

## GRAPHIC NOVELS AS A TEACHING TOOL FOR RAISING INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN PRIMARY ENGLISH CLASSROOM<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* As multimodal texts in which both pictures and words are used to communicate meaning, graphic novels are increasingly finding their place in a foreign language classroom. While multimodality supports comprehension and increases motivation for reading in a foreign language, graphic novel contents offer ample opportunities for developing the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, like visual literacy, critical and creative thinking, problem solving, communicative competence, and intercultural awareness and sensitivity. The paper explores how primary learners' intercultural sensitivity can be developed through a number of age- and language-appropriate activities applied before, during and after reading a graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Yang (2006). The aim of the paper is to support the didactic potential and pedagogical value of graphic novels to foster intercultural learning and develop empathy in primary English language learners.

*Keywords:* graphic novels, intercultural sensitivity, critical thinking and reading, English as a foreign language, primary language learners.

### Introduction

Foreign language education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has highlighted integration of two groups of skills: the skills for achieving proficiency in a foreign/second/target language (L2), and the skills for thriving in the plurilingual globalised world. The latter group of skills includes creative and critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, communication, and intercultural awareness and

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sensitivity (Binkley et al. 2012; Shin 2021; Shin, Savić, Machida 2021; UNESCO 2017). The increasing interconnectedness of people globally has demanded enhanced intercultural awareness and sensitivity for communicating beyond borders, while global problems like migration and pandemics, such as COVID-19, emphasize the need for worldwide cooperation and understanding (Griva, Papadopoulou 2019; Iqbal 2021; Savić, Shin 2021; United Nations Development Programme 2022). Language teachers are, therefore, expected to support L2 learners' holistic development and to provide education for global citizenship (Porto, Byram 2015).

The Serbian primary curriculum has responded positively to these requirements by stressing the cultural aspects in foreign language learning from the very beginning of formal L2 education, i.e. primary grade one (MoESTDS 2017, 2019). The primary curriculum highlights the importance of developing positive attitudes towards L2, especially towards the target language culture. However, it also sees an L2 classroom as a place for discussing home culture in the context of the world cultures. The newly adopted Primary Curriculum gives for each L2 grade curriculum a framework for (inter)cultural objectives that follow the linguistic aims of grade units (MoESTDS 2019). Teaching cultural content and raising L2 learners' intercultural awareness are thus seen as inseparable from teaching L2 linguistic content and developing L2 proficiency.

However, the aspect that is missing in the framework for (inter)cultural teaching in the Serbian Primary Curriculum is the guidance for teachers how to contextualise the teaching of (inter)cultural content to ensure the development of learners' intercultural competences. It is primary teachers' responsibility to provide adequate cultural material that can expose learners to comprehensible language and teach them the concepts and functional language needed for expressing aspects of the home culture, target language culture and the world cultures. Primary teachers of English as a foreign language need adequate teaching materials and pedagogical techniques to create engaging activities that may assist their learners in developing intercultural sensitivity.

Aiming to fill in this gap, the chapter explores how graphic novels as teaching tools can be used in primary L2 classroom for raising intercultural sensitivity of Serbian primary learners of English. We first define intercultural sensitivity and intercultural awareness, then we study the prospects of using graphic novels as reading materials with young L2 learners and teenagers, and finally we suggest a number of classroom activities that can potentially contribute to developing L2 learners' intercultural sensitivity and prepare them for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Intercultural Sensitivity and L2 Learning

Culture can be defined as “a complex, dynamic web of customs and mores and rules that involves attitudes, values, norms, and beliefs that are *imagined* to be shared by a community” (Brown, Lee 2015: 81). All cultures involve cultural products, practices and perspectives, whose learning requires different levels of engagement: while cultural products are transparent and mainly obvious, cultural perspectives and practices are not easily visible. The iceberg metaphor of culture (Indiana Department of Education 2011) compares culture to an iceberg and points to the fact that most of culture is below the surface of water; the small part of culture above water level is shallow, involving cultural products such as language, literature, music, dances, holidays, games and food; the much bigger part below the water surface represents deep culture, such as communication rules, family, fairness and justice, concept of time, attitudes towards elders, relationship to animals, concept of “self”, preference for competition or cooperation, and a number of other concepts, attitudes and values. When learners are able to use their cultural knowledge “to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (Porto, Byram 2015: 17) they exhibit critical cultural awareness.

How learners experience other cultures determines the stage of their intercultural sensitivity, which can be measured on the scale from Ethnocentrism to Ethnorelativism: if they experience their own culture as more central than the other cultures, they are going through the stages of Denial, Defence or Minimization, and show Ethnocentric intercultural sensitivity; on the other hand, if they experience other cultures as different ways of organizing reality, they are going through the stages of Acceptance, Adaptation, or Integration, and thus show Ethnorelative intercultural sensitivity (Bennett 1993, 2017; Bennet, Bennett 2004). Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) recognises the above six stages that a person may go through when viewing cultural differences. Intercultural sensitivity is used in this paper to refer to the ability of learners to view and experience cultural differences. The aim of developing intercultural sensitivity in L2 classroom should be to facilitate the learners’ passing from the stages of Ethnocentrism to the stages of Ethnorelativism, i.e. from avoiding cultural differences, to looking for cultural differences and for using different perspectives when approaching an issue. Considering great cultural diversity in all parts of the world today, making it “almost impossible to live in a monocultural society” (Iqbal 2021: 2), and the possibility to connect even to far away cultures using technology, there is an increasing need worldwide for developing intercultural sensitivity.

Being intertwined with language, aspects of a foreign language culture are an integral part of the process of L2 learning (Council of Europe 2018).

Intercultural sensitivity enables learners to compare their home culture to other cultures and thus understand their home culture better in relation to a rich diversity of world cultures. Thus, a foreign language classroom is the most natural place for teaching learners about other cultures and for assisting their development of intercultural sensitivity. Teachers of foreign languages are, therefore, expected to include into their curricula the content that can enhance intercultural awareness, and to select the materials and classroom activities that can provide an authentic cultural experience for their learners, while simultaneously creating a context for L2 development. Authentic materials are best sources of cultural information if they are age- and language-level-appropriate (Savić, Shin 2021). When teaching primary school learners, multimodal texts such as authentic graphic novels, can be a great teaching tool. The next section deals with the possibilities of integrating authentic graphic novels into the language curriculum.

### Authentic Graphic Novels in Primary English Curriculum

Graphic novels represent multimodal texts that combine two key building blocks of communication: words and images. Graphic novels are also referred to as graphic literature or graphic stories. They are very similar to comics, also called comic strips or comic books. Comics is a medium defined by McCloud (1994: 9) as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer”, and are characterised by panels with visual images and some text, often in speech bubbles. The panels appear in strips, with a gutter that is not an empty space between panels, but a gap of time when an action between two pictures happens. A graphic novel is a novel in comic-strip format that differs from comics in several ways: it is much longer, tells a complete story, has complex characters, a narrative structure with a clear beginning, middle and end, and precise narration. The story is told through captions, dialogues, and images.

Like other multimodal texts, which “integrate visual messages into language” (Savić 2020: 170), graphic novels support reading comprehension through a double coding system and two semiotic modes – written and visual (Kress, Van Leeuwen 2006). They are usually entertaining and can be used as reading materials to prepare learners for reading more difficult books, both in a native and foreign language. Graphic novels are, therefore, being increasingly used to develop reading habits, motivate less skilled readers, and spread the love for reading of schoolchildren (Sun 2017). Benefits of applying comics in a language classroom involve fostering motivation, lowering learners’ affective filters, encouraging communication and interaction, bringing culture into the classroom, and developing creativity through language and art (Whiting 2016). What is more, graphic novels allow the use of a variety of pedagogical techniques,

such as a role play, drama, story writing, turning stories into graphic novels, or creating own graphic novels. Still, the use of graphic novels in L2 classrooms in Serbia is not a widespread teaching method, nor is there research related to the effectiveness of reading graphic novels in our schools.

Importantly, depending on their theme, some graphic novels dealing with social issues can be used in L2 teaching to familiarise language learners with cultures different from their own and to convey messages of tolerance. Thus, by bringing culture into the classroom, graphic novels as authentic materials have a great potential to raise the intercultural awareness and sensitivity of L2 readers. Furthermore, graphic novels can support the development of critical thinking (Sun 2017) and increase sensitivity to stereotypes and cultural misconceptions. The next section gives rationale for using *American Born Chinese* by Gene Yang (2006) with primary learners of English, and suggests a number of classroom activities appropriate for intermediate English language learners, both young learners and teenagers.

### Using *American Born Chinese* (Yang 2006) for Raising Intercultural Sensitivity in L2 Classroom

The main theme of this graphic novel is the search for personal identity. It explores how difficult it is to construct a personal identity if a person has a mixed culture background. Gene Young is the author of Chinese origin, born in the United States, raised within the two cultures and exposed to all kinds of stereotypical assumptions about Asian Americans. To raise awareness of these issues he drew and wrote the visual narrative book that includes three parallel stories: 1. about a Chinese American boy named Jin, who transforms himself into Danny to be liked more by his white classmates; 2. about the Chinese character named Chin-Kee, Danny's cousin, an embodiment of negative stereotypes about the Chinese, who embarrasses Danny at school; 3. about The Monkey King, an abandoned monkey king who changes himself and reappears as Chin-Kee. In Chin-Kee's character the author shows extremely exaggerated stereotypes about the Chinese people in order to draw the attention of the readers on how unfair and racist they are: from his looks to his behaviour, i.e. the way he is dressed, the protruding of his front teeth, inability to pronounce the English sounds well and switching up the 'r' and 'l' sounds, and showing off with his wide knowledge.

All the characters are forced to change in order to fit the micro societies in which they live and where there is a lot of pressure from peers, the family, or even the unknown people to give up their heritage, beliefs and values, and to transform their true selves. The message of the story is to accept one's true self, and to accept people from all cultures as friends instead of making fun of them.

This is not only true for mixed nationality people or immigrants, but can be related to many situations where people are discriminated against on the basis of their nationality or a character trait they possess, like in schools or in public places. There are sections of the novel that can be used to relate to the learners' experiences of discrimination and prejudices, and to raise their intercultural sensitivity. Both young learners and teenagers can identify with Jin's and Danny's experiences in the scenes depicted in the graphic novel when the teacher mispronounces their name, or when peers assume what food they eat. To inspire understanding and the need for respect, English language teacher needs to develop the activities that will result in the appropriate emotional reaction and reflection of the learners. The following section gives example activities for developing a Thematic Unit based on reading *American Born Chinese* graphic novel.

### Unit Plan and Activities Based on *American Born Chinese*

In organising L2 teaching through thematic units, teachers of English can connect several lessons into a Unit Plan, i.e. a series of successive lessons on a common theme. When the theme is provided by a book, it is also important to organise the activities in the way and sequence that will support comprehension, meaningful interaction and reflection. This can be done by grouping activities into three large groups: 1. before-reading activities; 2. while-reading activities; and 3. after-reading activities. Each group of activities should contribute to a better understanding of the graphic novel through purposeful learner engagement. When using a graphic novel such as *American Born Chinese*, the activities should guide learners through a discourse analysis and a detailed analysis of visual aspects of the novel, to enable them to spot stereotypes and the search for personal identity.

#### 1. Before-reading activities

The purpose of this group of activities is to support comprehension by introducing the topic, connecting it to students' prior knowledge and experience, preteaching new vocabulary, reviewing known language, and predicting what will happen in the book (Shin, Crandall 2014). To be able to detect stereotypes, the learners' common understanding of the concept should first be developed. The following sequence of classroom activities can be used as a model to be adapted to different language levels and group ages in particular contexts.

1.1. *Defining Stereotypes* (based on Gianfrancesco 2019) is an activity that raises the learners' awareness of misconceptions and prejudices. The following sequence may lead to successful interpretation of the concept.

a) Ask the students to write about their thoughts and feelings regarding

stereotypes. Ask them to give examples of stereotypes about any group they feel strongly about: school stereotypes (e.g. nerds), or social stereotypes (e.g. low-income students).

- b) Discuss misconceptions about the learners' nationality (e.g. Serbia/Serbs).
- c) Define stereotypes in a discussion. Ask learners to think about possible historical reasons for the creation of specific stereotypes.
- d) Discuss racial stereotypes and the reasons for their rise today.

Another interesting way to introduce the topic can be through the discussion following the viewing of a video interview with the author.

- a) Let the learners watch the video interview with the author or his TED talk (Yang 2016). Ask them to focus on his reasons for exaggerating stereotypes.
- b) Ask the learners to reflect on the author's means for showing stereotypes described in his talk and make a list of all means.

## 2. While-reading activities

The purpose of this group of activities is to support comprehension by asking and answering questions and analysing the narrative through the characters, the setting, plot, events, problems and solutions. Understanding the narrative structure is very important for understanding the characters' actions and relationships. This can be done through story mapping, story boarding, or story re-telling. The following activities can help the learners share their comprehension and reflect on the main theme.

2.1. *Character Analysis Carousel* (based on Gianfrancesco 2019) is an activity that will support group work and contribute to the common understanding of stereotypes and the characters' needs to fit in:

- a) While reading the novel, students work in small groups to describe a character from the novel by writing their comments, observations and questions on a big poster paper titled with a character's name. The groups use a specific colored marker, after five minutes they pass the paper to the next group clockwise.
- b) They then continue the activity, this time adding new comments or making observations on those that have already been written by their peers.
- c) After all the groups have written about all the characters, the groups get the papers about the character they started describing and develop a presentation based on the feedback given by all groups.

2.2. *Timeline of a Character's Life* is an activity that helps learners focus on the events in the narrative structure of the novel that are important for shaping the characters and defining who they are.

- a) Ask the learners to create a timeline of Jin/Danny's character development and to mark the specific moments when Jin/Danny interacts with other characters in the book.
- b) Ask the learners to use the timeline in pairs to discuss the role Jin/Danny's childhood memories play at the present and how they have shaped his character.

2.3. *Questions* for guided reading and for eliciting student responses. These questions can also assist learners in completing the story map: Who is the main character? Where was he born? How does he differ from the other children? Why does he wish to become a transformer? Why do the boys bully him during the break? What is their misconception? How did he make friends at school? Did he choose them (Peter, Wei-Chen)? What did he like about Wei-Chen? What are the teachers' misconceptions? Who is transformed in the story? Why does Jin change his appearance and name? How does Danny feel about the arrival of his cousin Chin-Kee from China? How does he feel about his cousin's academic success? What is your first impression of Chin-Kee?

### 3. After-reading activities

This group of activities supports comprehension through retelling the story and discussing its message of personal identity construction.

3.1. *Establishing Personal Identity* (based on Gianfrancesco 2019) is the activity based on watching the video interview of the author with the purpose of understanding how important one's cultural heritage is for constructing personal identity.

- a) Ask the learners to watch the interview and to focus on the author's personal reasons for writing the graphic novel. What is the message of belonging? How is the mixed culture explained through its pieces?
- b) Invite the learners to write a short paragraph about personal experience of not belonging to a certain place at a moment in their life. Ask the learners to describe the situation and how they felt.
- c) Ask the learners to share the situation in a small group.
- d) Ask the learners to identify the ways that they change their "look" in order to fit in socially. They discuss other ways people try to change to fit in socially.
- e) Ask the learners to work in groups to discuss the cultures that experience

the biggest clash when assimilating into Serbian culture and to give the reasons for that.

3.2. *Questions for Raising Intercultural Sensitivity* can further assist learners to connect the story to their personal experiences and identity, and to broaden their understanding of their own and other cultures as aspects of cultural literacy needed for effective intercultural contacts (Savić 2013). The following questions can be used as prompts for group or class discussion, or for writing a short essay:

1. What kinds of challenges does Jin face at school as the child of Chinese immigrants?
2. What kind of challenges do you face every day when you attend school? Do you sometimes feel alone, or that you don't fit in / an outsider (immigrant kids)?
3. How effective is Danny's change in the story?
4. Why does Danny return to his true self in the end? How does it help him move forward?
5. Did you experience the same at a point in your life? How did being true to yourself help you?
6. Which aspect of your personal identity are you very proud of?
7. How much is understanding of respecting other cultures important today?

3.3. *Let's Imagine How You Live* (based on Sampredo, Hillyard 2004: 70-71) is an activity that aims to raise awareness of cultures other than the learners' own. By being asked to think how people from other cultures live, the learners are encouraged to understand more about diversity. The people from other cultures are the characters the learners select from the graphic novel. The learners first reflect on their own daily activities, and then visualise a character from the graphic novel, focusing on the following: a) how he/she lives and what he/she eats; b) what their immediate environment is like; and c) what their home is like. The activity is organised in the following way:

- a) Write on the board (or in the worksheet instructions) the following headings:

Things I eat  
Things I see  
Things I hear  
My home is

- a) Ask learners to take a blank sheet of paper and to draw a vertical line down the centre of the sheet, dividing it into two. Tell them to label the top of the lefthand column with their own name. Tell them to copy the headings on to the lefthand side of their sheets, leaving space for writing between the headings.
- b) Ask the learners to close their eyes and to think for a moment about their daily routine from the time they wake up until the evening. Tell them to visualize what they do and to think of the things they see, eat, and hear, and about the things at their home.
- c) When they open their eyes, ask the learners to write the things they have just visualized under the headings on the lefthand side of their sheets.
- d) Ask the learners to think of a character (of their own age, if possible) from the graphic novel that comes from the other culture, and to identify with him/her. Then ask the learners to go through their daily routines again, identifying with the character and trying to visualize what the other person may do, eat, and hear, what his/her home is like. Ask the learners to write the information in the righthand column of their sheets.
- e) Ask the learners to swap their sheets with a neighbour or to read to each other the daily routines of themselves as graphic novel characters, and to try to identify/guess the culture/character. They discuss their guesses and why they put what they did.

3.4. *Developing a Personal Story of Tolerance* (based on Savić, Shin 2021) is the activity that should follow all above discussions about and reflections on stereotypes and personal identity. The learners engage in developing the stories from their personal experience. They retell the stories from the past when they were victims of discrimination, focusing on their own feelings and the message of tolerance. Teachers can use the framework with steps for story development to help learners draft their own narratives before turning them into personal stories (Savić, Shin 2021).

3.5. *Developing a Personal Graphic Novel* is the activity that may follow the development of a personal story of tolerance. The whole story is turned into a graphic novel using a graphic novel template, either by drawing, or by applying some of a number of digital apps freely available on the internet (Lambert 2007). This activity can lead to creating the final product in a project based on reading *American Born Chinese* in English classes. Not only will teachers create conditions for learners to improve their language skills, but they will also foster the development of the learners' visual literacy and digital skills.

Considering the fact that the activities based on reading *American Born Chinese* offer many opportunities for the learners' purposeful interaction in a foreign language, their collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and their cultural learning, this graphic novel can be a very effective teaching tool in the English classroom. The pedagogical practices used for organising the activities based on the graphic novel require learners' collaboration in doing the tasks and "focus on the task outcomes rather than the language used to achieve them" (CEFR 2018: 29).

Primary teachers of English in Serbia can easily adapt the above activities to suit their teaching contexts, creating a potentially beneficial environment for a holistic development of their learners. The most important precondition is to turn the language classroom into a safe environment where learners can openly voice their opinions, without being judged. If they feel comfortable and safe "they are more likely to participate in and contribute to rich and mutually beneficial dialogues related to issues of race and other forms of diversity" (Husband 2010: 73). The language classroom can thus be turned into a space for understanding the universal values, such as equity and justice, respect and dignity, and for practising listening in life-like communication (Savić, Shin 2021).

## Conclusion

The chapter explored how authentic graphic novels in English can effectively be used in a foreign language classroom to foster the development of intercultural sensitivity of primary language learners. Technology has created communication bridges among world cultures and stressed the need for intercultural sensitivity, while school curricula point to the need for developing cultural knowledge and intercultural competences of young learners (MoESTDS 2017). Some foreign language teachers have created opportunities for their learners to communicate with peers of diverse cultures throughout the world (Shin, Savić, Machida 2021), while the others still need more professional development and appropriate materials to introduce intercultural issues to their classrooms (Savić, Prošić-Santovac 2020). The chapter has given a rationale for and the description of pedagogical skills for applying graphic novels to inspire discussions of intercultural themes and help relate them to learners' personal experiences.

*American Born Chinese* has been suggested as the appropriate teaching material adaptable to diverse language levels and ages of primary learners. It is a graphic novel used in schools in the United States to raise the awareness of stereotypes and point to the difficulty Chinese Americans face in constructing their cultural identity (Gianfrancesco 2019). The narrative can easily be linked to experiences of people in other cultural contexts who come from mixed cultures or experience any form of discrimination in their everyday lives. *American Born*

*Chinese* has great potential to support primary learner's holistic development as teaching material. By creating a Unite Plan and making an appropriate choice of classroom activities suggested in this chapter, primary teachers of English can prepare their learners for more successful communication in multicultural societies. Moreover, the pedagogical practices described in the chapter can help learners accomplish "more complex personal experience of otherness" (Bennet 2017, np) and move to Ethnorelative stages of intercultural sensitivity characterised by empathy, tolerance, mutual respect and understanding.

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## ГРАФИЧКИ РОМАН КАО НАСТАВНО СРЕДСТВО ЗА РАЗВОЈ ИНТЕРКУЛТУРАЛНЕ ОСЕТЉИВОСТИ У НАСТАВИ СТРАНОГ ЈЕЗИКА

*Резиме:* Графички романи су мултимодални текстови у којима се информација саопштава комбинацијом речи и слике. Захваљујући свом мултимодалном карактеру, све су присутнији у настави страних језика. Употреба графичких романа омогућава боље разумевање и повећава мотивацију за читање, а њихов садржај нуди широке могућности за развој вештина неопходних за живот у 21. веку, као што су визуелна писменост, критичко и креативно мишљење, решавање проблема, комуникативна компетенција, и интеркултурална свест и осетљивост. Рад има за циљ да истражи потенцијал графичких романа за развој интеркултуралне

осетљивости ученика основне школе применом наставних активности прилагођених узрасту ученика и њиховом језичком нивоу. Истражује се тематско планирање наставе и активности које се могу организовати пре, за време и после читања графичког романа *American Born Chinese* Џина Јанга (2006). Циљ рада је да укаже на дидактички потенцијал и педагошку вредност графичких романа на страном језику за јачање интеркултуралне компетенције и развој емпатије ученика.

*Кључне речи:* графички роман, интеркултурална осетљивост, критичко мишљење, енглески као страни језик, ученици основне школе.