

# Use Manga and Comic Books to Teach English

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## English Abstract

It is often a challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to read authentic texts written by native English writers for native readers. One way to introduce this literature in a more accessible way is via manga or comic books. Students can use the visual cues from the drawings to decode the written words on the page. This paper introduces the new pattern: "Teach English as a Foreign Language reading with Comic Books and Manga" for EFL teachers (TEFL), provides examples, outlines challenges, and connects with pre existing patterns.

## Japanese Abstract (日本語)

英語を外国語として学ぶ生徒にとって、英語ネイティブの作家が英語ネイティブ読者向けに書いた文学作品を読むことは、しばしば挑戦である。この課題を解決し、文学へのアクセスを容易にする一つの方法は、マンガやコミックブックを用いることである。生徒は、ページに書かれた言葉を解読するために、ドローイングによる視覚的な手がかりを利用できる。この論文では、英語教師のためのパターンを紹介し、いくつかの例を提示するとともに、現状の課題を概説して、この新しいパターンを既存のパターンと結びつける。

# Introduction

Sometimes, learning how to read English is challenging for students. Naturally, it can be especially difficult for non-native speakers of the language studying English as a Foreign Language, or [EFL](#). A group of students may start with illustrations aiding comprehension in English books around kindergarten. Others begin reading in elementary or junior high where they may meet EFL textbooks featuring graded language for reading practice that have translations of words nearby on the same page. Depending on the level goals of the student, staying with less difficult texts may be fine. Later as a student moves up the CEFR<sup>1</sup> levels, perhaps they want to use English for work as an adult? It will help to improve reading. Learning to handle these more complex works may help them succeed on exams like the TOEFL®<sup>2</sup>.

They may want to read a poem by Eve Ewing, novel by David Foster Wallace, play by Lorraine Hansberry, and sportswriting by Mina Kimes. Getting mostly just text on the page may be intimidating for them, despite their interest in the material. One hack to encourage students to read more is to make it more by by giving them **comic books**, a "bound collection of comic strips, usually in chronological sequence, typically telling a single story or a series of different stories" ([Encyclopedia Britannica](#)).

Teachers may also provide them with manga, "comics or graphic novels originating from Japan ... conform to a style developed in Japan in the late 19th century, and the form has a long history in earlier Japanese art." ([Wikipedia](#)). For the purposes of this pattern, we will use **comic books** when referring to narrative art (narrative art featuring words and pictures) from the United States of America and the United Kingdom, including graphic novels. We will use **manga** to refer to narrative art from Japan and Korea that has been translate into English, including [Tankōbon](#). This is a hack because the students may have so much fun reading the story, they do not realize they are improving their English test scores.

Teachers can give students either short comic strips or longer stories. The art on the page will give context clues for students to learn the meaning behind the words they see. As they realize they can understand more of the words, students' confidence can grow. Over time with repeated practice, they very well may be able to read other works written for native English audiences

Using **comic books** and/or **manga** to teach EFL (TEFL) is a new pattern. Patterns are often expressed as a solution to a problem in context, although they are not always that simple as Gabriel (n.d.) points

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<sup>1</sup> [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment](#) (CEFR)

<sup>2</sup> [Test of English as a Foreign Language](#) (TOEFL)

out. This paper introduces a pattern working towards this goal he described:

*"The goal of the pattern community is to build a body of literature to support design and development in general. There is less focus on technology than on a culture to document and support sound design and principles. Patterns have been used for domains as diverse as development organization and process, exposition and teaching, and software architecture."*

## Describing the Pattern

We will draw on the [Context, Problem Solution format](#) to describe our new Pedagogical Pattern which is a type that tries:

*"to capture expert knowledge of the practice of teaching and learning. The intent is to capture the essence of the practice in a compact form that can be easily communicated to those who need the knowledge."*

(EduPLoP, n.d.)

### Name

Teach English as a Foreign Language reading with Comic Books and Manga

### Intent

Help EFL students learn reading skills faster by adding in comic books as part of curriculum to complement existing literature and textbooks. Getting this experience with literature written for native speakers may help them later read and comprehend more complex works.

### Context

Reading authentic texts such novels, journalism, plays, and rap lyrics can be hard for EFL students because there may be unfamiliar vocabulary terms. To be precise, this pattern is focused on teaching adult English-language learners ([ELLs](#)) who want to read at a high level of comprehension.

### Problem

These unfamiliar words may discourage students from trying, especially stories that use slang, because they normally get accessible texts via EFL textbooks for reading homework.

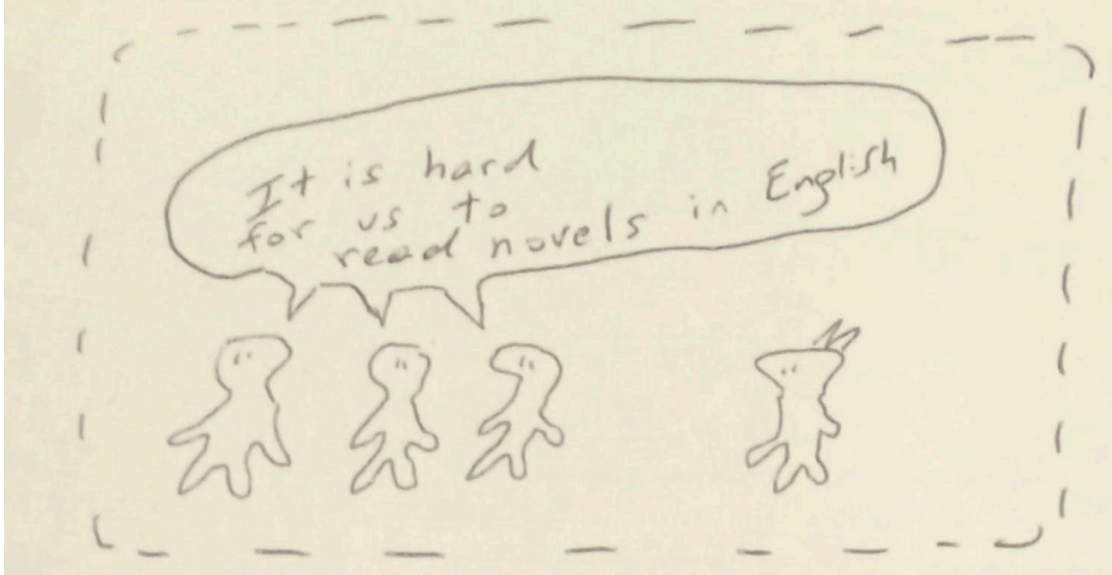


Figure 1

*EFL students at the Language School are frustrated because they want to read a novel by David Foster Wallace, but it is harder than they expected.*

## Forces

- Adult ELLs are intimidated by challenges of comprehending texts written for native speakers
- TEFL faculty have limited options for challenging reading materials beyond textbooks

## Solution

Introduce **comic books** and/or **manga** into your classrooms and curriculum. They embed authentic language within themselves, facilitating understanding alongside visual information and context (which may not be present in reading textbooks or novels, even those written for ELLs).

With visual cues from drawings, students can better understand what is happening in the written words on the page.

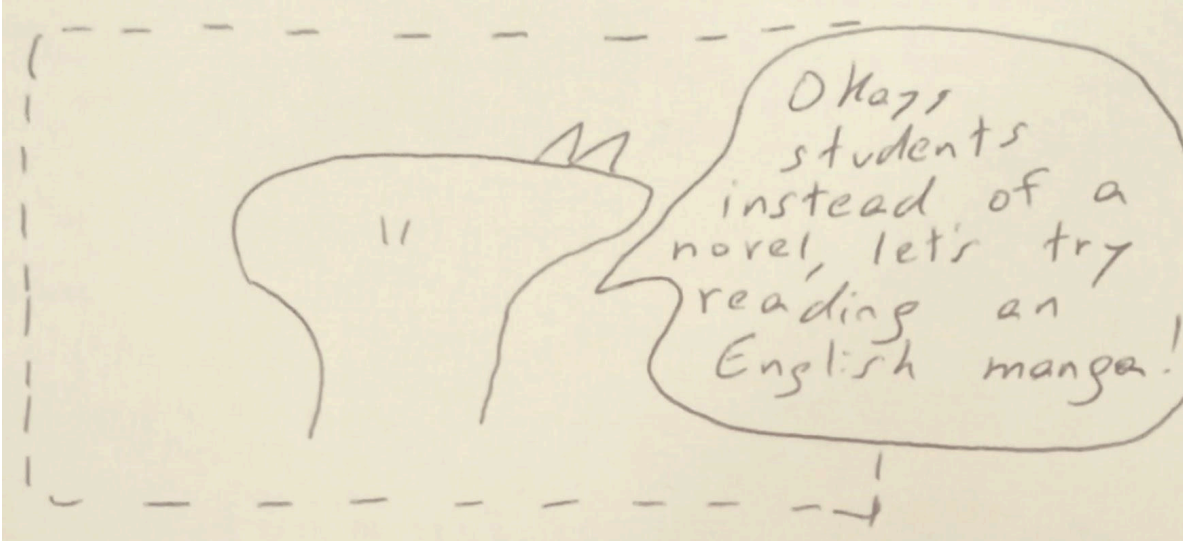


Figure 2

*The classroom's EFL teacher at the Language School suggests using **manga** to practice English reading*

## Consequences

### Drawbacks

- Comic books have less history of classroom usage than do textbooks which may lead to hesitancy from some administrators.
- Not every adult enjoys reading comics and/or manga. This may not be of interest to some students. In that case it will not help them improve their reading skills.
- Some comic books make jokes that are too high level for the English students to understand. Some students may find this lack of understanding to be discouraging. Instead of comic books being helpful for students, this may actually make them dislike learning even more.

### Costs

- Some comic books cost money and the teacher may not have funds from their school to cover the costs.
- Depending on budget and level, this can range from 1 to 3 pane comic strips (e.g. boondocks, peanuts) up to graphic novels.
- If the school does not provide a printer, the teachers may be unable to provide paper copies of the comics.
- If the students or school does not have access to smart phones, laptops, and/or internet it will eliminate digital comics and Internet Archive resources as options.

- Teachers just may not realize they can get English comics online and/or for free in local newspapers if offered by an accessible library.

## Student Feedback

When considering how to teach it is very important to also ask students how they feel about an approach. One adult learner named Kaito Shiota, a member of Iba Lab at Keio University in Japan used manga:

*"I had personally been learning English through reading English manga, and I thought incorporating this into the curriculum was a modern and casual approach that was very good.*

*I would like to share with you my approach to reading English versions of manga. Initially, I start by reading the Japanese version of the manga to get an overall understanding of the content. Then, I proceed to read the English version to grasp the phrases and other language nuances.*

*The reason I began reading English manga was motivated by my desire to read the latest chapters.*

*As I encountered expressions unfamiliar to me, I would research them and gradually progress through the manga. Specifically, when reading content in English manga that I haven't encountered in the Japanese version, I make it a point to read through the English sentences and use tools like Google Translate to understand parts that are unclear to me.*

*Here are some manga sites I frequently use ... Korean Manga Site: <https://page.kakao.com>*

*English manga site: <https://tapas.io>*

*Japanese manga site: <https://piccoma.com/web/>*

*Kodansha's US site: <https://kodansha.us> (Japanese Publisher's US Site)"*

## Implementing the Pattern

Teachers should procure comic books or manga to share with their class. At first, we recommend going for those that have simple jokes or morals. You can go to the school or local library to see what they have available. There are also places online that have free comic books. If you have funds available for class literature, you can check out a local book or comic book store. You can also find lists online (Ray, 2023).

Review the copyright laws in your own country if you are making copies of a comic you find. Ensure you respect the rights of the copyright holders. Also review the rules at your own school about leveraging outside resources. If you are able to find a copyright licensed resource, that will likely make it easier for other teachers to follow your example and use that comic in their own class.

Initially, go through one of the comics together as a class. Either give each student their own paper copy or a way for them to read via school computing devices (tablets/laptops) or project the comic onto the big screen. If they have their own mobile phones, those can also be used. This scaffolding of group reading first will build confidence for the students to read on their own later.

Ask the students to read the next comic in pairs with a partner. Request that they also discuss the comic with their partner in English. This provides another benefit of getting them to practice producing spoken English.

Give the students a comic to read for homework. Prepare some questions for them to answer to check their comprehension. Make at least one of the questions require them to write multiple sentences to answer. This provides another benefit of getting them to practice producing written English. Choose three to five challenging words from the story and ask students to make new sentences with them.

Talking about words from the stories allows teachers the chance to also give instruction in producing spoken English. Perhaps a manga has the word "comb". The instructor may explain how to pronounce it compared to "tomb" and "bomb", which all end with the same three letters. During this teaching moment, the instructor can clarify how the sound of the o is different for each word, which is not intuitive.

As we mentioned, teachers should take care not to confuse students with material for which they are not yet ready. After some easier texts have been completed; however, one could also turn this around to make teachable moments. For example, pick a joke which would go over the students' heads and base a lesson on it. If the teacher explains the linguistic principle behind a joke, the student might feel a sense of accomplishment at figuring it out and laughing at the punch line. Subsequently, this humor could serve as a memory aid for learning and remembering that principle.

If teachers do not have budget, the next question is if their school has an internet connection? If yes, comics may be found for free online. If their students have internet at-home or via computers in class, they could send them links to the comics. If the classroom has internet and a projector, Teachers could share the comics to the whole class together.

Another approach is teachers could write the publisher of a given comic and ask for donated copies to use in class or do a fundraiser to cover the costs (e.g., [DonorsChoose](https://www.donorschoose.org/)). They can check if local free newspapers have comics or try to make their own manga.

However they secure their comics, teachers should be careful to pick stories that are appropriate for the level of the students in their classes. One example that worked for intermediate level adult students was the "[Fantom of the Fair](#)".

Asking simple comprehension questions such as "Do you trust the Fantom?" and "Why?" can help [Danoff, 2013a]



Figure 3  
Page from *The Fantom of the Fair* comic book issue.  
Image via Digital Comics Museum. Public Domain.



## Examples

### Example One: In-Person Classroom

In a class for adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at a vocational English school, students were given comic books from the [Digital Comics Museum](#). One of the authors printed out copies that were read and discussed them during class [6]. At times this led to laughter and a pleasant break from the part of class devoted to textbook learning.

An adult student from that school shared a memory:

*"I do remember that you used comic books to teach us and it was helpful teaching materials! I think it was good way to learn vocabulary in the context. When we learn vocabulary at first, we just memorize the meaning so it is difficult to use in real context. So I think it was good to learn how can we use vocabulary while reading comic stories."*

- Miso Kim, English as a Foreign Language Student from Korea

### Example Two: Tutoring Online

While tutoring an adult EFL student online, an author found comics from free newspapers and magazines such as "[Linework](#)" from [NewCity](#), a free artistic publication in Chicago. These were chosen because they were free and the student lived in Chicago so it gave a sense of local art. Also the instructor hoped it would encourage the student to explore more of the publication. After reading that specific comic, this was the homework prompt (Danoff 2013b):

*Write 5 sentences with words from the October 30th, 2014 Newcity "Linework" comic:*

- \*\* bleak, adj. or n.*
- \*\* journal, n. or v.*
- \*\* handbook, n.*
- \*\* baby face, compound n.*
- \*\* amid, preposition*

### Example Three: Narrative Art for Other Subjects

As a general example of the idea of using manga to aid learning, there are now books, such as: "[To Teach: The Journey, in Comics](#)". Another example is the organization [Reading With Pictures](#) that "empowers teachers, librarians, parents, creators, retailers, and

publishers to engage all learners through the sequential arts. We foster the joy of reading and lifelong multi-literacy through the comic arts at all levels of education.” They share research including where a teacher used comic books to [meet Common Core standards](#).

## Example Four: A Pattern Story

Scene 1 - A EFL student at the Language School is reading a comic book in their own language instead of reading a textbook.

scene 2 - Another ELL at the Language School is with friends after class and their faces look sad as they talk about how hard it is to understand the boring English textbook.

Scene 3 - The next week in English class their teacher hands out English comic books from the Uk for the students to read for homework.

Scene 4 - After school a student improved their English reading skills by doing homework.

Scene 5 - The next morning the students are smiling slightly as they talk about how homework last night was less boring.

## Example five: A Pattern Manga

This remix of the story into a manga was inspired by “Pattern Manga: Attractively Expressing Patterns of a Pattern Language in Manga Style” from PLoP 2023. Each scene has a different style, but the ELLs are studying at the Language School and the faculty are all from the TEFL department at that school. Figures 1 and 2 earlier in this paper are at the same academic building.

Scene 1



Figure 4: A EFL student at the Language School is reading a comic book in their own language instead of reading a textbook. Image generated using OpenAI's DALL·E

Scene 2



Figure 5: Other ELLs at the Language School are in the library after class and their faces look sad as they think about how boring the stories are in their English textbook. Image generated using Midjourney

Scene 3



Figure 6: TEFL instructor at the Language School introduces comic books in their classroom. Image generated using OpenAI's DALL·E

Scene 4



Figure 7: After school a student improved their English reading skills by doing homework. Image generated using Midjourney.

## Scene 5

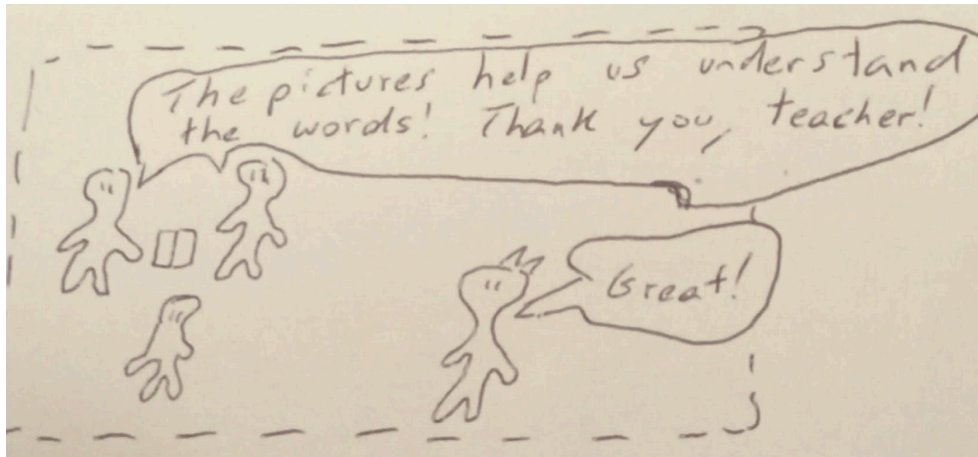


Figure 8: The next morning the happy students are telling the teacher how the pictures made it easier to learn the words.

## Related Patterns

- "[Effectiveness of learning 8 languages using patterns](#)" by Mary Tedeschi (PLoP '17: Proceedings of the 24th Conference on Pattern Languages of Programs)
- "Pattern Manga: Attractively Expressing Patterns of a Pattern Language in Manga Style" by Takashi Iba, Hiroaki Tanaka, Sae Adachi, Mizuki Ota, and Urara Tajima (2023 PLoP Conference Submission)
- "[Language Shower](#)" by Takashi Iba and Mami Sakamoto (PLoP '11: Proceedings of the 18th Conference on Pattern Languages of Programs)

## Conclusion

Members of our writers workshop suggested this could be extended to additional patterns, perhaps even a pattern language in the future. We are hoping to and embrace this daunting task and live up to its high expectations with the strategic patterns described in "Crafting a Pattern Language for Overcoming Setbacks and Carving One's Own Path Drawing Learnings from Shonen Manga" by Mizuki Ota, Mimi Kuwataka, and Takashi Iba (2024).

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