiences, exposure to cultural and linguistic diversity, and different opportunities for engagement, creativity and innovations. Visual narratives can graphically depict grammatical principles in action, giving real examples of how grammar works in sentences and dialogues, thereby making grammatical rules more accessible and clearer to students. In conclusion, the incorporation of comics into English grammar instruction successfully blends the structural precision of TGL with the functional relevance of SFL. This approach can benefit both teachers and students by making grammar training more effective,

entertaining, and relevant to real-world language scenarios.

If this method were implemented for ESL/EFL learners of various ages, then the effectiveness of this approach could be more thoroughly assessed. In the future, we hope to see this method used with other non-English speaking English learners, with more innovative and modern approaches, thereby increasing its impact and validating its benefits across varied ESL/EFL learner demographics.

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