Creating Cartoons: A Learner-Centered Approach to Comprehending Texts

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When English as a foreign language (EFL) educators teach reading, they often ask learners to read a passage and answer "who, what, when, where, why, and how" questions about it. A few years ago, we led a workshop on reading for advanced-level English speakers in Rwanda. Rather than ask them questions, we had them draw a one-panel cartoon in response to a passage we read from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1992). We told them to include the two characters in the passage, speech and thought bubbles for each character, and a narrator box. When we looked at their drawings, we found that most cartoons confused "who said what" with "who thought what." Upon reflection, we realized that the passage was too difficult for the majority of the participants.

We replicated this technique—having learners create cartoons based on a reading passage—with other texts, in other contexts, and with a variety of directions. Sometimes learners created cartoons from short texts in children's picture storybooks. Other times they created cartoons from long passages with no illustrations. Learners were sometimes asked to include specific information in the cartoons, and other times they chose what they wanted to include. Regardless of the context, this technique helped learners explore their understanding of reading passages and helped the teachers reflect on what the learners had comprehended.

WHY USE LEARNER-CREATED CARTOONS?

Teachers can use this technique when they want a learner-centered activity that lets learners respond to text. By asking learners to integrate information into cartoons, teachers are giving them an opportunity to lower their affective filters. Reading is a transactional process that takes place between readers and texts. Because readers bring unique experiences and knowledge to the reading process, their responses to text vary. When learners create a cartoon based upon a reading passage, they make meaning from the reading, practice language, and construct knowledge by converting their understanding of the text into a cartoon that includes character dialogue and thoughts.

LESSON GOALS AND LEARNER-CREATED CARTOONS

Before teachers use this technique, they must consider the lesson goal (see Table 1). One goal that this technique can address is skills practice, giving learners opportunities to practice reading fluency and comprehension, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. To meet this goal, teachers must give learners

Goal of the Lesson	The Teacher Says …
Practice language skills	• *Draw a one-panel cartoon about* [give a specific event] *and include* [grammar point or specific vocabulary from the text, or another language skill you would like students to focus on]. • *In the panel, include a narrator box. In this box, write the setting* [where and when] *of this event, the names of the characters, and what the characters are doing.* • [If the text includes the characters' thoughts] *Draw a thought bubble for each character and write each character's thoughts.* • [If the text includes indirect speech] *Draw a speech bubble for each character and write the words that the character says. Change indirect speech to direct speech.* • [If the text includes dialogue] *Draw a dialogue bubble for each character and write the words that the character said.*
Share affective, emotional responses about the text	• *Think about the part of the story that* [is your favorite/least favorite; is the most interesting/least interesting to you; you find funniest, scariest, or most confusing]. • *Draw a one-panel cartoon that shows this part of the story.* • *In the panel, include a narrator box. In this box, write the setting* [where and when] *of this event, the names of the characters, and what the characters are doing.* • [If the text includes the characters' thoughts] *Draw a thought bubble for each character and write each character's thoughts.* • [If the text includes indirect speech] *Draw a speech bubble for each character and write the words that the character says. Change indirect speech to direct speech.* • [If the text includes dialogue] *Draw a dialogue bubble for each character and write the words that the character said.* • *Write a sentence outside the panel explaining why you chose this part of the story for your cartoon.*

Table 1. Lesson goals and teacher directions

directions about specific information they need to include in the cartoon.

When the lesson goal is skills practice, teachers should select a reading passage that addresses the skill that they want learners to practice. In Rwanda, for example, our goal was to have our audience practice the language skill of converting dialogue in a passage from reported speech to direct speech. This provided us with information about the learners' knowledge of this grammar point.

Another goal might be to give learners an opportunity to provide an affective, personal, or open-ended response to texts. To meet this goal, teachers select a text with a controversial theme or strong affective focus—without regard to skills, grammar, or vocabulary. Texts from a wide variety of genres, including those with or without illustrations, are appropriate. Teachers direct learners to draw a cartoon that conveys learners' feelings, thoughts, and/or reactions to the text.

Teachers may be concerned that learners might be hesitant to draw. The first time teachers use this technique, they can select a children's picture storybook, comic strip, or graphic novel and allow learners to use the illustrations as a model for their cartoons. Teachers who do not have access to such texts can quickly create their own cartoon on a chalkboard, providing a model for their learners and emphasizing that cartoon illustrations can be as simple or complex as learners want to make them. After one or two lessons, learners become comfortable with drawing, and teachers can use texts that have no illustrations.

LESSONS WITH LEARNER-CREATED CARTOONS

After teachers select the lesson goal, their next decision should be whether to have learners work in pairs or groups. Learners negotiate and collaborate in making decisions about the scene from the text they choose to develop into a cartoon, the drawings, and the characters' words. The classroom atmosphere can become informal, with relaxed conversations focused on language and ideas.

Now teachers can plan the lesson. It should begin with the teacher reading the text and then asking learners to draw a one-panel cartoon based upon the passage. Learners should be told to include at least two characters and at least one speech bubble, distinguished by a "v" at the end of the bubble and directed at the character who is speaking. There should be at least one thought bubble, identified by a series of tiny circles at the end of the thought bubble and directed at the appropriate character. Learners can be told to include different sizes of written words to portray character voices, emotions, and other elements from the text. Learners can "bold" the words a character shouts, or write in small letters the words that characters whisper. Learners

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should be instructed to place a narrator box at the top of the panel, providing information—in their own words—about the setting, including the place, time, and, if possible, the atmosphere in this location. Teachers should require that these three elements be included because each element gives teachers information about what learners understand—and do not understand—about the text.

If the lesson goal is to have learners practice a skill, teachers should tell learners what the skill is and explain how to integrate it into the cartoon. For example, teachers can tell learners to integrate five vocabulary words from the passage into their cartoons or convert reported speech to direct speech. If the goal is for learners to share their affective reactions to a passage, teachers should tell them to draw a cartoon that depicts a moment in the text that they found important, interesting, scary, or funny, or that produced some other strong emotion in them. They should write a sentence outside the panel, at the bottom, that explains why they chose to represent that moment from the reading.

FOLLOW-UP IDEAS

Learners can present their cartoons to a different pair or group, or to the class. With the cartoons as a guide, presentations will be concrete and specific as learners speak about the elements in their cartoons.

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Teachers can choose to give learners an opportunity to revise and publish their cartoons for viewing in the classroom or on a school website. Learners can further explore their understandings and interpretations of the reading passage by expanding their cartoons. For example, learners can create a second panel—one that depicts an event before or after the initial cartoon.

EVALUATION AND TEACHER REFLECTION

One of the most important reasons to use learner-created cartoons is that we, as teachers, can evaluate learning and reflect on teaching. When we reflected on the cartoons created in Rwanda, for example, we realized that we had misjudged our audience and had given them a text that was too challenging. With a yes/no checklist, teachers can determine whether learners met the lesson goal. Teachers can check for information, vocabulary, or grammar—if this is the goal of the lesson. Or they can see from the cartoon and the sentence below it the learner reactions, thoughts, and feelings about the selected reading. Teachers can understand learner strengths and weaknesses as well as likes and dislikes.

Combined with evaluation is teacher reflection. While learners are creating their cartoons, teachers should circulate around the room, listening to the conversations, which can give teachers valuable information about learner responses to a reading passage. Teachers can use this feedback when selecting the next text or designing subsequent lessons.

When learners use this technique, they will be engaged and productive. They will play with language and interact with each other informally, using English to communicate, support, and defend—by questioning and challenging—group ideas about their drawings, their interpretations, and their language use. Classroom ambiance—for teachers and learners—will typically be fun and lively!

When teachers examine the cartoons and reflect on the classroom atmosphere, they should compare the lesson goal with the learner-created product and their impressions of learner engagement to determine what learners understood, enjoyed, and found interesting—or not—about the lesson. This information is useful for teachers when planning subsequent reading lessons.

HELPFUL WEBSITES

This technique can be used in classroom settings with chalkboards, pencils, and paper. If technology is available, teachers and learners can use websites to create digital cartoons. Comic Creator (www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/comic-creator-30021.html) is a free, open-access, interactive site. The Make Beliefs Comix (www.makebeliefscomix.com/) site is endorsed by Google and UNESCO as "one of the world's most innovative websites."

FINAL POINTS

Reading requires learners to understand information in a text, and their understanding is mediated by the experiences and knowledge they bring to reading. By engaging learners in this interactive technique, requiring them to draw and write, teachers will lead them to be active participants in making meaning from what they read and to find enjoyment in the process.

REFERENCE

Achebe, C. 1992. *Things fall apart*. New York: Everyman's Library-Alfred A. Knopf.

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