



## Language learners read comics: Background knowledge and perceptions of multimodal texts

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### Abstract

*When didacticizing a comics text for L2 instruction, teachers consider its content and appeal, potential difficulties in language and form, possible tasks and activities, and finally, ways comics can support existing instructional materials, especially the more traditional texts that have long constituted L2 curricula. What is lacking, however, are data on the background knowledge of form and content learners bring to comics texts in the classroom. Without this evidence, teachers are left to make assumptions about what needs to be explicitly taught and scaffolded in guiding learner comprehension of comics. To investigate learner background knowledge of comics and comics reading, this article presents a questionnaire study focusing on L2 learners' previous reading experiences, knowledge, and views. It asks advanced university L2 German learners (n = 26) about their comics knowledge in terms of characters, form, plot, and themes to determine whether they possess the necessary schematic background knowledge for reading. It further studies whether learners consider comics as literature and if they regard the reading of these texts as an effective task in language courses. The results provide insight into L2 learners' comics knowledge for instructors and comics scholars as well as a model for approaching other multimodal texts in L2 instruction.*

**Keywords:** *L2 reading instruction, background knowledge, schema theory, comics*

**APA Citation:** Benjamin, J. D. (2021). Language learners read comics: Background knowledge and perceptions of multimodal texts. *Second Language Research & Practice*, 2(1), 24–40. <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/69856>

### Introduction

The present article considers L2 learners' knowledge of comics as a test case for learning more about how they understand multimodal texts. After presenting a literature review that focuses on comprehension and background knowledge, comics as multimodal texts, and the role of these texts in L2 instruction, the article turns to a questionnaire study of L2 learners' background knowledge and perceptions of comics to both identify areas for improvement in L2 instruction and provide a model for learning about students' knowledge of other multimodal text forms. Following the results of the questionnaire study, the discussion and conclusion argue that a better understanding of students' background knowledge and perceptions of comics will enable language instructors, curriculum developers, and language program directors to create meaningful and effective instructional units that reflect learners' positionality. Such learner-centered instructional models for the teaching of comics can also inspire didacticizations of other newly emerging multimodal text types such as social media posts, memes, podcasts, and e-textbooks.

## Literature Review

### Comprehension and Background Knowledge

The main objective of reading in the second language classroom is to enable learners to comprehend texts. However, the comprehension process is far more complex than simple vocabulary knowledge and morphosyntactic understanding. In fact, Bernhardt's (2005) widely accepted and empirically substantiated model of reading in a second language illustrates that only 50% of reading comprehension can be directly attributed to language proficiency in the form of lexical and morphosyntactic competences. This fact warrants a more detailed look at the comprehension process.

According to cognitive psychologist Walter Kintsch, comprehension occurs when a reader is able to relate incoming information to existing knowledge structures. A reader does this by transforming “the original structures [and] merging the current environment with the organism's previous experience of it” (Kintsch, 1998, p. 14). Comprehension is thus a set of actions whereby readers combine knowledge they already possess with new textual information. This process results in new meaning. Cognitive scientists have often considered this mobilization of existing meaning in terms of *schemata* (Rumelhart, 1981)—that is, the “conceptual framework” through which information is understood (Anderson et al., 1978, p. 433). When new data are encountered, they are interpreted insofar as they fit with or can be attached to already existing schemata. Despite its roots in research programs that originated in the 1970s, this cognitive science perspective on comprehension continues to have a major impact on how reading researchers conceptualize the reading process (Grabe, 2009; Moje et al., 2020; Paesani et al., 2016).

As early as the late 1970s, schema theory views on reading started to impact research in second language reading and reading across cultural contexts. An early study of schema theory as it applies to transcultural issues in reading (Steffensen et al., 1979) compared how adult L1 English speakers from both India and the United States comprehended descriptions of wedding ceremonies from each culture. The results showed that participants recalled more information more quickly when they interacted with texts from their own cultures. The study suggests that culture-specific schemata aid in memory and may also affect comprehension. L2 researchers conducted similar studies adding in the variable of language. Johnson (1981), for example, found that cultural familiarity positively affected the comprehension and recall of texts by L1 Persian learners of English who read folklore from the United States and Iran, and Johnson (1982) saw similar results for texts about Halloween for ESL students in Illinois. Just as in Steffensen et al. (1979), greater cultural background knowledge correlated positively with greater comprehension.

In this early work, L2 scholars studied background knowledge as an undifferentiated mass of information that defined learners' readings. Later work began to investigate specific schema types. Carrell (1985), for example, showed that explicitly teaching text structure increased recall ability in L2 readers, and Carrell (1987) differentiated between formal schemata and content schemata. Lee (1986) separated out and tested specifically for the effects of *context*, or text type and genre, *transparency*, or the concreteness of lexemes, and *familiarity*, or content knowledge. This latter category reflects what Steffensen et al. (1979) and Johnson (1981, 1982) studied. Lee's (1986) data suggest that the type of background and contextual information provided to L2 readers does affect the success of their recall, with context having the largest effect.

Further studies and theory have continued to differentiate schemata. Kramsch (1993) identified four different schema types: text schemata, genre schemata, content schemata, and a discourse dimension, which includes “the social and cultural context of production and the personal and cultural context of reception of the text by the reader” (p. 124). Nassaji (2007) distinguished among six types of schemata: sentence schemata, story schemata, formal/rhetorical schemata, content schemata, textual schemata, and symbolic schemata. Despite not coming to a consensus on types, this work clearly illustrates the need to consider a wide range of background schemata when teaching any text. This multiplicity of potential schemata is further compounded when considering complex multimodal texts, especially comics.

## Comics as Multimodal Texts

Multimodality is the design or construction of meaning using different potentialities, referred to as modes (Jewitt et al., 2016; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2015). Meaning is realized when readers interact with, or read, a multimodal text or ensemble constructed of these potentialities (Serafini, 2014). An inchoate, deep-structural meaning is instantiated through the interpretation of these modes of representation. This process can be analogized to the New London Group's (1996) designs of meaning, a framework for meaning construction, in which Available Designs, or existing semiotic materials, are selected during a process of Designing, or meaning encoding, into an output, the Redesigned. This multiliteracies model addresses the same issues as multimodality scholarship, expanding texts beyond collections of written words to include contexts, cultures, languages, and modes—that is, the entire paratext (Genette, 1997). Multimodality, while requiring these multiple literacies of readers, is concerned with meaning construction centered on the text itself (Genette, 1997), that is, on the elements of a work framed within the paratext. In the case of comics, among these are the visual and verbal modes that constitute the comics form.

In this study, comics refer to any visual text, typically structured in one or more panels, and often using verbal text, which is usually contained within speech balloons. Comics are a useful text type for the present study's purposes for several reasons. First, running the gamut from simple, popular works to complex graphic novels, comics are diverse. Typically created for L1 speakers and not altered specifically for L2 learners, they are also authentic (Crossley & McNamara, 2016), which many view as useful for language learning (Berardo, 2006; Crossley & McNamara, 2016; O'Donnell, 2009). Second, comics have long been present in both popular culture and across academia (Dong, 2012; Syma & Weiner, 2013; Tabachnick, 2009).

Comics are blended multimodal texts; that is, they are not overtly dominated by the verbal or the visual and thus require exposure and training to fully comprehend (Serafini, 2014). This understanding of multimodal texts as modally neutral contrasts with typical approaches to semiotics, which see language as restricting (“anchoring”) or replicating (“relaying”) the visual meaning in an image-text ensemble (Barthes, 1977, p. 38). Here, rather than proceed with analysis borrowed solely from literary studies or visual studies, comics readers must learn new ways of analyzing them.

Comics scholarship is widely conversant with multimodality studies (Groensteen, 2013; Serafini, 2014; Tabachnick, 2009). Further, within comics studies, there are also independent discourses, which closely align with the concepts of interactivity and literacy present in multimodality theories. McCloud's (1994) discussion of closure, borrowed from Gestalt psychology, requires the reader to fill in gaps in the text to construct new meaning spatially, temporally, and conceptually. Similarly, Groensteen's (2013) concept of the “spatio-topical apparatus” (p. 12) envisions a generative reading process. According to Groensteen (2007), “an original ensemble of productive mechanisms of meaning” (p. 2) is thus realized, typically in narrative form. For Groensteen, the comics form is essentially an Available Design (New London Group, 1996).

L2 comics thus pose a challenge for readers not only in vocabulary, cultural background, and themes but also in formal (Carrell, 1987) and genre-specific content and visual schemata (Strömberg, 2020). To read them, L2 learners must become literate in constructing appropriate contextualized meanings from their visual (Gombrich, 1960; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), textual (Fish, 1980), and sociohistorical (Hall, 1993) conventions and information structures. Readers must thus be able to process information and employ reading strategies developed through guided reading (Stauffer, 1969; Kern, 2000; Paesani et al., 2016) to compensate for deficits in these schemata and literacies. As such, comics exemplify the myriad difficulties that L2 readers face when encountering multimodal texts. Establishing processes for understanding what learners already know about comics is a necessary step for instructors who teach with them.

## Background Knowledge and Multimodal Texts in L2 Instruction

The preponderance of scholarship on teaching with multimodal texts offers pedagogical models. For example, Unsworth (2014) showed how multimodal literacy can be taught to students starting at an early age in the English curriculum in Australia, and Serafini (2014) described how teachers can select model example texts when introducing new text types. Specific to comics, many recent works defining and discussing comics detail their benefits for teaching reading generally (Chute, 2017), for education more broadly (Hill, 2017; Tabachnick, 2009), and for L2 instruction (Bridges, 2009; Kutch, 2016).

Much scholarship on multimodality also recognizes the importance of background knowledge for reading and thus teaching texts. The New London Group (1996) explicitly counted existing background knowledge activated to construct a basis for comprehension among the possible Available Designs. Cope and Kalantzis (2015) referred to this same stage of contextualizing meaning making as situated practice or experiencing the known. Like for scholars of schema theory, multimodality scholars view this initial step as a central component of comprehension. Paesani et al. (2016) noted the culturally situated nature of these varied schemata and explicitly connected schema theory to the underlying assumptions of their work:

Formal and linguistic schemata are examples of some of the Available Designs that come into play during textual interaction. In reading FL texts, learners must tap into these existing Available Designs and at the same time identify gaps in their knowledge. (p. 145)

Finally, other examples of scholarship on activating background knowledge with multimodal texts include Abrams (2016), who considered how to scaffold multimodal tasks in the classroom; Abraham and Farias, (2017), who made prescriptions for introducing texts into the classroom; and Benjamin et al. (2020) who detailed the implementation of a teaching model from Paesani et al. (2016) for the guided reading of a video advertisement.

Scholars from a wide range of fields thus recognize the benefit of teaching with multimodal texts and even comics specifically, and they often discuss the necessary schemata or background knowledge needed for meaning making with these texts. What remains is to gather empirical data on what background knowledge L2 learners bring to these texts in instruction.

### Research Questions

To address the need for more insight into the background knowledge and views of comics among L2 readers, this study considers two primary research questions:

1. What do L2 readers know about comics in terms of characters, form, plot elements, and themes? Do they possess the schematic background knowledge that will support their comprehension process?
2. How do language learners perceive comics? Do they consider these texts as literature? Do they regard the reading of comics as an effective task in language courses?

## Methodology

### Participants

The participants of the study were 26 university students of L2 German in advanced courses at The University of Texas at Austin, having completed the equivalent of at least 312 contact hours in the language. All participants were native speakers of languages other than German—25 English and one Spanish—and were recruited in spring 2016 and spring 2017 from German courses focusing on literature, culture, or linguistics. Not all participants had taken the full sequence of courses at the university, and some had considerable experience outside of class in the target language, for example, while studying abroad. German learners who participated in this study are thus best described as those who were enrolled in upper-division

German courses where they encountered a range of texts from across historical periods, genres, and styles on a variety of subjects.

Advanced L2 learners were selected for the study for three reasons. First, having a group defined by a linguistic baseline can control for language ability as a variable in background knowledge and views of L2 comics. Second, advanced learners are, as a group, more likely to have read a variety of L2 texts and thus can provide data on whether L2 comics have figured in their L2 reading thus far. Finally, data on comics knowledge and perceptions, still largely based in these learners' L1 experience, may relate most closely to what advanced L2 readers can do linguistically. While comics should be and are used throughout the L2 curriculum, data regarding the wide range of comics and graphic novels learners may read in the L1 are initially and most immediately applicable for L2 instruction at levels for which language poses less of a barrier.

## Measures

Each participant completed a questionnaire using the survey software Qualtrics. The full text is included in the [Appendix](#). Following two items regarding the participants' language background to provide context, the questionnaire asked a range of questions about what learners know about comics in terms of background knowledge and perceptions.

To approach the first research question on schematic background knowledge, the questionnaire (see [Appendix](#)) elicited information on current or past experiences with comics (Items 4a/b) and participants' exposure to L2 comics (Items 7a/b). It then collected further data regarding the genres and types of comics participants enjoyed reading (Item 5) and their favorite characters and titles (Item 6). If participants answered in Item 4 that they had not read any comics, they skipped the remaining questions regarding their reading practices. Item 11 gathered detail as to participants' knowledge of specific characters, thus providing a rudimentary understanding of their range of experience and knowledge. This item also provided an opportunity to control the participants' self-reported level of experience by measuring familiarity with both well-known and more esoteric comics and graphic novel characters. It listed nine characters from a variety of styles, genres, and national traditions. The list included three superheroes/villains: Batman, Lex Luthor, and Wolverine; two figures from celebrated, complex graphic novels: Enid Coleslaw (*Ghost World* [1997]) and Rorschach (*Watchmen* [1987]); two characters largely popular from other media: Rick Grimes (*The Walking Dead*) and Scrooge McDuck; and two others from international comics traditions: Goku and Asterix. The list additionally included a distractor character, Dr. Demoniac, who was created to monitor the validity of the questionnaire item. Participants were asked to identify whether they were familiar with each character, and if so, whether it was only by name, only from another medium other than comics such as a film or a video game, or from reading the actual comics.

To answer the second research question regarding how language learners perceive comics, the questionnaire asked about participants' views of comics as literature (Item 8), whether they found prose or comics easier to read (Item 10), and if they thought reading comics in German would be useful for language learning (Item 9).

## Data Analysis

The analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaire can be broken down into three parts. First, quantitative data for all items except Item 11 are presented in raw counts and percentages. When applicable, these data are supplemented with qualitative responses to provide additional depth. Second, following an initial look at the qualitative data and several iterations of open coding (Baralt, 2012), the themes revealed are represented qualitatively in counts and percentages, also supplemented by the raw responses as needed.

Finally, to analyze the data from Item 11, I assigned point values to each possible statement to quantify the responses. When a character was not recognized at all (i.e., "I have never heard of \_\_\_\_\_") participants

received zero points. Knowledge of a character's name alone (i.e., "I have only heard the name of \_\_\_\_\_"), which may signal the activation of some expectations and background knowledge, received one point. Two points indicated knowledge of the character's attributes and histories/origin stories gained through other media (i.e., "I am only familiar with \_\_\_\_\_ from TV, films, books, etc."). Three points suggested knowledge of and information about the character as well as an awareness of how they are realized in the comics form (i.e., "I have read comics in which \_\_\_\_\_ played a role"). Although points were also assigned for reported recognition of the distractor character, Dr. Demoniac, these were not included in the composite point values for each participant. The resulting composite point values, though admittedly rough, may point toward a general understanding of each participant's familiarity with a diverse range of comics characters and thus some picture of their knowledge of the form. The higher the number, the broader and more diverse the knowledge.

## Results

### Research Question 1

#### *Comics Reading Experience*

First, Item 4a from the questionnaire asked, "Do you currently read/have you ever read comics?" Nineteen of 26 participants (73.1%) reported having read comics at some point, whereas seven of 26 (26.9%) said they had never read comics. Participants who answered yes to Item 4a were then asked in Item 4b to provide detail. Many reported changes to their reading habits over their lives, most often involving a decrease in comics reading. Participant 19 reported "I used to love the comics page of the newspaper," whereas Participant 24 remembered reading comics "on occasion as a child, though not so much anymore as an adult." Participant 2 stated: "I would read the Sunday comics with my grandma when I would stay with her on weekends growing up." Participant 22 noted: "I read comics weekly as a kid. Now, as a student, I read comics during the summer and winter breaks; so, only three or four times a year." Finally, Participant 16, who also reported reading less, noted a change in reading habits, not solely in quantity, but also in quality: "When I was young I had a subscription to the Amazing Spider-man, and read comics regularly. As I've grown up I don't read comics all that regularly, but when good storylines come out I do buy and read them as graphic novels."

In contrast, Participant 12 noted no decrease in comics reading over time, but rather changes in genre:

I have read comics my whole life. When I was much younger I read newspaper comics and would collect anthologies of my favorites. When I was in middle school I was turned on to graphic novels and read several. In high school I developed an interest in webcomics as well as Japanese manga, both of which I continue to read on a weekly/daily basis respectively to this day.

The responses to Item 7a, "Have you ever read comics in a foreign language?" provided further data on reading experience. Only four of 19 participants who answered this item had read comics in a foreign language. In Item 7b, of these four, two reported having read *Asterix* in German, the third a collected manga volume translated into German, and the fourth *Maus* in German and *Asterix* and *Tintin* in their original French versions.

Item 5, "What are your favorite comics?" aimed to learn about genre preferences. Many participants reporting enjoying several genres from the list. Of the 20 who responded (interestingly, one more than reported having ever read comics), superhero comics were the most commonly chosen (9/20 participants), followed closely by graphic novels (7/20) and manga (6/20). Of the suggested responses, mystery/crime/horror comics received the lowest number of responses (4/20). Of the responses marked as "other" (6/20), there were four that mentioned humor or comedy as a characteristic they enjoyed, one mentioned science fiction/fantasy, and one webcomics.

An additional question, Item 6, asked for specific titles and characters that learners enjoyed. The 16 participants who provided an answer mentioned 19 characters/titles, three of which—Batman, Captain America, and Superman—were each mentioned twice. The remaining 13 answers, in alphabetical order, were *Akira*, *Bone*, Calvin (*Calvin & Hobbes*), *Deadpool*, Bigby (*Fables*), *Fullmetal Alchemist*, *Initial D*, *Persepolis*, *Rat Queens*, *Sailor Moon*, *The Sandman* (Neil Gaiman), *The Walking Dead*, and Wallace Wells (*Scott Pilgrim*).

### Comics Reading Knowledge

Item 11 elicited participants' familiarity with 10 comics characters. Table 1 shows the raw data from Item 11 by character. It also shows the composite score for each character based on the assigned point values for each answer as discussed in the data analysis section above.

**Table 1**

*Questionnaire Item 11: "Please choose the most appropriate statement for each of the following" (n = 26).*

Character	I have read comics in which ____ played a role. (3 points)	I am only familiar with ____ from TV, films, books, etc. (2 points)	I have only heard the name of _____. (1 point)	I have never heard of _____. (0 points)	Composite Point Values
Batman	6	19	1	0	57
Goku	0	9	10	7	28
Lex Luthor	3	16	1	6	42
Asterix	4	2	8	12	24
Dr. Demonic	0	0	2	24	2
Rick Grimes	2	8	3	13	25
Enid Coleslaw	0	0	2	24	2
Wolverine	5	19	2	0	55
Rorschach	8	3	5	10	35
Scrooge McDuck	4	12	5	5	41

According to the composite point values, the best-known characters were those from superhero comics (Batman, Wolverine, and Lex Luthor) and a popular children's series from Disney (Scrooge McDuck). In the middle range were Rorschach from the acclaimed graphic novel *Watchmen*, Rick Grimes from the popular adventure comic *The Walking Dead*, and Goku and Asterix, the two characters from non-English language works. Least known were Enid Coleslaw, the sole female character, and Dr. Demonic, the distractor (made up and not present in any known comic). When looking solely at the characters known specifically from comics, the numbers are largely the same, with the superhero characters enjoying higher recognition than the others, with one notable exception. The character best known from comics reading is Rorschach: Eight of 26 participants (30.8%) reported having read a comic with the character Rorschach. This number was higher than that of two popular superhero characters, Batman and Wolverine, which had six participants (23.1%) and five participants (19.2%), respectively, who reported having read them in a comic.

To consider how this familiarity with, and knowledge of, the characters, plots, and themes of a range of comics was distributed among the participants, Table 2 shows the composite point values for all 26 participants for all nine real characters—that is, not including Dr. Demonic.

**Table 2**

*Composite Score from Questionnaire Item 11 Reflecting Comics Knowledge (n = 26).*

Participant Number	Composite Score
1	12
2	7
3	6
4	16
5	10
6	12
7	11
8	6
9	16
10	9
11	15
12	18
13	14
14	16
15	16
16	23
17	10
18	6
19	13
20	4
21	12
22	20
23	7
24	8
25	14
26	8
Mean	11.9
Median	12
Mode	16
Standard Deviation	4.70

The highest possible score from these nine characters was 27. For the 26 participants, the resulting scores ranged from 4 to 23, with a mean of 11.9 and a standard deviation of 4.70.

## **Research Question 2**

### ***Comics as Literature***

Item 8a from the questionnaire asked, “Do you view comics as literature?” A strong majority (65.4%) reported viewing comics as literature. Four participants (15.4%) said they did not view them as literature. The remaining five participants (23.1%) stated that they were unsure.

Item 8b expanded on these results. Of the four who responded “no,” one referred to a lack of character development in comics, whereas the others mentioned the visual nature of comics as differentiating them from literature. One of these three, Participant 7, viewed the multimodal nature of comics negatively, stating that “comics tend to debase the purity of the written word.” Three of the five who reported being “not sure” whether comics were literature also focused on their multimodal nature, and one felt unable to offer an



opinion without having read comics. The fifth, Participant 15, defined literature as “something I had to read in high school.”

Of the 17 participants who answered “yes,” a wide range of reasons for the response was provided. Eight of the responses discussed the multimodal form of comics, and seven referred to comics’ ability to tell a story. Three more noted their ability to transmit meaning. Two participants discussed their complexity, their increasing credibility (Participant 22 observed this phenomenon in academia, while Participant 24 identified it in culture more broadly), their ability to reflect and critique culture, and their creativity—Participant 6, in fact, argued that comics are sometimes more creative than prose, noting that “the ways in which image and text interact to tell a story or give messages often involve as much, if not more, creativity than text-based literature.” A number of further pertinent themes, which only appeared once, include comics’ appearance as books, their written form, the fact that they are read, and their possibility of being analyzed using “literary devices and criticism” (Participant 3).

Finally, perhaps of most significance to this study is Participant 24’s view of comics’ place within literary history, which merits being quoted in full:

I prefer a broader definition of “literature” that isn’t restricted to classic works. Many comics are dominated by text and offer artistic critiques of social order and depict the intricacy of human interaction. The graphic novel, *Maus*, was even awarded a Pulitzer, so the genre clearly enjoys some level of literary esteem. Though comics may not subscribe to the traditional image of “literature,” the very idea of literature itself is a dynamic one, subject to change and evolution. Comics themselves seem to be a step in that evolutionary process.

### **Comics for Language Learning**

The remaining data for answering Research Question 2 provide insight into the participants’ views of comics as material for language learning. Recognizing the role that the comics’ form would play in this, Item 10a asked “What do you think is easier to read, comics or prose?” The results show that 22 participants, almost 85%, viewed comics as easier to read than prose. Of the 26 participants, only four viewed prose as easier.

Item 10b expanded on these results. One of the four respondents who considered comics more difficult reported images as hard to follow, whereas the remaining three felt that the interaction of image and text complicated reading or got in the way of the depth available to one single mode. Participant 4 suggested that, in comparison to comics, “the type/printing [in prose works] is more structured and (usually) follows a conventional pattern,” and Participant 21 argued that “the more verbose nature of prose allows for better character development.”

Among the 22 participants who reported comics as easier to read than prose, several common themes emerged from their answers. First, 13 (59.1%) thought the presence of images made comics easier to read. Many also focused on language in comics, with seven (27.3%) noting that there are typically fewer words in comics, three (13.6%) observing how their text is often divided into chunks in the panels, and two (9.1%) viewing the language in comics as simpler. Beyond these observations regarding modes, four participants (18.2%) found comics more entertaining and three (13.6%) saw them as more direct or less complex than prose.

Finally, Item 9a asked learners, “Do you think reading comics in German would be helpful for language learning?” In identical proportions to the affirmative results from Item 10a, almost 85% again reported thinking that comics in German would be helpful for learning language. Here, four of the 26 participants responded that they were “not sure,” and zero participants reported thinking comics in German would not be helpful for language learning.

Item 9b asked for further context. Of the four who were unsure, Participant 5 suggested that motivation would determine their usefulness; Participant 12 reported being unsure of what would be helpful for

language learning; Participant 19 was concerned that colloquial language in comics could be “a challenge, but potentially helpful”; and Participant 21 remained unconvinced, citing experience playing L2 video games, another multimodal text type. Of those who reported finding comics well-suited to language learning, 15 (68.1%) mentioned pictures as helpful for providing additional context, with two noting how this could be helpful for vocabulary learning. Seven participants (31.8%) focused on the language exposure to be gained from comics, five of whom noted the unique language in comics. The latter described comics language as being “as it is spoken” (Participant 4) or “mostly written dialogue” (Participant 15), and Participant 17 focused solely on this linguistic aspect: “Comics provide short tidbits of language that are easy to read. Smaller bites of a language are easier to understand and process. Comics are also a great way to learn the idioms, slang, and colloquial speech of a language.” Six participants (27.3%) noted how comics are “fun,” “interesting,” or “relatable,” which they saw as a positive in learning. Participant 16 explained that “exposure to the language in a context that interests you is an incredibly effective way to learn a language.”

An additional response of interest from Item 9b refers to the role of background knowledge in comics and its role in the classroom:

If I were familiar with the comic or superhero, then it could be helpful to read in German. This would be particularly useful for colloquial/conversation German because comic dialogue is usually less formal. Furthermore, the visual aids would be particularly helpful. (Participant 22)

## Discussion

### Research Question 1

The first research question asks what L2 readers know about comics in terms of characters, form, plot elements, and themes and, specifically, whether they possess the schematic background knowledge that will support their comprehension process. Most participants were familiar with at least some comics, with a clear majority (73.1%) reporting having read them at some point, and all were familiar with some major comics characters present in popular culture. However, more than a quarter reported that they had never read comics. Although this surprising finding may point to a disconnect between academic definitions and popular understandings of comics, it nonetheless suggests that teachers cannot assume all learners are familiar with comics conventions, especially some of the more nuanced formal phenomena discussed by Groensteen (2013) and McCloud (1994).

Although a sizable minority of the participants were not familiar with comics, those participants with some comics reading experience had read a broad range of comics. Although Item 5 suggests that the most popular genre was superhero comics (45%), initially suggesting a rather narrow familiarity in terms of formal and content schemata, all the other three listed options were popular with at least 15% of the participants as well. It is also possible that had additional genres been listed, the range would have been even larger. Further, the responses to Item 6 represent not only a diversity of genres (manga, superhero comics, and graphic novels), but also of gender identities and sexual orientations, eras and settings, and countries of origin of the comics and authors. LGBTQIA characters and varied gender identities are represented in, among others, *Deadpool*, *Rat Queens*, *The Sandman*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Scott Pilgrim*. Eras and settings explored include the Iranian Revolution (*Persepolis*); the present day in locations such as Toronto (*Scott Pilgrim*), Tokyo (*Sailor Moon*), Gunma Prefecture in central Japan (*Initial D*), the American South (*The Walking Dead*), New York (*Fables*), and other locations in urban (*Deadpool*) and suburban (*Calvin and Hobbes*) America; and, finally, a range of alternate history, fantasy, and future worlds (*Akira*, *Bone*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, *Rat Queens*, and *The Sandman*). Finally, as for country of origin, though the United States and Japan dominated, Canada (*Scott Pilgrim*), Croatia (*Rat Queens*), England (*The Sandman*), and Iran and France (*Persepolis*) were also represented. These diverse texts suggest the potential for prior exposure to a range of cultural, and potentially, formal schemata (Carrell, 1987).

Despite this diverse cultural background knowledge, participants reported very little exposure to comics beyond the L1. Further, all four who reported having read comics in German noted only Japanese, American, and Franco-Belgian comics in German translation. These texts are, of course, still authentic in that they were translated for L1 German speakers and not for L2 learners, and they can provide a very effective way for readers to access German texts. That said, it also suggests that learners separate linguistic and cultural distance to L2 comics as barriers for understanding. Learners may be more willing to read translations and adaptations of known titles in the L2 than L2 originals.

These findings may suggest that instructors have a dual role in not only teaching L2 texts but also introducing new L2 texts to readers that they would not otherwise find on their own. This broadening of background knowledge can yield results in instruction by preparing the ground for future exposure. And neither L2 texts originally from that language nor those in translation should be ignored in this pursuit as both carry unique affordances. As *Asterix* is familiar to most Europeans, even those who do not speak French, it can offer much in terms of cultural background knowledge beyond comics; other comics from a bygone sociohistorical moment—for example, *Mosaik*, wildly popular in East Germany but largely unknown in the West (Benjamin, 2019)—can be used to provide knowledge of identities necessary for further work in language studies. Both types are important for providing students background knowledge for learning to cross between cultures, a learning goal called for in the MLA Report (2007).

Item 11 reveals several points of interest about the participants' formal and thematic background knowledge. First, though the most familiar characters, Batman and Wolverine, were unsurprising considering their popularity in Hollywood films, two of the most widely read characters, Asterix and Rorschach, stand out. *Asterix* is interesting to the study due to its enormous popularity abroad contrasted with its relative anonymity in the United States. Rorschach is even more surprising and, perhaps, encouraging, as he comes from *Watchmen*, the highly-acclaimed 1988 graphic novel by Alan Moore, often seen as representative of the first wave of graphic novels<sup>1</sup>—a literary departure from mass-market comics typified by Wolverine and Lex Luthor. *Watchmen* stretches Groensteen's "spatio-topical apparatus" (2013, p. 12) with appendices employing other media; rich verbal and visual intertextuality; plot elements, formal characteristics, and characters playing with temporality; and sociohistorical critique (Groensteen, 2015). Although these findings regarding character knowledge showed variation between both characters and participants, and the sole female character was conspicuously unfamiliar to learners, overall, the participants exhibited exposure to a wide range of comics. These results suggest that comics knowledge as measured in this study may be both broad and deep among some L2 learners. Others, however, showed quite the opposite. An interesting problem, then, may be the significant gulf revealed here between various readers. Teachers need to account for and address these distinctions.

## Research Question 2

The second research question asked how language learners perceive comics, whether they consider these texts as literature, and if they regard the reading of comics as an effective task in language courses. Surprising to instructors here may be the result that the participants viewed comics as literature. This result is important to this study because it suggests that students who understood the texts as literary forms may already be primed for the appropriate types of guided reading and multiliteracies meaning-making strategies discussed in the literature review above, especially in Kern (2000), Stauffer (1969) and Paesani et al. (2016). It further suggests that L2 learners may recognize the narrative nature of many comics (Groensteen, 2013), since one of the most common responses affirming their literary nature noted the form's ability to communicate stories.

However, participants' consideration of comics as literature may also suggest that L2 learners are not prepared to interact with comics as specifically multimodal texts, let alone as models for other multimodal texts. Although multimodality does not favor individual modes of meaning over others, many of the respondents here do; for them, words often anchor or replicate the visual meaning (Barthes, 1977). As such, the category of "multimodality" in the coding of the data is rather less emic than others and points to a more

traditional view of the interaction of image and text among the learners. This disconnect speaks to the importance of teaching learners how to read diverse text types.

Most participants also considered reading comics as a useful way to learn a language. First, they viewed comics in general as easier to read than prose. In the language of the New London Group (1996), they saw pictures as additional Available Designs providing vital information that can cross linguistic and cultural boundaries to help in the Designing phase of meaning construction. Even those that disagreed largely focused on the images, suggesting that comics' perceived approachability and difficulty is in their image-text form. We can thus conclude that the scaffolding used to provide and assist in recalling background knowledge is required to address not only deficits in content and cultural background knowledge, but also formal understanding. Depending on the needs of individual learners and learner groups, this process could briefly occur as comics are introduced in a given course, or alternatively, in moments across the curriculum to prepare learners over time.

Finally, no participants thought that comics were not useful for language learning, though a few were unsure. Learners again focused largely on images and text as separate, which once more suggests the need not only to teach formal schemata but also to familiarize learners with some of the overarching claims made by scholars of multimodality regarding modal neutrality (Serafini, 2014). Nonetheless, it is encouraging that these texts would likely meet little opposition in language classes. The limits here are in background knowledge and not in affective opposition.

## Conclusion

In this study, most participants had read comics, though that knowledge was restricted to the L1. Many of those who were familiar with comics were acquainted with a variety of characters and genres, though this breadth was also not universal. Further, whereas many participants were aware of the comics form, most did not understand the texts as multimodal, instead focusing on the verbal and visual elements separately. They also mostly understood comics as literature and primarily focused on the verbal modality; they were ready to bring analytical tools from literary studies to bear on multimodal texts. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, not all participants believed that comics would be easy to read.

Several concrete suggestions for instructors, curriculum designers, and language program directors follow from these findings. First, even if all students in a course or program are fans of comics—which was not the case here—they are likely to know quite little of L2 comics. Specific conventions (multimodal, verbal, and visual) contributing to the L2 comics traditions in a given culture may require explicit mention prior to or during their initial introduction into a course or curriculum. Beyond form, the comics history specific to the language and culture may need to be scaffolded as well, especially if the genres of comics are distinct from what learners may know from their L1.

Second, it is unlikely that all learners will have broad familiarity with comics. Knowledge of comics form—for example, reading direction, the distinction between thought balloons and speech balloons, or temporality conventions—may also need to be taught. If English is acceptable or desirable, McCloud (1994) presents a simple and clear introduction that itself makes use of the comics form. A course might also pair a shorter article in the L2 on a specific subject in comics form with a comics reading that exemplifies the article's point.

Third, language learners' likely interpretation of comics as literary works dominated by language allows for distinct paths in instruction. As comics are intricate texts requiring analysis and interpretation that can reveal much about other multimodal texts found in the L2 classroom, instructors might choose to overtly address this misconception and use it to introduce the construct of multimodality. A brief introduction and discussion of the term that notes how each multimodal form is unique and plays on the affordances of each mode differently can quickly generate broad interest. From the beginning, instructors could present another common multimodal text type alongside comics, for example an Instagram post, and lead a discussion distinguishing how the images, text, space, and temporality function differently in each form.

Alternatively, instructors may also choose to lean into the perception that comics are literature by reading them alongside traditional prose works to provide scaffolding in both directions. This option is especially enticing given the numerous adaptations of beloved prose works into the comics form. For example, an L2 German teacher could supplement a reading of Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* with Corbeyran and Horne's (2011) adaptation. Then, this initial step can be supplemented with discussions on adaptation that can do the same work to teach about multimodality and the affordances of different forms, as in the previous suggestion. The lack of understanding of multimodal texts as their own forms may make them easier to initially teach next to literary texts and thus more effectively lead toward learning about multimodality.

Finally, instructors should remember that not all learners are likely to feel comfortable with comics. Once again, this challenge presents an opportunity, as learners who feel this way ultimately stand to gain the most from instruction with comics. If learners are less familiar with and more wary of comics, they may also feel uncomfortable with other multimodal forms. Effectively constructed lessons and units teaching these learners how comics function may help address their concerns for other forms going forward.

By effectively scaffolding the reading of comics in the classroom, instructors can thus make these texts more than just another source for teaching literacy in another language and culture. They can also be used to teach learners about comics themselves. And most importantly, they can be a useful tool for teaching multimodal literacy. However, as the data here suggest, if comics are not presented with sufficient cultural and formal background knowledge, they may be confusing and alienating for some, and they may reinforce the belief in the supremacy of the written word.

Several limitations require brief mention to contextualize this study's findings within other work on teaching multimodal texts. First, as the sample size is small, these conclusions cannot be generalized to all students automatically. Rather they should be seen as useful for generating further questions, which should be asked of different audiences and in greater numbers to corroborate the results. Second, the choice of specific comics and genres throughout the questionnaire as examples should be examined. They are only representative of the comics reading experiences and knowledge of one context: that of my specific temporal and cultural moment, further problematized by my biases, affected by gender, race, and other markers of identity. Further study should consider how best to mitigate these shortcomings and test the findings with further options. Third, Item 11, which attempts to quantify comics knowledge, could be further refined. Questions not only targeting characters, but also formal issues, plot developments, tropes, genres, and other schematic elements of comics could yield a clearer picture of how L2 learners arrive to comics. Finally, the overall data must be questioned as they derive from self-reporting. A future study should consider ways to access knowledge, experience, and affective views more directly.

Despite the study's limitations, its findings show the promise of research into how to approach prior knowledge of multimodal texts in the L2 classroom; more work is needed to confirm, deepen, and expand what has been learned from the present study. Further study will discuss how these learners actually read L2 comics; how their background knowledge, experience, and affective views correlate to these readings; and how these readings then in turn affect these views. But the work cannot stop there. Further research should reflect on these findings and extrapolate their meaning for other multimodal text types, especially social media posts, which currently dominate so much of public discourse. Further projects should then replicate or build on this study's findings for these additional text types. A final important area of study is instructor knowledge and perception of multimodal texts, which likely has an effect on how learners perceive and read them as well. The overall goal of this inquiry is to determine how to account most effectively for the diversity of our learners in developing pedagogical models to teach multimodal literacy to the entire L2 classroom.

## Note

1. Importantly, for the interpretation of these results, although this study did collect data after the release of the 2009 film adaptation, *Watchmen*, directed by Zack Snyder, it was prior to the release of the popular 2019 HBO sequel series, also titled *Wat*.

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## Appendix. Questionnaire

- 1a. For how many years have you been learning German?
- 1b. How did you learn German?
- 2a. What is your native language?
  - English
  - Other, please specify
 (if “English,” participant automatically skips to question 3)
- 2b. How would you describe your English language abilities?
3. Do you like comics/graphic novels?



- Yes
- No
- Not sure

4a. Do you currently read/have you ever read comics?

- Yes
- No

(if “no,” participant automatically skips to question 8a)

4b. Please provide detail. How often do you read/did you read comics? For how long? When did you start/stop?

5. What are your favorite comics? Select as many as you like.

- Superhero comics
- Mystery/Crime/Horror comics
- Graphic Novels
- Manga
- Other, please specify

6. What is your favorite title/character (e.g., Superman/Maus/Sailor Moon/Donatello)?

7a. Have you ever read comics in a foreign language?

- Yes
- No

(if “no,” participant automatically skips to question 8a)

7b. Which comics and languages?

8a. Do you view comics as literature?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

8b. Why?

9a. Do you think reading comics in German would be helpful for language learning? Yes/No

9b. Why?

10a. What do you think is easier to read, comics or prose? Comics/Prose

10b. Why?

11. Please indicate, which statement is the most appropriate for each of the following characters.

Statements:

- I have read comics in which \_\_\_\_ played a role.
- I am only familiar with \_\_\_\_ from TV, films, books, etc.
- I have only heard the name of \_\_\_\_.
- I have never heard of \_\_\_\_.

Characters:

- Batman
- Goku
- Lex Luthor
- Asterix
- Dr. Demoniac
- Rick Grimes
- Enid Coleslaw
- Wolverine
- Rorschach
- Scrooge McDuck

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