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# Using Graphic Novels to Engage English Language Learners

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# Using Graphic Novels to Engage English Language Learners

## **Abstract**

Seen in America's schools and elsewhere, the United States is experiencing a dramatic change in demographics. The national population, which was approximately 300 million in the year 2005, is expected to be more than 360 million by the year 2030 (Doorn and Schumm, 2013). As a result, the United States has experienced, and will continue to experience, a profound increase in racial and ethnic diversity.

## **Disciplines**

Education

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# Using Graphic Novels to Engage English Language Learners



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By Joellen Maples  
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Seen in America's schools and elsewhere, the United States is experiencing a dramatic change in demographics. The national population, which was approximately 300 million in the year 2005, is expected to be more than 360 million by the year 2030 (Doorn and Schumm, 2013). As a result, the United States has experienced, and will continue to experience, a profound increase in racial and ethnic diversity.

In 2007, it was estimated that 21 percent of elementary and secondary school students spoke a language other than English at home (Doorn and Schumm, 2013). However, teacher demographics have remained largely unchanged, showing little deviation from white, middle class, and female (Zumwalt and Craig, 2005). In addition, many teachers have not received significant training in how

to address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

School administrators know that training programs for preservice and in-service teachers have failed to keep pace with changing student demographics. As a result, teachers have limited preparation for meeting the unique needs of ELL students (Durgunoglu and Hughes, 2010; Polat, 2010). Teachers, especially those at the secondary level, also report a lack of connection with ELL students (Tan, 2011).

Understandably, teachers who have limited information will be much less effective in their instruction. Furthermore, the instructional needs of teachers will continue to increase with the rise of diversity in the classroom.

There are immediate ways to diminish this instructional gap. The use of graphic novels to include immigration narratives in the classroom is an innovative way to reach ELL students and address their unique needs. Such culturally relevant literature provides a mirror for ELL students to see themselves and also become engaged through language and literacy strategies. This article

explores the benefits of using graphic novels that represent the immigrant experience for ELL and general education students.

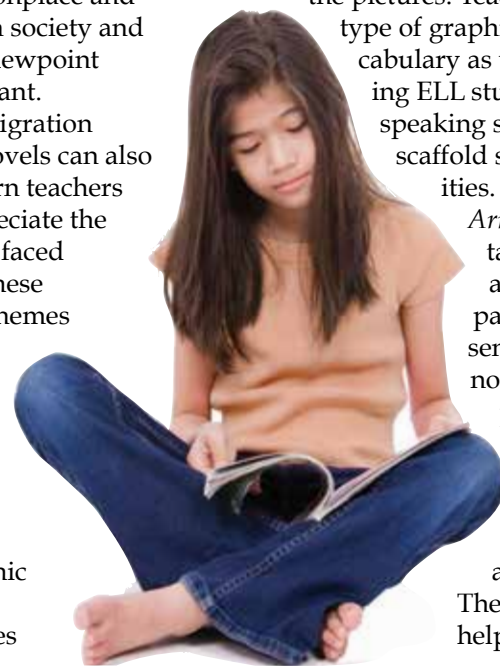
The use of graphic novels for struggling readers, including ELL students, is well documented (Bitz, 2004; Gavigan, 2012; Schwarz, 2002). In response, a growing set of graphic novel titles focuses on immigration narratives. *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2007), *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007), *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey* (Tran, 2010), *Escape to Gold Mountain* (Wong, 2012), and *The Four Immigrants Manga* (Kiyama, 1998) represent a small sampling of immigrant themed graphic novels that discuss the challenges faced by immigrants, the pressures to assimilate into larger American culture, and the desire to maintain a unique cultural heritage. The content and format of these works provide an ideal platform for considering the unique experiences of immigrants. Additionally, the art and illustrations in graphic novels help struggling readers understand the story, downplaying the students' difficulty with reading in English. The immigration narratives themselves illustrate the very human issues at play as individuals, families, and communities wrestle with issues of cultural assimilation and retention of native traditions.

Along with helping ELL students, graphic novels help other students disrupt the commonplace and consider American society and culture from the viewpoint of a recent immigrant. Furthermore, immigration themed graphic novels can also help American-born teachers and students appreciate the unique challenges faced by immigrants. These novels introduce themes of assimilation and inequity in sociopolitical and economic status between native born populations and immigrants. Graphic novels are ideal classroom resources

as they force readers to consider the plight of recent immigrants to the United States. As a genre, graphic novels are often more accessible to struggling readers and can be used to investigate themes of social justice. They can help students reflect on their own perceptions about culture, as well (Brozo and Mayville, 2012; Chun, 2009; Schwarz, 2002).

*The Arrival* (Tan, 2007) is an excellent first time graphic novel for teachers who wish to help their ELL students. *The Arrival* is mainly a wordless graphic novel that tells the story of a man who leaves his family to immigrate to a strange new land. Through *The Arrival*, Tan captures loneliness and difficulty, chronicling the main character's journey as he learns a new language and adapts to life in a foreign country. Along the way, the man meets other immigrants who share similar struggles. At the end of the story, the man's family joins him in his new home. This story sparks empathy from students who are not ELL students and is relatable to students who are new to the U.S. Not only does culturally relevant content provide a springboard for understanding, but the wordless nature of this graphic novel provides an opportunity for ELL students to practice their new language and literacy skills.

With a wordless graphic novel, students have no choice but to "read" the pictures. Teachers may use this type of graphic novel to teach vocabulary as well as writing. Pairing ELL students with English-speaking students may help to scaffold such literacy activities. While reading *The Arrival*, students can take post-it notes and, as they look at each page, they can write a sentence on the post-it note and stick it on the page of the wordless graphic novel. As they make their way through the graphic novel, they are writing the story. The post-it activity can help ELL students learn





writing skills and also spark conversation between English-speaking students and ELL students about the journey of immigration. This type of engagement can build an understanding of the immigration experience and dismantle any stereotypes that students may have had. The activity also makes students practice dialogue, develop sequence, and create action in their stories.

In addition to developing literacy skills through wordless graphic novels like *The Arrival*, using graphic novels also spans across the Common Core standards, reaching all grade levels. Gavigan (2012) suggests that graphic novels fit well within the Common Core standards:

**Grade 2**, Reading Standard 7:

Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting or plot.

**Grade 5**, Reading Standard

7: Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).

**Grades 6-12**, Standard 10: Range, Quality, and Complexity of Student Reading: Includes the sub-genres of adventure stories, historical fiction, mysteries, myths, science fiction, realistic fiction, allegories, parodies, satire, and graphic novels (p. 21).

Finally, another literacy activity that teachers can implement after reading this graphic novel is to ask their students to write their own immigration narrative “graphic novel” to give a better understanding of their experiences. Students can use comic creation programs online to design a comic. For ELL students, creating a comic may be less intimidating than writing a formal essay. A comic creation site recommended by teachers is Bitstrips. Accessible through Facebook or its own website, Bitstrips uniquely allows students to create characters in their own likeness and the likenesses of their family members. ELL students can then easily share their comics with their classmates,

telling the story of their immigration to the United States. Going a step further, teachers could even bind these stories into small books to share with family members of ELL students upon completion. The graphic novel serves as an accessible and nonthreatening piece of literature to establish basic literacy skills with students, to help ELL students make connections, and to help non-ELL students develop an understanding about their peers’ immigration narratives. All of these outcomes will assist both teachers and students as they face increasing diversity in school and in the world around them.

Principals, assistant principals, and instructional directors can help build inclusive experiences for ELLs and other students. Administrators can work with school librarians to ensure that graphic novels such as the ones suggested are available in the school library. Class sets of graphic novels with immigration narratives can also be ordered to encourage teachers to use these strategies in English language arts classes as well as social studies classes. Currently in some schools, interested teachers are piloting lessons using graphic novels to gain experience and engage students. They are seeking to involve other classes, offer workshops to other teachers, and begin a dialogue that embraces a more purposeful strategy for engaging English language learners. Finally, school administrators can begin to assess the level of educators’ understanding about ELL students in their districts for the purpose of being more inclusive, better prepared, and more focused on strategies that engage ELL students with teachers and other students. Graphic novels such as *The Arrival* can begin this process and immediately give ELL students a clear voice in the classroom.

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