

ENJOYING THE NOVEL BUT HAVING A HARD TIME: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCE OF READING GRAPHIC NOVELS FOR ADULTS

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Abstract

This article discusses teachers' experience of reading a graphic novel for adults. Graphic novels have been increasingly integrated in education systems recently, hence the importance of analyzing the experience of the teachers responsible for mediating those texts for their students. The participants were 48 teachers, most of them for language arts, studying for a graduate degree in Israeli colleges. The research question was: What characterizes the teachers' acquaintance with graphic novels and their response to the genre? The data were collected from a questionnaire completed after reading opening pages of a graphic novel, which included both closed and open-ended questions. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the qualitative data using thematic analysis. The participants attested to shallow familiarity with the genre. While enjoying the encounter with it, many confessed to a difficulty reading due to cognitive overload caused by an excess of verbal, visual, graphic and spatial elements and the difficulty integrating them. The findings thus suggest a need for teachers to study the language of graphic novels and gain experience reading them before they feel comfortable teaching them in class.

Keywords: graphic novel, language art teachers, cognitive overload, multimodality, reading

This article presents the findings of a study on the experience of reading a graphic novel written for adult readers. Graphic novels are becoming increasingly popular in recent decades, particularly among children and youth, although there is also impressive growth in complex comic works for adults. Some view graphic novels as an outgrowth of comic books, whereas others consider them as belonging to the same format (Labio, 2011). The indeterminate nature of graphic novels, and the processes of its reception by educational policymakers and critics have hitherto delayed its inclusion in school curricula in Israel, despite growing local attention to it. Academic literature has also been slow in responding to this development; in particular, there is very sparse literature on the way teachers read, interpret and teach graphic novels (Mayer & Jimenez, 2017; Serafini, 2014), a gap the present study seeks to narrow.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Ever since the New London Group (1996) called for expanding the educational conception of text to include texts and media extending beyond print, rich literature has been written, with several theories proposing to provide students with literacy skills using a broader variety of media. Terms such as “multiliteracies” have been increasingly examined and applied in a way that has expanded the meaning of texts from strictly verbal ones to those used in additional sign systems, such as static or dynamic visual systems (Jewitt, 2005; Lenters, 2018). The digital age has led researchers and theoreticians to call for integrating multimodal learning into standard curricula and provide tools for understanding its usage and effects in various sociocultural situations (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2012; Jewitt, 2005; 2008; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Lenters, 2018).

Graphic novels tell stories using elements and conventions of the comics medium. Wolk (2007, p. 14) argues that:

Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text-driven medium with added pictures; they're not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of a film. They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties. The first step toward attentively reading and fully appreciating comics is acknowledging that.

Graphic novels convey meaning using three semiotic systems: Verbal, visual and spatial. In addition to understanding words and phrases, readers must review and understand visual images, the text-image layout, proximity between different elements, their sequential order, use of colors, fonts and location of panels, use of the perspective of the images deployed, as well as the cultural foundations of these materials (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Pantaleo, 2014; Serafini, 2019). This highlights the uniqueness and complexity of graphic novels and calls for deepening research not only into artistic characteristics, but also into the ways they are read and interpreted by different readers.

1.1 *Graphic novels and reading complexity*

If the graphic novel is a work that is neither a verbal novel nor a film, but a unique medium that demands a unique reading approach, how to read it? Serafini (2012) proposed a model for multimodal reading, a further development of Freebody and Luke's (1990) Four Resources Model for reading and viewing. Serafini suggested four roles of the multimodal reader, who operates as (1) a *navigator* who determines and directs their reading path, relying on familiarity of the genre and shifting systematically between the verbal and visual; (2) a *designer* who relies on the semiotic resources available in the text to consider the navigation route and arrive at a meaning of his own; (3) an *interpreter* who gives the work meaning based on previous knowledge and familiarity with the culture and context; and (4) an *interrogator* who poses questions regarding the social and power relations reflected by the work. Importantly, the first two roles are unique to multimodal texts and pose a particular challenge to readers.

Jimenez and Meyer (2016) examined how expert readers of complex comic works and graphic novels used intentional attention shifts to textual details in order to construct meaning. Specifically, they studied how these readers used visual, verbal and spatial elements, compared to the usage of the same elements by readers, experts in verbal reading. Findings showed that the latter started out by looking at the verbal elements, and only then reviewed the visual and spatial elements; however, the non-verbal elements did not deepen or modify their understanding constructed in the verbal reading. Conversely, readers experienced in graphic novels, first reviewed the visual and spatial elements to gain an initial impression of the genre, of the characters, and of potential plot directions; only then did they examine the verbal elements. In the third stage, they synthesized all three to construct a rich and comprehensive meaning of the text. The researchers concluded that graphic novels for adults called for complex, nonlinear reading, placing a question mark on the common assumption regarding the easiness of reading comics.

Serafini and Reid (2019) proposed a methodology for the study of graphic novels, with emphasis on the fact that the verbal elements in multimodal texts themselves have both a conventional content dimension, and a visual-spatial dimension. Readers skilled in verbal texts are usually not required to attend to the visual-spatial dimensions. Consequently, as they start reading graphic novels by focusing on the verbal texts, they might ignore its design and deployment and attend exclusively to its content dimension, thereby missing out of a significant part of the meaning-making resources before even glancing at the drawings.

Readers less experienced in reading graphic novels may feel flooded with different types of stimuli, particularly if the reading task is not carefully designed to meet the reader's needs, knowledge, and abilities (McClanahan & Nottingham, 2019).

Many people approach multimodal texts such as graphic novels intuitively, without studying their characteristics, perhaps because every image they see awakens an entire world of images from the reality familiar to them, and the photo or drawing

are seen as representing familiar objects (Hallet, 2018). Those who appreciate the artistic value of graphic novels view them as complex texts that call for attentive and careful teaching, so that their meaning would not be superficialized or lost (Bongco, 2000; Cohn, 2009; Conners, 2010, 2013; Goldsmith, 2010; Pantaleo, 2014; Serafini, 2012). Wallner (2020) argues that readers of comics construct meaning depending on their previous experience with comics or their ability to read text and pictures. Hence, teachers must be multimodally literate. The aforementioned points underscore that reading and interpreting graphic novels necessitates a deep understanding of literacy, particularly when the novels aim to present a critical perspective on reality and incorporate intricate social-cultural signs and symbols.

1.2 Graphic novels and literacy education

The evaluation and teaching of graphic novels in the education system is in correlation with perceptions of literacy education. An education system which adheres to traditional or “autonomous” approaches in Street’s term (2003), attaches less value to the integration of graphic novels in the curriculum and will promote the acquisition of literacy skills that promise, in its view, success along the trajectories of education and professional training by the very mastery of those skills. Education systems that adopted critical approaches clearly state a connection between society, culture and power centers in society and the policy of literacy education. They regard the variety in literacy performance and literacy skills required in different social, cultural and historic contexts, an educational resource (ibid). Research of teaching graphic novels and their inclusion in educational materials refers to the topic from various aspects. Several researches deal with the question: May the integration of graphic novels promote learning? If yes, how does the process occur? Namely, the graphic novel is conceived as a tool for reaching an external goal. There are some that examine the correlation between the integration of graphic novels in the course of reading acquisition both in L1 and in a second language, and motivation for reading and achievements in its acquisition. Researchers suggest that reading graphic novels reduces the cognitive load on struggling or reluctant readers and motivates them to read (Gavigan, 2011). The language of these novels is relatively simple, as they use fewer words than conventional printed texts, and are therefore more accessible to beginners or those with reading difficulties; their format supports these readers by interweaving words and images. The images themselves provide accurate information that is immediately understood with no need to make an effort to decipher codes like letters and letter combinations (Crawford, 2004; Griffith, 2010; Ranker, 2007; Trong–Hansen, 2012). Other researchers investigate the influence of graphic novels on the understanding of historical and social situations, as well as of conflicts between societies and cultures when of studying social sciences.

These studies argue for the benefits of integrating comic books and graphic novels in the various subjects taught at school. The images help students comprehend unfamiliar cultures or historical periods by illustrating their characteristics.

Graphic novels also motivate students by engaging them emotionally through the visual content, which fosters empathy towards the characters in the novels (Barter–Storm & Wik, 2020; Gavigan, 2021).

Another group of researchers deal with educators' position towards the integration of graphic novels in teaching, in relation to teachers' prior knowledge and predisposition. These researchers indicate mixed positions of teachers and educators towards the teaching of graphic novels. Reasons for opposing derive from educators' prior knowledge of the medium, and from their presupposition that graphic novels are "too violent, too brutal, or, in a word, too graphic" (Strong Hansen, 2012, p. 58).

Others fear that reading graphic novels in class will affect the reading habits of young learners so that they would avoid reading classical verbal texts or lose the ability to enjoy them. Strong Hansen (2012, p. 58) describes them as thinking that "graphic novels are easy texts for lazy readers." Some principals think that teachers' ability to prepare students for meeting academic requirements will be reduced, if these novels be integrated (Jaffe & Hurwich, 2018).

Teachers voice doubts stating that their superficial familiarity with the medium makes them feel unconfident with regard to reading, interpreting, and most importantly, teaching graphic novels (Lapp et al., 2011). Consequently, many fear to include them in the syllabus, although many others believe it is important to introduce this medium to the students due to its growing popularity and attractiveness (Jaffe & Hurwich, 2018).

We would like to note that there is a contradiction between our claim for the complexity of graphic novels and their interpretation on the one hand, and their conception as easier for reading and thus more suitable for beginning or weak reader, on the other. The contradiction may derive from the goals of teaching a graphic novel and how it is integrated in various educational contexts (Wallner, 2017). Like other texts, graphic novels appeal to different audiences and are constructed upon awareness of their audience. Those intended for young children would be simpler in terms of language complexity, the kind of illustrations chosen, the organization of panels and integration of symbols than graphic novels directed to older readers. When the integration of the graphic novel targets the enhancement and improvement of reading skills, the emphasis would be on the linguistic aspect and on the student as reader, and less on synergy between language, line, color, composition and page setting. When the goal is the novel as a work of linguistic-visual work of art, the linguistic level would be only one of the stimuli offered to the spectator/reader, and therefore deciphering and interpretation become more challenging for the student.

Our research intends to broaden our knowledge of teachers' familiarity with graphic novels and their opinion of these works, within the Israeli context. Therefore, the chosen text is a graphic novel directed to an adult audience, which presents social and historic complexity from a humoristic and critical perspective.

1.3 *The current study*

As instructors of teachers for language and literature in the education system, who are in the program for professional development of teachers in this field, we wished to expand our knowledge as well as the knowledge of other teacher-instructors, concerning the acquaintance of teachers—particularly of language arts—with graphic novels and their attitude towards reading them.

Accordingly, our research questions are:

- 1) How extensive is art teachers' acquaintance of graphic novels for adults?
- 2) Do teachers find the reading experience enjoyable?
- 3) Do they find the reading experience more difficult or easier than the reading of a verbal novel?
- 4) Is there correlation between the age of teachers and their L1 and the sensation of pleasure or difficulty?

2. METHOD

2.1 *Participants*

Three groups of Jewish and Arab teachers ($n = 48$) from two colleges of education in Israel participated in this study. Two groups studied for an M.Ed. and included language arts teachers with five or more years of seniority, while members of the third group studied for an M.Teach and included teachers of various subjects in the early stages of their career. One group of experienced teachers performed the research task (see below) after learning three lessons about the characteristics of graphic novels ($n = 13$). The second group was in the early stages of studying about integrating multimodal texts in language arts lessons ($n = 14$). The third group of early-career teachers was in early stages of studying issues in literacy ($n = 21$).

Most (69%) of the participants were native Arabic speakers, and 27% were native Hebrew speakers. Two Jewish participants (4%) were native Russian speakers. Despite their cultural and language differences, all participants were fluent in both spoken and written Hebrew—the language of instruction in their colleges. In terms of age, the two first groups included older teachers than the third (see Table 1).

Table 1. Age of participants

	M.Ed. programs	M.Teach program	All participants	
	No.	No.	No.	%
25–30	6	10	16	33
31–35	5	4	9	19
36–40	7	9	12	25
41–45	6	1	7	15
46–50	2	0	2	4
51+	1	1	2	4
Total	27	21	48	100

All the students studying for an M.Ed. taught in different elementary and high schools. All the teachers studying for M.Teach taught in high schools. Since the research was conducted in field conditions and the participants were students in post graduate academic courses, the number of respondents as well as their age, gender and L1 were beyond our control. From this respect, the limited number of participants and the imbalance between Arabic speakers and Hebrew speakers limited our ability to draw conclusions from the analysis of statistical data.

2.2 *The graphic novel*

The participants read the first 21 pages of *Tunnels* by Rutu Modan (2020) a quest story written as a graphic novel. The protagonists of *Tunnels* search for the lost Ark of the Covenant, driven by a mixture of motives. These include religious-national zeal, profit, academic status, desire for respect, and vengefulness. These motives are embodied in the characters that represent all shades of Israeli society. The protagonists are all members of the same family. The father used to be an archeologist; when he was young, he dug a tunnel to locate the Ark of the Covenant, and was forced to stop. He is now demented. The daughter initiates an illegal excavation to find the Ark, reveal the past and restore her father's honor. The journey passes through locations charged with national and personal myths. The tunnel itself passes under the Separation Barrier between Israeli and Palestinian territories in the West Bank.

We have chosen a graphic novel meant for adults because we wanted to hear students' response as readers, and not as teachers. We wished to distance instrumental thoughts (how could I use the text for my teaching?) and direct all attention to the reading itself, to understanding and interpretation, thereby posing an intellectual challenge of literacy to our students. The opening of the novel does not provide easy access; instead, it demands observation and patience, as we thrust into the middle of a situation without acquaintance with the characters and without introduction or any background.

2.3 *Data collection*

In the first stage, the participants received the first 21 pages of the graphic novel *Tunnels* in PDF format and were asked to read them in their spare time. These pages provide hints and important expository data, significant for the comprehension of the following text. The reader can learn from them about the characters appearing at the beginning of the work and the connection to archeological research and the trade of archeological findings in Israel.

They were also sent a questionnaire as a Google doc. Its first part asked for demographic details and its second part included questions concerning the research goal (see Appendix A). The participants were given two weeks to complete the questionnaire after reading the opening pages of the novel. In the second stage, the text was discussed in the two groups of the language arts teachers studying in the M.Ed.

program, in subgroups of 3–4 participants each. They were audiotaped and transcribed. Both stages were integral to a course in the participants' program and to their learning process overall. The present paper reports the analysis and findings of the data from the first stage (personal questionnaire).

The second part of the research, which examined group interaction during the interpretation of the opening pages, focused on a different research question which deals with teachers' interpretations and how these were crystallized; this will be covered in a different article.

2.4 Data analysis

The questionnaire data underwent basic quantitative analysis. Despite the limited number of participants and their characteristics, a chi-square test of independence was performed to examine (1) dependence between L1 of the participants and their enjoyment or lack of it (2) between age and enjoyment or lack of enjoyment and (3) between L1 and the feeling of difficulty or ease while reading.

The verbal explanations offered by the participants in response to the open questions were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each of the two authors read the participants' responses to each open question and noted recurring issues and preliminary themes. This was followed by a discussion between the researchers to determine and hone the definitions of the final themes. In the third stage, each of us went back to the participants' comments and sorted them according to the agreed themes. Then the researchers compared between the two individual analyses and found a high level of agreement (95%). Finally, the authors held a joint discussion to review the themes and further refine their definitions.

2.5 Ethics

All participants received an explanation about the study objectives. Every participant who agreed to have his or her task included in the study signed an informed consent form. The data were analyzed only after the participants' courses had been completed and graded. The research was approved by the research committees of the two colleges.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Familiarity and experiences in reading graphic novels

Nearly half (44%) of the participants admitted to having no experience in reading graphic novels. A few mentioned that they read short comic strips consisting of only two or three panels, whether in children's journals, candy wrappings or commercials, but not an entire novel. This finding surprised us. We expected more participants to be acquainted with this format.

3.2 *Enjoyment of the graphic novel*

Two-thirds (69%) of participants mentioned that they enjoyed reading the 21 pages of the graphic novel, whereas the remaining 31% did not. We examined whether younger teachers enjoyed more. As seen in Table 2, this seemed to be the case, but we did not find a statistical significance for relations between age and enjoyment.

Table 2. Age and enjoyment from reading comics

Age	Enjoyment	No Enjoyment
25–30	12	4
31–35	7	2
36–40	8	4
41–45	5	2
46–50	1	1
51+	-	2
Total	33 = 69%	15 = 31%

We also examined whether the participants’ enjoyment was related to their mother tongue. Interestingly, as seen in Table 3, Arabic-speakers reported enjoying the graphic novel more than did their Hebrew-speaking counterparts, and it was found statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 4.69$, $p < 0.05$.

Table 3. Enjoyment from reading comics and L1

L1	Enjoyment	No Enjoyment
Speakers of Arabic: 33 participants	79% (26)	21% (7)
Speakers of Hebrew: 13 participants	46% (6)	54% (7)
Speakers of other languages: 2 participants	50% (1)	50% (1)

3.3 *Reasons from enjoyment*

The participants’ reasons for enjoying the graphic novel were reported in 28 statements, grouped together into seven subthemes, presented as follows, together with quotes from participants’ responses to the open question.

The use of illustrations makes reading interesting and fun (6 participants): “Comic books are usually colorful, their illustrations attract attention and provide enjoyment beyond the reading”; “Because pictures make me get interested in the book’s content or story”; “More experiential and friendly, enjoyable and fun.”

Reading a graphic novel tastes like childhood (5): “It brings me back to childhood”; “For me it began with Bazooka Joe, because I always used to buy it for the text on the wrapping, and it made me curious about comics.”

Graphic novels are open for interpretation and challenge thought and imagination (4): “It makes you think with unusual depth”; “It allows the reader to surf wherever he wants to in his mind and interpret it according to personal experiences—in short, it doesn’t limit you.”

The illustrations make it easier to understand (4): “The pictures help you understand; the facial expressions also help you and open up an option for raising assumptions and developing expectations.”

The way the characters and ideas are presented is humoristic (3): “There is something that’s real fun, it’s fun to create new characters, it’s funny sometimes and it’s cool.”

A graphic novel is more authentic and realistic (2): “For me it simulates real conversations and authentic situations.”

Additional reasons (4): “Closer to my world”; “Lots of thoughts and ideas with fewer words”; “Only today at the lesson, I was exposed to this for the first time, it always used to seem uninteresting to me—and it was a lot of fun.”

3.4 Reasons for no enjoyment

The participants’ reasons for not enjoying the graphic novel were reported in 17 statements, grouped together into five subthemes, as follows.

Unfamiliarity with the medium (5): “I don’t know it”; “I have no experience with it.”

Confusion and difficulty following reading directions (5): “I sometimes don’t know in which direction I should keep reading because there are text bubbles in different places in every comic square [panel].”; “Reading comics makes me get lost in the plot, rather than enjoy it.”

Excessive visual stimuli (3): “I find it very difficult to read a book with pictures, my eyes get tired!”

Personal taste (3): “It’s not for my taste, it doesn’t attract me”; “There’s no point in reading comics, it’s easier to watch TV.”

Preference for verbal texts (1): “For me, reading stories is more interesting.”

3.5 Ease of reading a graphic novel in Hebrew

More than half (58%) of the participants found it harder to read the graphic novel than to read a verbal novel in Hebrew. We examined the relationship between age and ease of reading, but found no significant relationship (see Table 4). Interestingly, among the younger teachers, whom we expected to be more open to and experienced in reading multimodal texts, quite a few felt that reading the graphic novel was more challenging than reading a verbal novel: Among people aged 25 to 30, eleven expressed difficulties, more than twice as many as those who expressed ease (5). Nonetheless, in chi-square tests, this finding was not found significant.

Table 4. Age and ease of reading a graphic novel

Age	Easier than a verbal novel	Harder than a verbal novel
25–30	5	11
31–35	5	4
36–40	5	7
41 and above	5	6
Total	20 (42%)	28 (58%)

3.6 Reasons for ease

The participants wrote 29 answers to the question why reading a graphic novel is easier for them than reading verbal texts; the answers are grouped together in six subthemes, as follows.

Ease of reading (7): “Simpler language”; “Stories and novels written in a literary language that’s a bit hard.”

Illustrations and pictures illustrate the meaning (7): “The graphic drawings illustrate [characters, places and situations]”; “The pictures make things clearer.”

Having to read fewer words (5): “Few words”; “Little text.”

The visual medium is attractive and fun (5): “It makes reading more fun”; “The pictures attract me.”

Quick reading (3): “The message the writer wants to deliver arrives quickly”; “Reading is faster.”

Other reasons were: “The graphic drawings illustrate in an interesting way and serve as an additional locus of interest”; “The text and the illustrations are matched and closely related.”

Note that reasons frequently mentioned for the ease of reading the graphic novel included simplicity, immediacy, and shorter texts. Simplicity, speed and brevity mostly refer to the written text, namely, to the characters’ words appearing in bubbles; this may indicate that teachers participating in the research focused mainly on verbal interaction between characters and devoted less attention to interaction between the written text and visual and spatial aspects of the work, or to panels that had no verbal text.

3.7 Reasons for difficulty

The participants wrote 26 answers to the question why reading graphic novel is more difficult for them than reading verbal texts; the answers are grouped together in five subthemes, as follows:

Difficulty following the correct reading and chronological sequence (10): “I need order in the illustrations and captions, I can’t tie the chronological sequence together”; “It’s impossible to know exactly where to begin, and I find no relation between the slides.”

Difficulty reading illustrations and connecting them to words (8): “I need to connect the illustration with the writing, and it requires more work”; “You have to read several times before you understand”; “The visual aspects and the pictures are confusing more than the words.”

Need for great effort to fill information gaps (6): This difficulty applied to both the transition from one panel to the other, and to the need to activate both the verbal and visual modalities: “The reader is required to fill information gaps between one picture [= panels] and the next by himself”; “The written word is not a stable anchor. I need to understand what’s said in every illustration, I mean you need to know how to read and understand illustrations”; “In a short story you can immediately understand what’s written and what the writer wants to show us; in a graphic novel you need to pay attention to every little detail, not only what’s written, but also the pictures and their details.”

The illustrations restrict the reader’s imagination (1): “The illustrations limit my ability to describe the scenes [to myself] using my imagination, and I therefore cannot connect the plot with my own personal experience.”

Cultural and language gaps (1): “Sometimes not all the words are clear to me, and I don’t understand all the jokes.”

Overall, 18 out of the 26 statements expressing difficulty (70%) address the challenge of navigating in the text and locating the right sequence in order to follow the plot. Six (23%) related to the difficulty of simultaneously interpreting images and words. All statements attest to a sense of overload and other challenges that require greater experience in reading multimodal texts.

3.8 Ease, and enjoyment

Comparing native Arabic and Hebrew speakers with regard to ease and enjoyment reading the graphic novel in Hebrew, we found that more than half (14/26, 54%) of Arabic speakers who enjoyed the reading experience indicated that it was more difficult than reading a verbal novel in Hebrew. Namely, they experienced pleasure despite the difficulty. As for the Hebrew speakers, from the 7 who indicated that reading the graphic novel was more difficult than reading a verbal novel in Hebrew, 5 pointed out they did not enjoy the experience—painting an opposite picture.

We examined the explanations of those who enjoyed the graphic novel but found it more difficult to read compared to a verbal novel. A native Hebrew reader who belonged to the group that had already studied a little about graphic novels, wrote: “This genre has complexity and sophistication, we need to process information in several channels.” She enjoyed the sophistication and complexity, but said:

In the story we hang on to the written word, whereas in the graphic novel the written word is not a stable anchor. I need to understand what is said in every illustration, I mean you have to know how to read and understand illustrations. In addition, you have to understand the sequence of illustration in each block. The criticism in these novels is revealed to us in different pieces of information presented to us, not necessarily in words.

In that, she testified to the difficulty of simultaneously processing information from the verbal, visual and spatial channels.

Another participant, a native Arabic speaker, wrote:

I was tremendously attracted by the way the idea was presented. In addition, comics allow the reader to surf where they want in their mind, and interpret it according to the personal experience. In short, it doesn't limit you, and there's no right and wrong.

Nevertheless, she admitted to the difficulty:

I need to connect the illustration and the writing, and this requires additional work, that's not required when reading a short story or a novel. In addition, in a graphic novel I need to make an effort to search for the message or the purpose of what is said, because usually it is not directly evident.

Here, too, the need to simultaneously connect the visual and verbal appears to be a difficulty, making the message feel more hidden and implicit than in a verbal novel.

Another Arabic speaking reader wrote: "When reading a comic book, I feel I can put my personal imagination into the story." Nevertheless, she added, "In a short story or novel everything is given to the reader. In a comic book, you have to make an effort and activate the imagination." Apparently, using imagination is enjoyable, but not easy.

One last example is also taken from an Arabic speaker: "The pictures help you understand; the facial expressions also help you and open up an option for raising assumptions and developing expectations." This understanding, however, does not come easy: "Every time there's a different idea, there's no uniform meaning." In other words, every panel presents a separate picture and provides no information, and these do not complement one another easily and immediately, creating the overall impression that the novel is inconsistent.

3.9 Prior knowledge and difficulty level

We devoted special attention to the two groups of experienced teachers ($n = 27$). Comparing the teachers who had learned something about graphic novels and those who had not led to an interesting finding. Ten (78%) out of thirteen teachers with some experience with graphic novels said they found it more difficult to read the graphic novel, compared to a verbal one. In the less experienced group, eight participants (57%) said they had trouble, whereas six found the graphic novel easier to read than a verbal one. Thus, it would seem that readers' difficulty is increased by the understanding of the medium's characteristics and the realization that elements not included in the verbal text must be attended.

4. DISCUSSION

This study examined the responses of Arabic native speakers and Hebrew native speakers, most of them language arts teachers in Israel, to reading a section from an

adult graphic novel. We asked about the teachers' acquaintance with the medium and their experience reading it. In addition, we also asked about possible affiliations between ease of reading and enjoyment, and L1 of readers and their age.

The findings showed that most participants were hardly familiar with the graphic novel, if at all. Few of them knew the comic medium from bubble gum wrappings or children's journals, hence the "taste of childhood" referred to by some. However, these comic sections were only a few panels long, and never occupied more than one page. Most importantly, in their academic studies or teacher training, the participants had never learned about or dealt with graphic novels as a text to be taught in class. Although today children's comic books, with complex plots and multiple characters, are published frequently, teachers are not familiar with them and do not know how to read or mediate them to their students.

Most participants found it more difficult to read the graphic novel than to read a conventional verbal novel in the same language, as they had studied literature, and some of them had even been trained as literature teachers. The difficulties they mentioned attested to their embarrassment and confusion due to the combination of words and images and due to the unfamiliar reading path. Consequently, many reported frustration trying to interpret the meanings of the opening pages.

The format of many textbooks is based on the proximity of texts and images, with each medium interpretable in its own terms. They deal with the same issue or problem and present it in different modalities. Reading and interpreting both types of texts, each separately, deepen the understanding of the topic under study thanks to the use of both the verbal and visual learning channels. Things are different when it comes to graphic novels, where the verbal and visual texts are not just proximal, but inherently intertwined, so that one cannot be understood without the other. Wallner (2017) suggests the term *comics literacy* to emphasize the intertwining of textual literacy and visual literacy in order to comprehend comics. As McCloud (1994) and Wolk (2007) argue, graphic novels require a different way of reading than what both students and teachers know from their textbooks.

It may very well be that comic works written for children with the specific aim of helping them acquire literacy in their native or second/foreign language make it easier for learners to read and interpret the text (Griffith, 2010; Rankel, 2007). This is not so, however, when the graphic work conveys multiple messages with multiple characters and plots occurring in a variety of times and places, when it uses complex visual and spatial elements, and when it contains allusions to a broad cultural infrastructure or references to multifaceted sociopolitical issues. In that case, a different reading dynamic is required (Hallet, 2018; Serafini, 2019). Without experience in reading that integrates verbal, visual and spatial aspects and without learning the components of the graphic novel, reading may become burdensome. This is how many of the research participants, experienced in reading verbal texts alone, felt.

Despite the difficulty, however, many participants enjoyed the multimodal text. Moreover, the percentage of those who enjoyed it among the participants, for whom

Hebrew was a second language, was higher than among their Hebrew speaking counterparts. We explain this enjoyment in terms of the very encounter with a colorful text, rich in images, with relatively few and simple words and sentences. Those reading Hebrew as a second language need not make an undue effort to decipher the meaning of the words, as opposed to the experience of reading a conventional novel, and the images enable forming a quick impression of the meaning of the text (Hallet, 2018). Nevertheless, impression is not equivalent to understanding, and enjoyment does not do away with the difficulty of understanding the content, situation and relationships presented in the multimodal text.

We started this article by stating that the world in which we live and act is multimodal (Jewitt, 2005; 2008; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Lenters, 2018): The press, websites, the news, text messages, podcasts, commercials, PR texts—all communicate with their target audiences by combining visual, auidial, and verbal texts in various compositions. About half of the participants in our research were about 40 or below, and grew up in the digital and multimodal age. Despite this, they faced considerable difficulty while deciphering the opening of the multimodal work presented to them in the research. For many of them, the multiplicity of languages involved in the work—spatial, visual and verbal—created difficulty. This difficulty may be explained by little acquaintance with the medium that had a marginal position in the literary scene in Israel for years, and has begun to resume a more meaningful place in Hebrew literature only in the last two decades (see special edition of *Bezalel* (journal) devoted to comics and caricature, Blich, 2010).

Assuming that in our multimodal technological world, more and more complex multimodal texts will be integrated in the curriculum, we recommend updating the teacher training curricula in Israel —and worldwide— in order to equip language arts teachers with the tools of reading, interpreting and mediating such texts. Special attention should be paid when students with different L1s read graphic novels written in a language other than their L1. They may report great enjoyment, which might, however, cover up for difficulties in the process of deciphering and understanding.

4.1 *Limitations and future directions*

Our research relies upon a given situation in the field: The participants were registered students and there was no way to affect the number or the identity of the participants. Few teachers participated in our research, without having a balance between native Hebrew speaking Jews and native Arabic speaking ones. The groups concerned have not only different languages, but also different cultures. The more we advanced in our research, the more we understood the significance of a follow-up research, with more participants, while adhering to a balance between participants of different L1s, in order to support findings about the influence of L1 and home culture on the reading of graphic novels for adults.

This study used a questionnaire, and its limitations therefore call for using additional instruments, such as classroom observations and documented dialogues

about texts in order to gain more knowledge about teachers' knowledge about graphic novels and the way they deal with them. We assume that the kind of graphic novel chosen for the research also affected the results; therefore, further research should be done to enable the study of coping with graphic novels of different levels of complexity.

Finally, we strongly recommend devoting attention to graphic novels and multi-modal literature in language teacher education programs to familiarize future teachers with this unique genre and give them the necessary knowledge for teaching it in their future classrooms.

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APPENDIX A: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Please highlight, underline or encircle the right answer for you.

1. My age is 25–30 31–35 36–40 41–45 46–50 51–55 56–60 61+
2. My native language is Hebrew Arabic Other
3. I have read comic books in the past Yes No
4. I have read graphic novels in the past Yes No
5. I have enjoyed reading the graphic novel Yes No,
because _____

6. Was reading the graphic novel harder or easier than reading a novel in Hebrew
Easier Harder,
because _____

