

4. USING COMIC STRIPS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING FRENCH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE: CHANGES IN MOTIVATIONAL BELIEFS

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Abstract: *The present work reports a small-scale quasi-experimental study which investigates effects of using comic strips as authentic learning materials in supporting Romanian students' motivation for learning French as foreign language. The study is based on a pretest – post-test design with experimental and control convenience groups (N= 29), which included Romanian students from an urban high school, studying French as the second foreign language. Motivational beliefs were investigated with adapted versions of three scales selected from Motivation Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ, Pintrich & De Groot, 1990): self-efficacy, intrinsic value and test anxiety. The intervention consisted in educational activities organized for eight weeks, in which comic strips have been used consistently. Results revealed significant effects of the intervention on students' test anxiety, but no significant effects on self-efficacy and intrinsic value. These outcomes suggest the potential role of coming strips, among other authentic documents, in sustaining and improving some of the students' motivational beliefs. However, more research is needed in this direction, as authentic documents, especially comic strips, are resourceful teaching and learning materials in language classes.*

Key words: *authentic documents, comic strips, motivational beliefs, language education, French as foreign language*

1. Background: teaching and learning French as foreign language with authentic documents, especially comic strips

In the last years, the motivation for learning French as foreign language has decreased systematically among Romanian children and youth, while the study of English as the “global language” gained popularity. In response, researchers and teachers attempt to infuse innovative didactic strategies aiming to raise Romanian students' motivation in learning French language and literature.

One of the alternative methodological frameworks that can be used in teaching foreign languages in general, and French, in particular, is based on *authentic documents*, which may include literary texts, postcards, photos, comic strips and cartoons, songs, tourist brochures, recipes, advertisements, newspapers, magazines, films, television and radio programs, webpages and blogs, bus or subway tickets or any other available material deriving from concrete life activities and experiences.

Authentic documents are perceived by language educators around the world as real or natural materials that can be employed in the classrooms, as opposed to textbooks and other pedagogical aids. According to theorists and practitioners (e.g., Berwald, 1987; Duda & Tyne, 2010), the use of authentic documents may support enrichment of specialized vocabulary, reinforcement of

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grammatical structures, but also learners' autonomy and familiarization with foreign cultures and diverse ways of expressing thoughts and emotions.

In recent year, comic strips captured the attention of foreign language educators, as one of the authentic documents which has the advantage to involve learners in reading, visually analysing and actively reflecting. Comic strips as educational materials reflect authentic language and culture, but also may alleviate the youth's negative views of reading, by offering a positive experience of successful reading and understanding experiences (McVicker, 2007). Therefore, they may be considered a helpful pedagogical tool in determining and sustaining engagement in language learning, which may be further transferred to other types of texts.

A number studies emphasize some of the positive effects of using comic strips in language education (e.g., Liu, 2004; Chiera-Macchia & Rossetto, 2011; David-West, 2012; Megawati & Anugerahwati, 2012; Ravelo, 2013). Thus, Liu (2004) hypothesized and reported a significant role of comic strips on reading comprehension of learners of English as foreign language. The author reported a quasi-experimental study, in which both high level texts without image and high level texts supported with comic strips have been used. The findings indicated a higher level of recalling among students exposed to comic strips, and are interpreted in the larger context of dual coding cognitive theories.

Chiera-Macchia & Rossetto (2011) discuss the outcomes of an educational intervention which consisted in using comics in a guided writing experience in Italian as foreign language, designed for ninth graders. Their study revealed that comics – as a combination of image and text – may better support foreign language learning, especially for nowadays children and youth who are heavily exposed to visual communication in everyday life.

David-West (2012) advocated for the role of comics in teaching English as a foreign language to university students, with a strong cultural emphasis, while Megawati & Anugerahwati (2012) promote comic strips as a valuable teaching material for improving students' writing skills.

Based on a study with adolescents, Ravelo (2013) suggested that comic strips may be regarded as a valuable pedagogical resource to teach history in English as foreign language classrooms, while – at a different side – Askildson (2005) favours comics as a vehicle of natural pedagogical humour, which may facilitate classroom interaction, but also more efficient language learning.

Jones (2010) explored the effect of using comics on Japanese students learning English as a foreign language, and concluded that their usage supported participants' motivation, and improved their attitude towards reading, as images helped them to figure out unfamiliar vocabulary.

As one may derive from the studies covered in the above brief literature review, the use of comic strips in foreign language education has been associated with multiple positive effects, from improved reading, reading comprehension and writing, to motivational, affective and cultural gains. However, most of the studies are rather descriptive and advocate for the benefits of comics as authentic documents without fully covering relevant psychological

processes which support learning processes, such as motivation. Therefore, we considered a more structured approach, which has the characteristics of an action-research project, centred on comic strips as a pedagogical tool for improving students' motivational beliefs.

According to current theories, motivation includes a large set of perceptions, beliefs, values, interests and actions which are interconnected. The result of defining motivation so widely is the inclusion within its boundaries of various cognitive and non-cognitive constructs. Beliefs fall into this second category of constructs. The theoretical framework used by P. R. Pintrich & E. De Groot, E. (1990) in proposing and developing MSLQ favours a social-cognitive view of motivation and self-regulated learning. In this model, students' motivation is directly linked to self-regulation of learning, and it is perceived as rather dynamic and contextualized, and – as a consequence – it is closely related to each class or course (see also Pintrich, 2003). This theoretical view of motivation supports educational changes and innovations, which may determine improvements in students' motivational factors.

2. The present study

The study reported in this paper relies on the theoretical framework of motivation mentioned above (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Pintrich, 2003), and attempts to provide additional empirical data on its modification under the influence of important changes in the pedagogical approach of a class, respectively sets of lessons. The modification targeted by the authors refers to the use of comic strips and other authentic documents in teaching and learning French as foreign language.

2.1. Participants

The study is based on a small scale quasi-experimental pretest – post-test design with experimental ($N= 14$) and control ($N= 15$) convenience groups. Participants are Romanian students from an urban high school, studying French as the second foreign language, aged between 17 and 18 years ($M= 17,44$ years).

2.2. Instruments

Motivation for learning French was investigated with adapted versions of three scales measuring motivational factors selected from Motivation Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990): self-efficacy (nine items), intrinsic value (nine items) and test anxiety (four items). According to Pintrich & De Groot (1990, p. 35), the self-efficacy scale captures *the perceived competence and confidence in performance of class work*; the intrinsic value scale measures *intrinsic interest in and perceived importance of course work, as well as preference for challenge and mastery goals*; and the anxiety scale targets *worry about and cognitive interference on tests*.

High-school students participating in the present study were asked to respond to the items on a 7-point Likert scale ($1= not at all true of me$ to $7= very true of me$), in terms of their behaviour in French classes. For each of the

motivational scales an average score was computed before and after the educational intervention. Within this study, reliability levels for all scales are satisfactory (.62 for the self-efficacy scale, .71 for the intrinsic value scale, and respectively .88 for the test anxiety scale).

2.3. Procedure

The scales have been self-administered to both groups before and after the intervention, which consisted in educational activities organized for eight weeks. Comic strips have been favoured throughout the intervention, together with other authentic learning materials (videos, newspapers, songs), and infused especially in lessons of French literature. Examples of comic strips introduced into teaching activities are the fables of La Fontaine finely illustrated and applied in a variety of learning situations: reading and comprehension, extending vocabulary, grammar structures, messages and texts construction. Activities also included creative tasks (e.g., finding alternative titles for fables, developing different ending versions than the one proposed by the author, continuing the fable by designing a new comic strips), which aimed the encouragement of oral and written communication in French language, above the purpose of stimulating students' creative potential.

3. Results

Pretest comparisons revealed similar levels of motivational beliefs before intervention among control and experimental groups: all *t* tests for independent samples resulted in significance levels above .05 – for self-efficacy $t(27) = .34$, $p = .73$; for intrinsic value $t(27) = -.92$, $p = .36$; and for test anxiety $t(27) = .35$, $p = .72$ (see Table 1 below for pretest descriptive statistics). Therefore, we considered the two groups equivalent in terms of the dependent variables addressed in the study.

Table 1. Pretest descriptive statistics

Variables	Groups	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Self-efficacy	Experimental	14	3.80	1.62
	Control	15	3.62	1.02
Intrinsic value	Experimental	14	4.29	1.23
	Control	15	4.68	1.06
Test anxiety	Experimental	14	4.42	1.19
	Control	15	4.63	1.80

Effects of the didactic intervention on motivational variables have been investigated through ANCOVA tests, with initial effects of the variables (self-efficacy, intrinsic value and test anxiety) included as covariates. For the experimental group, test anxiety decreased significantly - $F(1, 28) = 6.91$; $p < .05$ (see also Figure 1), while average scores for self-efficacy and intrinsic value increased non-significantly - $F(1, 28) = .25$; $p > .05$, and respectively - $F(1, 28) = .61$; $p > .05$ (see Table 2 below for post-test descriptive statistics).

Table 2. Post-test descriptive statistics

Variables	Groups	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Self-efficacy	Experimental	14	4.15	1.73
	Control	15	3.84	1.14
Intrinsic value	Experimental	14	4.55	1.41
	Control	15	4.62	.92
Test anxiety	Experimental	14	3.55	1.32
	Control	15	4.91	1.73

For the control group, average scores for the subscale of perceived self-efficacy modified in a similar direction as for the experimental group, while average scores for intrinsic value decreased non-significantly and perceived text anxiety increased non-significantly.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Overall, results indicate a positive effect of using authentic documents, and especially comic strips in teaching French as foreign language. Thus, high-school students participating in the study reported higher levels of perceived self-efficacy and intrinsic importance associated with French classes, although the improvement was not statistically significant. In addition, the level of perceived text anxiety reduced significantly for the experimental group. These results are in line with previous studies suggesting positive motivational changes (Askildson, 2005; Jones, 2010).

The effects on competences of reading, writing and communicating in French as foreign language have not been documented through specific measures in the present study. However, based on classroom observations during tasks' completion, as well as on outcomes of continuous and formative assessment, we suggest that higher engagement also produced beneficial effects on language competences' development among students.

Although limited in scope and sample size, the present study emphasises the advantages of using authentic documents with artistic value, and especially comic strips, in teaching French as foreign language, as argued elsewhere (Tarabuzan & Popa, 2014). Beyond making lessons more attractive, the use of comics supports a genuine contact with the foreign culture through artistic texts and images. This type of educational approach also place foreign literature in a more favourable place within foreign language education, and revives students' interests for cultural products. More empirical evidence is needed in order to fully support the present research results, but also to highlight the potential impact on foreign language specific competences, already implied in several works (e.g, Liu, 2004; McVicker, 2007; Chiera-Macchia & Rossetto, 2011).

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