

## **Comics are an Innovative Technique of Humor that can be used in Classrooms to teach Vocabulary and Reading.**

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“Education should not be the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire”

\_\_\_\_Anonymous

### **Abstract:**

*Comics are no longer being treated by educators as a taboo, that it used to be once. In the current times they are important tools for learning a language. As the times have changed and so have the methods of learning. Comics can be seen as an innovation in the field of learning a language. The history of Comics was tainted with allegations of not being worthy enough to be used for purpose of learning. The use of Comics was considered dangerous as they were assumed to have caused Juvenile Delinquency in children according to Fredric Wertham. Which lead to the ban on comic books. It is only recently that they are seeing the new light of library racks where educators and researchers are exposing students to comics as a new technique to learn vocabulary and acquire reading habits. Reading and Vocabulary forms an important component in language learning. In reading we come upon new words that can help one improve vocabulary, with the help of visual learning through comics a student can be motivated towards reading, which is otherwise a boring task for some. Acquiring a powerful word knowledge can be a daunting activity, memorizing every word and its meaning can be an unnerving task, but with the help of Comics this task can be made easy, fun and productive. As they are visual in nature, they can help the students re-connect and assemble the learning in a more structured manner.*

**Key Words:** *Comics, Classrooms, Pedagogy, Humor, Motivation, Retention, Techniques, Vocabulary, Reading.*

In the recent years the Classroom paradigms have shifted from a teacher centered space to a student centered space. It is required in the current times that teachers look at learning from a perspective that involves creativity and innovative techniques. Learning can be a tedious process, if not interesting it can lead to boredom. This can in turn lower the motivation of a student. In a recent survey on Humor as an important pedagogical instrument to be used in classroom; it showed that most of the students who are in a language class, often view their

classrooms as haunted rooms of torture. They find their classes hard and stressful because of lack of understanding from the part of teacher. With the use of strategies and techniques a teacher can help in improving the motivation of students as well as promote retention. Language is a means of communication; it is essential to use language in order to communicate with one another. It helps in bringing ideas, opinions, thoughts and feelings. There are four important components that are vital in English teaching, they are: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. In teaching and learning a language there are four aspects that support four language skills such as: Grammar, vocabulary, spelling and Pronunciation.

Will Eisner's book called *Comics and Sequential art* (2008, first published in 1985), which is considered to be one of the fundamental books within the field. Eisner simply defines comics as "Sequential art", in which images and letters together form a narrative. The second definition comes from Scott McCloud's highly acclaimed book - *Understanding Comics: The invisible art* 1993 mentions that all we might actually need in terms of a definition i.e. "Sequential Art", he argues that with a more specific definition we are able to explore comics and their history in another way.

As we know, historically comics were considered to be a threat to the people's ability to read and write (Eisner, 1994); However, more recently researchers and educators have started to realize the potential of comics that can be used for developing different types of literacy and other skills. Learning a new language is hard work. In order to excel in it, you have to immerse yourself in it as fully as possible. This means more than just memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary one has to have an interest in understanding the language. For example: if one wants to be a cricketer, but instead of practicing in the field, one spends time memorizing the rules and techniques of the game. What do you think will happen? Will the person planning to be a cricketer succeed, was he able to understand the practicality of the game by just memorizing it? The person will falter miserably. The same concept can be applied when learning a language. If someone wants to be a cricketer, they need to go out and practice in the field. Memorization and following the techniques in the language learning process won't help in understanding subtle expressions that hold a lot of importance in learning the language. "Comics can also help with the long-term retention of concepts in advanced science courses. In Nagata (1999), the popular manga *Bishojo Senshi Sailor Moon*, was shown to help biochemistry students recall terms two years after the course had ended."

In an age where children don't read in comparison to a time when there was no television or internet. When one invested their spare time in reading books. Today the scenario has changed drastically where everything has become easy. Students prefer investing their time on social media or on games other than reading or being productive. In an interview of Stan Lee who was an American comic book writer, he talks about how Comics can help the reluctant reader. It helps a reader's imagination and reason to develop. Shakespeare wrote plays which we have read. But when we go and see the play it helps us reconnect with what we have read. He says, Comic Strips in its own way is like theatre. When he had met Steven Spielberg an American film maker, Spielberg said to Lee "You and I essentially do the same thing, except my pictures move." Children learn to equate pleasure when they are reading comics.

Reading is one of the best ways to immerse oneself in the language. This is because when you read, you are contextualizing all the vocabulary and grammar one would have already learnt. Instead of just memorizing words that have been previously learnt in the tedious task of building one's word knowledge. When reading one is subconsciously learning and retaining new words and phrases. Comics can greatly help a student fall into the good habit of reading as Comics provide narrative experiences for students who are just beginning to read and for students who are learning a new language. Students follow story beginnings and endings, plot, characters, time and setting, sequencing without having the sophisticated word decoding skills that a novel or a book requires. Images are like the clues that the students need in order to support the text and give students significant contextual meaning to the word. Comics act as a scaffold to student understanding.

Stephen Cary, a second language learner specialist and author of *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom*, says; "Comics provide authentic language learning opportunities for all students... The dramatically reduced text of many comics make them manageable and language profitable for even beginning level readers." Also according to Cary, comics motivate reluctant readers. They engage students in a literary format which is their own. Comics speak to students in a way they understand and identify with. Even after students learn to be strong reader's comics give students the opportunity to read material which combines images with text to express satire, symbolism, point of view, drama, puns and humor in ways not possible with text alone.

Many consider comics to be suitable only for young children. The prejudice attached with comics that they are cheap substitutions of literature and are written mainly for kids can be refuted. Rudolph Topffer (1845, In: Scott, 1994) points out that “the picture story, which critics disregard and scholars scarcely notice, has had great influence at all times, perhaps even more than written literature” but at the same time he adds “...in addition, the picture-story appeals mainly to children and the lower classes...”.

Williams (1995) summarizes the advantages of using comics in language teaching:

- a) Cartoons have a permanent visual component (unlike movies)
- b) Characters interact in here and now (you and me not the him and her of narrative)
- c) Characters share many of the paralinguistic aspects of interaction
- d) Language lies about halfway between real spoken English and "written" English
- e) The language represents one man's idiolect and so is rich in fixed collocations which come round again and again indifferent contexts. (Williams, 1995).

A lot of research has been done on the effects of the extensive reading on foreign language learners, however the topic of using comic books or graphic novels to develop students' English language proficiency has not been discussed so widely. Still, the result of several studies indicate the positive effects of “light” reading: on motivation, studies have shown that readers of comics are also avid readers of more advanced texts, and the use of comic book style graded readers does not hinder motivation to seek out other literature (Cary, 2004, In: Jones, 2010, p. 229)

Most language teachers ask themselves what is the way by which they can promote motivation amongst their students. The answer they get according to recent research that has been done on motivation, is to involve students in the dynamics of the class and make them interact in the class as much as possible. Students when they interact with each other has a lot of advantages. Some of the advantages are listed below:

- It reduces the dominance of the teacher over the class.
- It increases the amount of student participation in class.
- It increases opportunities for students to participate and use new features of target language.

- It increases the opportunities of individual students to participate and use new features of the target language.
- It promotes collaboration among learners.
- It enables the teacher to work as a facilitator or consultant.
- It gives learners an active role in the learning process. (Richard and Lockhard, 1994:153)

Learning a foreign language can be challenging for children. It is mainly a challenge because like our five fingers are different in size so are children, every child is unique in its characteristics and has a special way of learning. They acquire knowledge by asking, listening to people and through this multi-interaction they are able to develop their vocabulary.

Vocabulary is a pivotal component of language that has all information about meaning and using words in a language. Vocabulary building is an important task in any language learning. This becomes an important aspect in acquiring a language and mastering the second language. It is supported by Schmitt who says: “One of the keys in learning a foreign language is mastering the vocabulary” (2000: 19). As Thornburry says; “that vocabulary and comprehension have a powerful relationship” (2002: 15). It is very clear that learners have to increase their vocabulary in order to speak, read, write and listen. “One of the language elements in learning a foreign language is mastering the vocabulary.” Schmitt (2009:19)

- A. The use of comics stories and comic strips for language learning has greatly increased over the last few years. Recent studies show that the materials derived from comic books are a great aid to learning in that they appeal to the learner’s imagination, increase motivation and above all, create a rich and meaningful context.
- B. Since the dialogues concerned everyday situations, learner’s felt they could understand the contents easily. But the comic strips also included detailed explanations of grammatical points and more culturally related nuances that may be unknown even to the advanced learner’s.

Students vocabulary is closely related to their ability to comprehend what they are reading Foil and Alber, (2002). Furthermore, the depth and breadth of knowledge helps sharpen the individual’s communication skills so that may render their messages with clarity, precision and

eloquence Johnson (2001). As researchers it becomes our responsibility towards our students to look at the process of their vocabulary instruction. How we impart word knowledge should not only ensure a sound understanding of vocabulary, but it should inspire a curiosity of words. Such curiosity once implanted if once implanted into the minds of learners, it may motivate a lifelong passion for the central component that is building a vocabulary in order to speak the language in a fluent manner. The importance of vocabulary instruction and the consideration of words are made more compelling by understanding that, ultimately it is the skill with which a learner uses the choice of words that draws the listener closer and leads them to consider the messages one has to impart.

Vocabulary forms an integral part of language learning. In order to learn English one needs to know a plethora of words to make their speech colorful. The knowledge of vocabulary is a sign that you know your language well. Unfortunately learning vocabulary can be a daunting task as there are so many words that need to be learnt. Here the technique of memorization can be a tedious job. So in order to teach vocabulary to students one can take the help of Comic strips, comic books in order to help the students engage in a visual method. They can be an unconventional method of effective learning.

The definition of comic strips entails a series of adjacent drawn images, usually arranged horizontally, that are designed to be read as a narrative or a chronological sequence. The story is usually original in this form. Words may be introduced within or near each image. The comic strip is essentially a mass medium, printed in a magazine, newspaper or a book.

Historically Comics have been viewed as “debased or simplified word based literacy,” explains Dale Jacobs, who considers comics to be multimodal texts. Jacob shows how comics can engage students in multiple literacies. Prior to their current renaissance, comics were often viewed at best as popular entertainment and at worst as a dangerous influence on youth. Such attributes were certainly prevalent in the early 1950’s when comics were at their epitome of success, with critics as well as with the children.

Comic Strips are referred as ubiquitous as they are considered dangerous for learning, because in the past Comics were shunned by educators as they lacked the seriousness of a book and immortality of a novel. According to a Gene Yang who is a school teacher as well as an illustrator, he says: that comics can help students with motivation and also help in retention.

As comic are a combination of words and pictures. He talks about how as a kid he was fond of reading comics, but never really brought them to school as he had never seen them in the school library or in book fairs in school, unless they were surreptitiously being read behind the cover of a novel or other officially sanctioned book. So he instinctively drew a boundary that they don't belong in school. In his talk titled 'Comics belong in Classroom' at Ted, he talks about the permanence that is associated with learning using Comic books.

Dr. Wertham in his book 'Seduction of the innocent' said that comic books cause 'Juvenile Delinquency in children', Fredric Wertham was a Child Psychologist and he dealt with children who were damaged or had psychological problems. He voices the most strenuous arguments against comics in 1954. He questions the whole idea of reading comics and argues that "comics are death on reading". The problem according to him is, reading comics can distract the focus of children. As the focus is far too much on the image to make meaning and this hampers the attention on the written word, a semiotic system that he clearly sees as both complex and important. Thus he sees the visual nature of comics as dangerous.

He was majorly concerned about the reading habits in children and claimed that it is because of comic books that the children suffer in developing a reading habit. He said a large number of children who cannot read well read comic books. They are not really readers but gaze mostly at the pictures, picking up a word here and there. Among the worst readers is a very high percentage of comic book addicts who spend most of their time wasting, he calls them "bookworms without books". According to this thinking, children who read comic books are not really reading; they are simply looking at the pictures as a way to avoid engaging in the complex process of learning to read.

"Cartoons, along with problem-based learning techniques, improved students' permanent learning (i.e., learning with deep understanding and retention). Teachers also reported the concept cartoons encouraged students to study and fostered an environment in which discussion and debate were welcomed." Anonymous

Over the last few decades, however there has been a movement to claim a value for comics in the literary education of children. Comics have made their way in schools, mainly as a scaffold for later learning that is perceived to be different in terms of both the literate practices and the

content involved. For example, comics in education, the online version of Gene Yang's final project for his master's degree at California State University, embodies the thinking that is typical of many educators who advocate the use of comics in classroom. Yang a teacher and cartoonist claims that the educational strength of comics is that they are motivating, viral, permanent, intermediary and popular. As a young kid Gene Yang was interested in reading comics, but he never brought them to school as he innately knew that in comics don't have a place in school as he never saw these type of books in the library or in book fairs. Later he became a school teacher and happened to use sketches in the class which were appreciated by his students more than the lectures. His class was no longer boring that it used to be before but learning happened rather in a more productive and fun way.

Comics are closely related to the concept of Humor. Humor is anything that is perceived to be funny, comical or amusing. Perception is the key as comedian Steve Allan has observed "what is funny is a matter of personal opinion." Humor like beauty is in the eyes (and ears) of the beholder. Humor is abundantly present in the modern day society. The numerous sitcoms on television, newspapers and magazines in the form of comics, jokes or stand-up comedians making top dollars; expose us to the fact that we are never short of an opportunity to find and enjoy humor. Humor has a special role in the classroom, in modern education it is considered and appreciated as an important tool for learning effectively.

"Humor has been shown to have positive effects on the learning environment, to initiate, maintain and enhance the learners interest and to facilitate retention." Deniere

Herbert. P, Cornett indicates the importance of using humor in the process of capturing and maintaining student's attention and creating a positive relationship between teachers and students in reducing stress and tension in classroom and facilitating learning. Caroline. Stanley is a teacher and she talks about how she used humor as a process of making the students think critically and write better. She points out that the students often view classrooms as serious spaces or are overwhelmed by the presence of being in a place where there is too much of tension. She gives her example when she was a student and her experience of being in a class was of a conventional kind. Where her teachers were not even close to being a facilitator. She only spoke in class when she had a solid contribution to add, else she remained remotely silent.



It is of much importance to create a positive atmosphere which helps the students feel more comfortable and open to learning. When humor is used in the classroom, it brings a positive vibe of optimism and interest. It is not necessary that one has to have a list of jokes prepared for the class, or for that matter dress like a clown, what is important is one needs to be aware of the techniques one prepares to use in the class that can make the classroom lively and a space of interaction. "Humor creates a relaxed atmosphere where dialogue can be enhanced. Humor neutralizes serious situations; a person feels open and accepted by the group. Humor makes the atmosphere more sociable and can be used as an ice-breaker as learners learn to know one another better. It reduces tension in class. Absenteeism is not experienced where humor is integrated to the teaching content. You want to be in class and enjoy. Humor makes learners to feel at home. Learners feel relaxed and can converse freely without being intimidated and threatened." Goodman (2005:5)

According to research, the use of humor in teaching and learning is presented as socially and psychologically beneficial to learners, helping them to relax, to create a comfortable classroom atmosphere, to create bonds among classmates, to raise student's interest and simply to make learning more enjoyable. In addition, humor has been an indispensable tool for students to learn the vocabulary, syntax, semantics and discourse conventions of the target language as well as to gain insight into the culture of those who speak that language.

Most teachers and learners are a little reluctant to use jokes or puns as the stigma that has been attached with humor. Initially humor was considered inappropriate for learners as it was thought to be a distractor and a negative influence, rather than as a significant pedagogical tool in the classroom. It was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that there was a shift in the meaning of humor, only then it was referred to as normal human behavior (Morrison 2008)

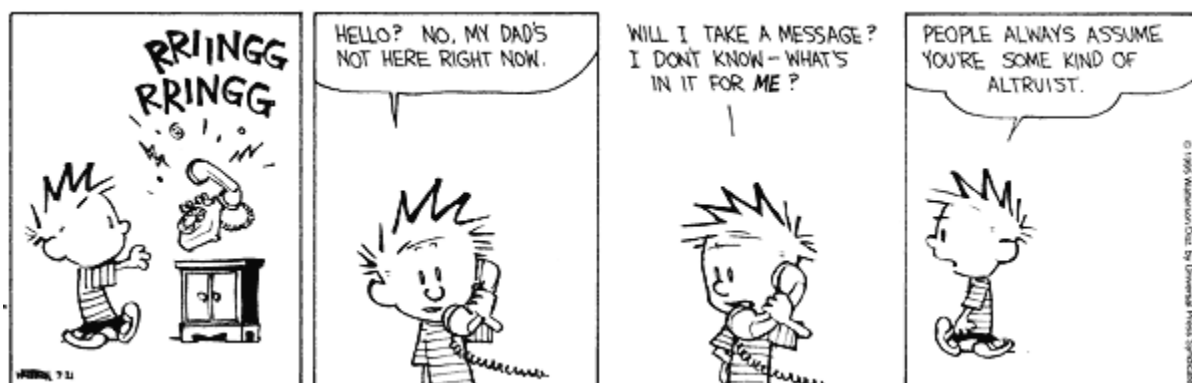
According to Morrison (2008) during the Renaissance period the term humorous referred to demented people and it was not until the 1700, that the nature that was associated with humor was validated. Humor originally a Latin word referring to one of the four fluids in the body (blood, choler, phlegm and black bile), a balance of which was thought to determine one's health. A person with a good balance, i.e. good health was said to be in good humor.

Neuroscience research reveals that humor systematically activates the brain's dopamine reward system and cognitive studies show that dopamine is important for both goal oriented motivation

and long term memory. While educational research shows that humor used appropriately can be an effective intervention to improve student's retention in students from kindergarten through college.

Humor can be very motivating from a physical perspective laughter creates biochemical changes in the body that may enhance one's ability to concentrate and learn, Berk(2000). From an emotional perspective, humor decreases stress and increases the feeling of well-being and happiness. From a cognitive perspective, humor increases and sharpens the thinking ability in students.

Techniques play an important role in bringing content to life. If the technique is right it can help in making the subject more organized and structured when it is taught in a class and also can help, follow the objective in the right way. Like the concept of humor uses the technique of comic strips, that help build reading and vocabulary in students. It not only creates an atmosphere in class that is entertaining and fun but productive as well. Following the conventional method of teaching can be monotonous, at a point it would be like treading the same old path numerous times. Like how Sisyphus rolled the boulder up the mountain. A conventional method of teaching can be like the boulder that is being dragged up the mountain by educators who are too apprehensive to experiment.



**Altruist** (n.) One who selflessly devotes themselves to the welfare of others, generally as a moral principle.

***Other forms:*** altruism (n.), altruistic (adj.)

**Etymology:** “Altruism”—in word if not deed—is of recent invention: it was coined, along with “[sociology](#)” and “[positivism](#)“, by the 19th century philosopher [Auguste Comte](#), who used the word to describe his conception of the essential moral obligation of mankind. Comte derived the word from the Italian *altrui*, meaning “toward others”—this root is also the source of such words as “alter”, “alternate”, and “[altercation](#)“.



**[Undermine](#)** (v.) To sap or weaken, often gradually, imperceptibly, and/or fundamentally.

**Other forms:** underminer (n.)

**Etymology:** A classic of the Anglo-Saxon “Take two words and smack ’em together backwards” school of etymology, “to undermine” originally meant “to mine under”—i.e., to dig a tunnel beneath the wall of an enemy castle, so as to weaken its foundation and attack from below.



**[Scandal](#)** (n.) A disgraceful or outrageous incident, particularly one that is public knowledge.

**Other forms:** [scandalous](#) (adj.), [scandalize](#) (v.),

**Related words:** [scandalmonger](#) (n.)

**Etymology:** “Scandal” comes from the Greek *skandalon*: a snare, tree stump, or other trap which causes the unwary to stumble and fall. This more literal meaning is alluded to when we speak of someone being “felled” or “taken down” by a scandal.

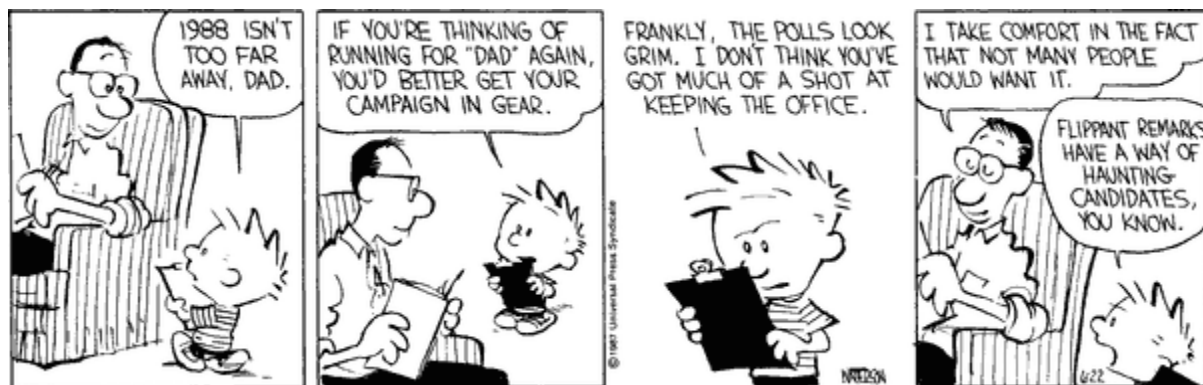
**-gate** (suffix) An alleged scandal involving illegal acts committed by government officials.

**Vindicate** (v.) To clear from blame or suspicion; to prove worthwhile or correct despite the doubts of others.

**Other forms:** [vindication](#) (n.), [vindicator](#) (n.)

**Related words:** [vindictive](#) (adj.), [vendetta](#) (n.)

**Etymology:** All these words come from the root *vindic-*, which means “to set free, to avenge”. However, their tone is quite different: while “vindication” is generally associated with truth and justice, “vindictive” and “vendetta” imply bitterness and a thirst for vengeance.



**Grim** (adj.) Uninviting in appearance, dismal, gloomy.

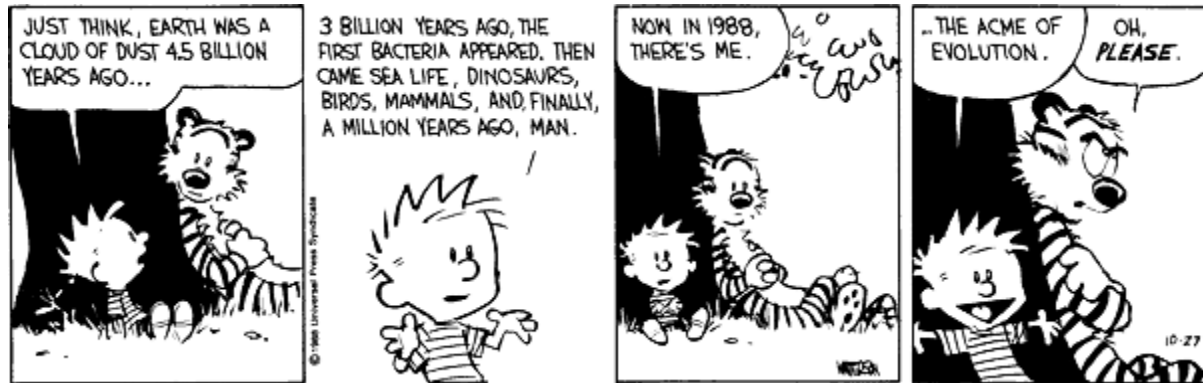
**Other meanings:** Fierce, especially in the face of forbidding odds (as in “grim determination.”)

**Notes:** There doesn’t seem to be a direct etymological connection between “grim” and either “[grime](#)” or “[grimace](#)“, but it’s not hard to make a mnemonic connection: for instance, a building that’s covered in grime probably looks pretty grim, which might cause you to grimace—especially if it was your job to clean it.

**Flippant** (adj.) Disrespectfully casual or humorous, especially in regards to a serious situation; smart-assed.

**Other forms:** flippancy (n.), flip (adj.)

*Notes:* “Flippant” originally meant light-heartedly talkative, but in a generally positive way—a flippant person was someone who’d be fun to chat with at a party. Around 1800, though, its negative connotations of “shallow” and “unserious” began to take over.



**Acme** (n.) The highest peak; the point of perfection in the development of something.

*Synonyms:* [apex](#), [pinnacle](#), [zenith](#), [summit](#)

*Etymology:* The Greek root *ak-* means “sharp” or “pointy”—a positive or negative thing, depending on the metaphorical context. For instance, to possess “[acuity](#)” or “[acumen](#)” is to have a sharp mind, which is a plus; on the other hand, to be “[acrimonious](#)“, “[acid](#)“, “[acid](#)“, or “[acerbic](#)” is to have a sharp tongue, which is generally considered a minus. (“Acrid” and “acid” can also mean to have a sharp smell or taste, usually in an unpleasant way.) And then there’s “[acne](#)“, which originated as a misreading of “acme” and is a type of peak, albeit one infrequently associated with perfection.

## Conclusion

The modern world that we all live in requires one to be good in English as English is the Lingua Franca and that the development of reading skills play a significant role for non-English speakers in terms of employment, cultural enrichment or homogenization into new cultures. Here comes the role of reading and vocabulary as one of the main components of language which play a vital role in learning any language. Vocabulary is a necessity rather than a need, since it is one of the main goal of the learning process. We can use comics as one of the techniques that are associated with humor in teaching vocabulary. Comics creates a positive environment for the students thereby promoting interaction, participation and retention due to its visual nature which allows the students to articulate and better express in a vivid manner. Students become better readers and have a deeper understanding

of the language and are able to assemble their thoughts in a more structured manner, they can implement this creativity while they are reading other books. Comics have a positive impact on the learning process making it more diverse, effective and efficient, thereby fueling the desire for learning and thereby making experience of learning attractive, diverse, efficient, effective and receptive for the students.

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How the visual language of Comics could have its roots in the ice age

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/.../comics-language-neil-cohn-Cartoons-grammar>

A Humor Competence Curriculum

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27785074>

### **Comic Strip Clips**

Calvin and Hobbes and Vocab | SAT words, as used by a boy and his ...

<https://chvocab.wordpress.com/>

### **You Tube Video**

Stan Lee –The appeal of Comic Book (37/42)

Web of stories – Life stories of remarkable people. 3.3k views. 2years ago