
Treball Fi de Màster

The coming of age story in Smile: using the graphic novel to boost student's critical thinking in the EFL classroom

Irene Galera Puga



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The Coming-of-Age story in *Smile*: Using the Graphic Novel to boost Students' Critical Thinking in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

Graphic novel has gained respect during the last years among parents and educators thus being currently included in more school curricula in the present days. However, this format still prompts considerable criticism even research shows the numerous benefits and potential of including graphic novels in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. This research paper aims to illustrate how graphic novels and more precisely the coming of age story genre enhances students' critical thinking in the 3rd of CSE classroom. *Smile* (2010) by Raina Telgemeier is a coming of age story that portrays the story of a middle school student, who after a dental injury will see her life invaded with surgeries and dentist visits while she also tries to discover the meaning of love and friendship in this journey called life. To carry out the research, a series of activities were designed thus requiring students to make inferences, solve problems, find ambiguities in the texts, and question the information presented to them. A critical thinking rubric was used to evaluate if there had been an improvement in their critical thinking skills. The results demonstrated that students' critical thinking had not only increased with the use of the graphic novel but students also embraced the coming-of-age story genre as a mirror of their own experiences and feelings and as an opportunity for telling their own story.

Keywords: coming-of-age story, critical thinking, EFL classroom, graphic novel, respect

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Resum

La novel·la gràfica s'ha guanyat el respecte durant els darrers anys entre pares i educadors i actualment es troba inclosa en cada vegada més currículums escolars. Tanmateix, aquest format encara genera crítiques considerables, encara que les investigacions demostrin els nombrosos beneficis i el potencial d'incloure novel·les gràfiques a l'assignatura d'Anglès com a Llengua Estrangera (EFL). Aquest treball de recerca pretén il·lustrar com les novel·les gràfiques i, en concret, el gènere de la novel·la d'aprenentatge impulsa el pensament crític dels alumnes de 3er de la ESO . *Smile* (2010) de Raina Telgemeier és una novel·la d'aprenentatge que retrata la història d'una estudiant de secundària que després d'una lesió dental veurà la seva vida envaïda per cirurgies i visites al dentista mentre també intenta descobrir el significat de l'amor i l'amistat en aquest viatge anomenat vida. Per dur a terme la recerca es van dissenyar una sèrie d'activitats que requerien que els alumnes realitzessin inferències, resolguessin problemes, trobessin ambigüitats als textos i qüestionessin la informació que se'ls donava. Finalment es va utilitzar una rúbrica del pensament crític per avaluar si hi havia hagut una millora en les seves habilitats de pensament crític. Els resultats van demostrar que no només el pensament crític dels estudiants va augmentar amb l'ús de la novel·la gràfica, sinó que els estudiants també concebien el gènere de la novel·la d'aprenentatge com un mirall de les seves pròpies experiències i sentiments i com una oportunitat per explicar la seva pròpia història.

Paraules clau: anglès com a llengua estrangera, novel·la d'aprenentatge, novel·la gràfica, pensament crític, respecte

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Resumen

La novela gráfica se ha ganado el respeto durante los últimos años entre padres y educadores y actualmente se encuentra incluida en cada vez más currículums escolares. Sin embargo, este formato todavía genera críticas considerables, aunque las investigaciones demuestren los numerosos beneficios y el potencial de incluir novelas gráficas en la asignatura de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL). Este trabajo de investigación pretende ilustrar cómo las novelas gráficas y, en concreto, el género de la novela de aprendizaje impulsa el pensamiento crítico de los estudiantes de 3ero de la ESO. *Smile* (2010) de Raina Telgemeier es una novela de aprendizaje que retrata la historia de una estudiante de secundaria que después de una lesión dental verá como su vida es invadida por cirugías y visitas al dentista mientras intenta descubrir el significado del amor y la amistad en este viaje llamado vida. Para llevar a cabo la investigación, se diseñó una serie de actividades en las que los estudiantes debían realizar inferencias, resolver problemas, encontrar ambigüedades en los textos y cuestionar la información que se les presentaba y se utilizó una rúbrica de pensamiento crítico para evaluar si había habido una mejora en sus habilidades de pensamiento crítico. Los resultados demostraron que no solo aumentó el pensamiento crítico de los estudiantes con el uso de la novela gráfica, sino que también estos concebían el género de la novela de aprendizaje como un espejo de sus propias experiencias y sentimientos y como una oportunidad para contar su propia historia.

Palabras clave: novela de aprendizaje, novela gráfica, pensamiento crítico, inglés como lengua extranjera, respeto

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1. Introduction

Life skills are essential abilities that facilitate individuals cope with the different challenges and needs that may arise in their everyday. In a visual world such as ours, where “a picture is worth a thousand words” as the proverb says, and we are constantly bombarded by different stimuli, it becomes paradoxical that this continuous interaction with the world leaves us isolated and the amount of information that we receive keep us uninformed. Thus, acquiring a critical way of thinking, therefore, has never been more important than today as we need to learn to question and differentiate all the information that is given to us.

According to the UNICEF’s Conceptual Framework (2022) 21st century skills, also known as “transferable skills” are necessary tools to tailor to the different situations in life. They comprise of the emotional, social and cognitive dimensions “which enable children and adolescents to continue lifelong learning and become active and productive citizens” (p.3). Among these skills, the 4 Cs: communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking are considered to be the most important skills in education.

The English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom provides students the opportunity to develop four skills: listening, speaking, writing and reading. However, one of the conceptions still prevailing in literature, as Cuesta (1995) highlights, is constantly questioning its prestige and relevance as the complexity, which is attributed to literary works, is still seen as a hindrance to readers’ motivation as it requires them to disentangle its meaning. Selecting the most appropriate readings for students becomes a challenging exercise that needs to be in consonance with their interests, needs, background and level in order to provide them with authentic and meaningful works that will help them build relationships between the text and their feelings, experiences and thoughts.

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Presenting students with different literary formats as well as using them in the classroom contributes to the appreciation of other forms of literature which are didactically valid and which can be more significant for the students. Numerous studies (Falter, 2017; Wallace, 2017; Wrobetz, 2018) on using the graphic novel in the EFL classroom have demonstrated that this format of storytelling engages students in authentic writing, increases their motivation, expands their vocabulary, improves their language proficiency and it also promotes critical thinking. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to illustrate how the coming of age graphic novel *Smile* is a suitable work for encouraging critical thinking, by proposing a series of activities that will activate students' higher order thinking skills as well as make them appreciate other formats of literature as creative ways of storytelling.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section introduces Bloom's levels of learning associated with the development of critical thinking, an important approach in literature; characteristics of the graphic novel, which make this format an interesting proposal for students; the transactional theory of reading, where the meaning is given by both the reader and the text; and the coming of age story as a literary genre that students can identify with, in order to illustrate how critical thinking may be boosted through the graphic novel and the coming of age story genre.

2.1 Bloom's Taxonomy: The cognitive domain

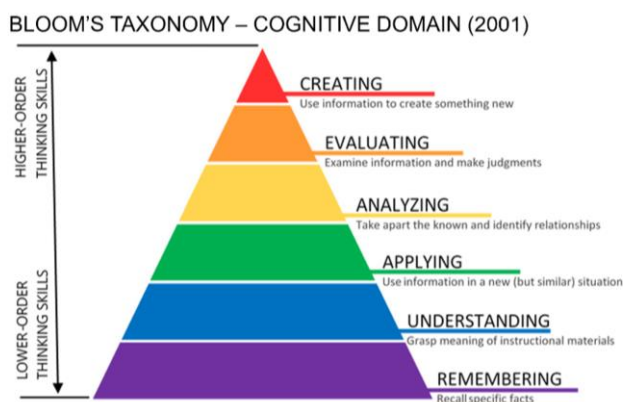
In 1956, the pedagogue and psychologist Benjamin Bloom together with other psychologists designed a classification which established the different levels of learning and thinking. This classification is commonly known as "Bloom's Taxonomy" and comprises of the cognitive, the psychomotor and the affective domain. The cognitive domain is related to the mental and intellectual processes that take place in learning, which are classified into six levels: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

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According to Hoque (2016) "Bloom's taxonomy focused on describing levels of attainments rather than process skills, and did not substantially address the manner in which the learner proceeds from one level to the next" (p.46). The revised version of Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* by Anderson & Krathwohl (2001), however, incorporates new characteristics such as definitions and examples and its six levels (originally written as nouns but replaced by verbs): remember, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate and create which "can be very useful to educators as they try to construct optimal learning experiences" (Hoque, 2016, p.46).

Figure 1

Revised Bloom's Taxonomy by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001)



Note. Taxonomy extracted from the webpage of the University of Florida, whose levels are listed from Lower to Higher Order Thinking Skills.

Remembering, understanding and applying, all of them deemed as lower-order thinking skills, need to be achieved in order to acquire higher-order thinking skills. Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), on the contrary, entangle more complex cognitive processes which require analyzing, evaluating and creating. By examining the information, making inferences, finding evidences to support arguments or making judgments based on criteria, a higher level of thinking, also called critical thinking, is achieved.

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Project Based Learning, Service Learning or the Socratic Seminar are some of the methodologies that according to the Inter-American Teacher Education Network (2015) promote critical thinking.

2.1.1 Critical Thinking: A necessary approach for teaching literature

Critical Thinking (CT) has been defined as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action” (Scriven & Paul, 1996, p.1). Research has demonstrated the importance of providing students the tools for developing their own thoughts and being able to solve problems, as well as it remarks the importance of the classroom as a space that provides the teacher “the opportunity to engage students in discussions about the ideas expressed in literary texts” (p.62) as stated by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) (2012). Discussions allow students to express their tastes, interests and ideas and establish relationships and” it forces them to use a more complex set of structures and a more ‘advanced’ range of vocabulary” (p.62). Placing the students into groups or pairs can help them practice making inferences, stating opinions, comparing and analysing different events in order to establish relationships that will help them develop critical thinking skills. (COL, 2012).

There are two ways of introducing critical thinking to the students as Hakes established in her book *When Critical Thinking Met English Literature* (2008). The first one is presenting the idea in a natural way when it is considered appropriate and the second way is introducing critical thinking and “establishing a few key points and then moving on to the texts as illustrations of those points, and as texts to which the critical thinking analysis can be applied” (p.122). DiYanni (2016) notes that some crucial qualities for developing critical thinking are “open-mindedness, honesty, and flexibility; perseverance; reasonableness, diligence, and focus” (p.4) as critical thinkers also may reconsider arguments or ideas by embracing different perspectives and thus “remain open to continued learning”. (p.4).

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Willingham (2007) goes further by providing the reasons which make CT a difficult skill to teach as he underlines that this type of thinking is not employed in every moment or circumstance as it basically depends on "domain knowledge and practice" (p.10). As teachers, we need to be conscious that students interpret and read problems by recalling their "prior knowledge" (p.11), which is the information they already know about a particular subject or topic as "you can't think critically about topics you know little about or solve problems that you don't know well enough to recognize and execute the type of solutions they call for" (p.12). When students face challenges, they appeal to their knowledge or experience in order to solve them; however, if they need to solve a rather different problem they may not know how to do it.

For this reason, Willingham (2007) remarks the importance of being familiar with the deep structure of a problem as a key point to be able to find a solution: "When one is very familiar with a problem's deep-structure, knowledge about how to solve it transfers well. That familiarity can come from long-term, repeated experience with one problem, or with various manifestations of one type of problem (i.e., many problems that have different surface structures, but the same deep structure)" (p.11).

One of the most important aspects of CT is that it does not seem to rely on the amount of training that a person receives, as it is not a predictor of success; however, by providing students with alternative ways of thinking and different situations where they could make use of them might help: "teaching students to think critically probably lies in small part in showing them new ways of thinking, and in large part in enabling them to deploy the right type of thinking at the right time" (p.15). The literature classroom reveals itself as a suitable environment for introducing CT as students need to display higher order thinking skills in order to infer meanings, analyse, interpret, evaluate and contrast different literary texts and formats. (Ouhiba, 2022). By being a reflection of society, literature can also "help the learners to find or create a relation between the literary text and real-life experiences" (2022, p.479).

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2.2 The graphic novel and its characteristics

In 1978, Will Eisner published *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, in which he coined the term “graphic novel” in order to define a series of comic books who were arranged in book format. That work has unanimously been claimed to be the first graphic novel by the experts on the matter. Nevertheless, far from being easily defined but, conceived as “a sequence of images, often (but not always) accompanied by text that tells a story or provides information” (Hansen, 2012, p.57), the term graphic novel still creates confusion as it can refer to both the publication format and this new type of comic for adults.

Considered a worthy successor of the comic book (Baetens & Frey, 2015), the graphic novel defies the latter in length by portraying a story by using a book format, much alike the traditional novel, whereas the comic book undergoes serialisation. Baetens & Frey (2015) state that a distinctive feature in the graphic novel is that the narrator has more presence, both “verbally and visually” (p.10) whereas in the comic book “the story seems to tell itself” (p.10). This physical presentiality also translates to an inclination for realism as graphic novels “are not necessarily restricted to fiction” (p.12). Graphic novels bear a resemblance to the classic narrative form, as its images and text exert a similar function as the text itself narrating the story in traditional novels. In both formats, readers encounter text features such as punctuation, tone, literary techniques and devices such as metaphors or alliterations. Moreover, the graphic novel contains the elements (characters, narrator, setting, plot...) and the structure (beginning, middle and end) of the traditional story and presents the same genres (romance, historical, horror, adventures, science fiction...) as traditional novels (Walden, 2018). Due to the success of its format, classic works of literature have also been adapted into graphic novel such as *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury made by Tim Hamilton.

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Graphic novels also share the same elements of content organisation and design as comics as they are composed by **panels**, which are those square or rectangular (they may take other shapes or sizes depending on the goal pursued) visual boundaries in which the elements of the story (setting, plot...) are contained; **gutters**, which is the space left between the panels that readers need to connect and sometimes organize in order to follow the storyline and **speech balloons**, also known as speech bubbles, which frame the written words (dialogues, conversations) or sound effects of the story, in order to convey a message that allows the reader to follow and understand every panel which composes the story (Walden, 2018).

2.3 The Transactional Theory of Reading

Literature as Exploration (1938) by Louise Rosenblatt is an essential book in literature for understanding the relationship between readers and the text. Rosenblatt's work constitutes a first introduction to the transactional theory of reading that conceives reading as a process that acquires meaning as a result of the transaction between both the text and the reader, which brings his or her past experience to the text in order "to gain understanding that will make his own experiences more comprehensible" (1938, p.8). The preference for characters or situations where the reader sees himself or herself reflected seems to obey a need "to attain the satisfactions or the balanced vision, or perhaps merely the unequivocal motives, that we have been unable to attain in our own lives" (1938, p.46). At the same time that we enjoy seeing ourselves portrayed in works, literature constitutes a way of escaping the monotonous routines or the endless demands that dominate our lives as it provides us with "the experience of profound and varied emotions, the contact with rich and subtle personalities, the understanding of the wide range of human activity and human problems" (1938, p.48). This values seem to be aligned to the demands, needs and emotions of the readers and even sometimes with their aspirations and "the possibility of compensating for our own lacks or failures through identification with a character who possesses qualities other than our own of who makes fuller use of capacities similar to our own" (1938, p.49).

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Being able to understand or sympathise with the characters of a literary text also reflects on the diversity of personalities and experiences within human nature condition as it "may be one of the things that makes it possible for us to seek through literature an enlargement of our experience" (1938, p.49). As teachers, by wisely selecting narrative works which are related to "the student's/past experience and present emotional level" (Rosenblatt, 1938, p.51) we can help activate their background knowledge and forge emotional bonds with the text.

2.4 The coming-of-age story genre

As human beings, we are in constant evolution throughout our lives by accumulating experiences. It is not then surprising that growing up is one of the most recurrent and popular themes explored in novels such as *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J.D. Salinger or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) by James Joyce. The coming-of-age story is a literary genre that explores the transition or growth of the protagonist from childhood or youth into adulthood, which "invites readers to reflect upon themselves and upon their relationship to the world" (Boughton, 2008, p.1) and guides them through the process of becoming adults and interacting with a world that is new to them. Moreover, coming of age stories transcend cultures and periods in history: "while individual characteristics such as race, gender, ethnicity or family background will influence one's story, certain aspects of growing up are universal" (Boughton, 2008, p.1).

Central themes such as love, family and friendship are common motifs that can be "quite similar in any culture" (Garrison, 2020, p.11) as well as other coming-of-age stories may offer readers a different perspective on the theme. An interesting fact about the coming-of-age story is that the characters or the protagonist do not see themselves as undergoing a transformation; however, the reader may perceive their physical, emotional or intellectual changes and "even see something in the fictional world that he is blind to in his own life" (Boughton, 2008, p.1).

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Figure 2

Depiction of how growing up is portrayed in Smile



Note. This excerpt has been extracted from p.177 and is one of the many examples that can be found of growing up while navigating through the pages of *Smile*. As comically portrayed in the panel, Raina's perspective on growing up varies slightly from her mother's.

Gender and sexuality are themes highly associated with adolescence, where the search and struggle for one's own identity becomes a journey of discovery full of experiences, some of them constituting powerful life lessons, where the protagonist explores his or her sexuality in order to discover more about themselves, as it is portrayed *Blue is the warmest colour* (2013) by Julie Maroh. Garrison (2020) declares that "novels for young adults offer a more realistic portrayal of adolescence, illustrating the harsh social realities and complexities of the journey into adulthood and giving developing readers some solace and commiseration in the experience" (p.10). Coming of age stories can be particularly meaningful for readers in the sense of helping them reflect on themselves and grow (Boughton, 2008).

2.4.1 *Smile* as a coming of age story to enhance critical thinking

Smile (2010) by Raina Telgemeier is a biographical memoir that narrates the author's life from sixth grade to high school. The story revolves around Raina, who after an unfortunate accident is going to experience a real odyssey with her teeth, for which she will need more dental work and surgeries than she had initially expected. From the beginning, the narrative presents itself as the life story of a typical American teenager who feels out of place as her body, skin and teeth are

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suddenly changing while she only wants to be “normal” (Jaffe, 2013). The first pages of the novel are quite revealing: Raina visits the dentist, where she is told that she will need braces as she has an overbite; later that day, she reunites with her Girl Scout troop and in a race with her friends, she falls on her face breaking two front teeth. Her parents immediately take her to the dentist who tries to solve the situation; however, it will become eventually worse as Raina will need some surgery and braces, a process that readers are invited to throughout the novel thus experiencing the same discomfort and pain as Raina.

Nevertheless, dental surgeries are not the only events that take place in the story as Raina finds herself experiencing a scary earthquake in San Francisco, a crush on a boy of her classroom that plays basketball, teenage parties or arguments with friends... everyday experiences that one would expect of a middle school student. Readers may feel that Raina's experiences are also their own or similar experiences: This is precisely what makes the novel the perfect tool to be used in the classroom. The fact that it is written in the form of personal memoirs, thus approaching the challenges of becoming an adult and offering multiple perspectives on growing up, makes *Smile* a coming of age story per excellence, where experiences such as getting braces mark a turning point in life and where Raina accepts the kind of friendship that she thinks she deserves. Moreover, *Smile* shows its mastery in promoting the development of visual intelligence by presenting students with expressive and colourful characters, who evolve throughout the story and who may revisit their past in the form of flashbacks (sepia tone pages). Ideas, facial expressions conveyed by the images will also demand readers to question the images and the text that are being read or seen in order to help them expand their thinking. Raina's life changes due to many factors or events and she learns a lot of valuable lessons such as “how to gracefully embrace life's twists and be more sensitive to others who are doing the same.” (Jaffe, 2013).

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2.5 Literature Review

The graphic novel has derived into more than the entertaining tool that it was originally conceived to be, acquiring great importance in the field of education. However, despite the amount of research carried out it is still scarcely used in the English classroom. This literature review explores firstly, the previous research carried out regarding the use of graphic novels in the classroom in order to bring to light their benefits and potential as a meaningful and motivating format. Secondly, it also presents and discusses the challenges of incorporating graphics novels in the classroom and finally highlights the benefits of using this format to help students develop critical thinking.

2.5.1 Benefits of using the graphic novel in the EFL classroom

Graphic novels are regarded as a multimodal form of literature as they combine the written language with visual elements. Brenner (2015) claims that graphic novels also constitute a powerful tool for captivating readers into the multiplicity of genres that this format contains. The variety of genres and titles that the graphic novel offers is not always destined to a specific audience, even more graphic works are especially created for young readers. However, nowadays book sales in the publishing industry show that graphic novel consumers extend to all ages.

Both reluctant and advanced readers can leverage from the narrative structure of the graphic novel, as it includes simple or more complex and challenging plots that may attract both types of readers. Even those readers “who are not interested in reading or who, despite being capable of reading prefer gaming or watching media” (Brenner, 2015, p.3) may feel attracted by the pictures that graphic novels contain. Students with special needs may also encounter the benefits of the format as they will “find that the illustrations provide contextual clues to the meaning of the written narrative” (p.3) so they will be more motivated to acquire the new vocabulary (Brenner, 2015). In

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fact, the combination of images and text may engage readers in “a deeper understanding of the story” (Garrison, 2020, p.11), they can also become tools used by the students to analyse other subjects (history, sciences...), other formats (Brenner, 2015) as well as for addressing controversial issues (Scorer et al., 2016) such as the Holocaust, immigration, addiction, bullying or war in a more critical way.

Figure 3

Persepolis (2004) by Marjane Satrapi



Note. The war theme (p.115) is present at Persepolis as the author experienced herself the Iranian Revolution, so this work becomes a strong autobiographical coming-of-age narrative.

The classroom may be also a space where some students experience some insecurities or difficulties when reading. Another benefit of the graphic novel proves to improve students' reading comprehension as the text and images help the students decipher and process the images faster, thus also leading to the decreasing of the “cognitive load” (Falter, 2017, p.145) and the students' affective filter. Furthermore, by giving graphic novels the opportunity to be read and used by the students, their interests and tastes are valued, which helps build connections and relationships between literature and their lives (Falter, 2017).

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2.5.2 Challenges of using the graphic novel in the EFL classroom

Considerable criticism has always been surrounding the graphic novel as some parents and teachers claim that this type of genre does not help readers grow. Graphic novels are accepted as they motivate readers, but parents expect that children “eventually move on to “more quality literature” (Brenner, 2015, p.3) as it still pervades some reluctance towards the format, not deeming it as “real literature” (Brenner, 2015). Even most of the students have been exposed to other forms of literature such as comics, for some students who have never read one, it constitutes an added challenge (Rycroft, 2014) as they need to familiarise themselves with the devices, structures and conventions that the graphic novel uses. Students may also find that the stories are too complex or boring, in case they do not understand its meaning and they may direct their attention to the images in hopes of being distracted by them, not knowing what is happening in the story. One of the most common arguments against the graphic novel is that, it leaves little to imagination as “the free flow of imagination of the reader is blocked because pictures and images are already given” (Saini, 2020, p.1259). Some students who opt for the traditional novel may prefer to customize their own characters, without having to use the ones provided to them visually (Saini, 2020). Finally, the erroneous association of violence and graphic novels which may derive from the comic books tradition becomes an obstacle for educators who are trying to introduce a different and innovative format in the classroom.

2.5.3 Using graphic novels to develop critical thinking

Many authors and researchers (Connors, 2010; Falter, 2017; Jaffe, 2014) have affirmed that using graphic novels helps developing critical thinking, but there is still little research conducted in the classrooms on lesson plans, or methodologies that could be used to enhance this type of thinking. An interesting research conducted in 2017 by Lina Sun on the graphic novel *Persepolis* (2004) related graphic novels and teaching peace and social justice with the promotion of critical thinking, as both peace education and critical thinking question preconceived ideas about the world. Sun (2017) mentions that a first step for teachers to address the novel is contextualising it by providing the students with some key terms, concepts and ideas (revolution, war...) as well as

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historical background information, as it will allow students to build their own ideas on solid foundations and “make them question their own identities and notions of culture, gender, and genre by connecting their lives to the lives of others.” (2017, p.24). In order to promote a critical understanding and reading of the novel, the instructor gave a series of pre-reading (KWL charts, surveys...) during reading (comprehension questions, graphic organisers...) and after reading (speech, debate, multiple choice tests...) strategies to students, which proved to increase their motivation, made them reflect on social issues, fostered empathy for the characters and inquiry-based learning made students question their own experiences and culture and enabled them “to raise questions that have relevance for the present” (Lina, 2017, p.27).

2.6 State of the Art

Latest studies on critical thinking analyse the effectiveness derived from using comics or novels in order to promote critical thinking. A recent study carried out by Van der Sluis (2021) discusses the three formats of visual narrative: manga, comics, and graphic novel as relevant materials for higher education in order to “provoke further thinking” (2021, p.25). By underlining its origins and characteristics, he provides some reasons why these formats could cover topics from disciplines as history or sociology thus encouraging cultural interest. Van der Sluis goes further by providing a list of graphic novels on scientific topics and a list of articles, which range from the earliest to the most recent research, on the use of graphic novels to teach scientific disciplines and their uses in education. Another interesting proposal in the field of critical thinking is the study performed by Hollis (2021), in which by comparing fictional and non-fictional works, she analysed readers’ development of critical thinking. Both forms of narration were equally valued as providing opportunities for thinking critically. Non-fiction was valued for its ability of being direct and question and fiction value was found in its ability to “drive critical evaluations through the subtle and circuitous way it presented ideas, its complication of veracity, as well as giving rich and deep understandings of the real world” (Hollis, 2021, p.1).

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3. Hypothesis and Objectives

At the beginning of the research, I focused my attention in critical thinking as a general process to be promoted in the classroom, until I realised that the content was so vast that it needed to be more precise and illustrative. It was not until I visited a library and saw some teenagers engaged in reading and discussing comics that I realized the higher potential of the visual storytelling narrative to create a powerful debate. Two main research questions that arose were:

How can graphic novels foster critical thinking?

My hypothesis was that graphic novels required students to apply a series of higher-order thinking skills such as making inferences or being able to interpret both the images and the text. That could be promoted by designing some classroom activities, which made the students think and reflect on the content and structure of the graphic novel. I also conceived guidance by the teacher as an important component to provide the students with some orientation.

Does the coming-of-age genre contribute to critical thinking?

I hypothesised that students felt identified with that literary genres where they saw themselves reflected in the form of a character or a situation. As a consequence, students were more prone to develop a critical way of thinking about the characters and situations in the story but also about themselves.

Therefore, the general objective of this thesis was to analyse the use of the graphic novel *Smile*, which belongs to the coming of age literary genre as a tool to enhance students' critical thinking skills in 3rd year of Compulsory Secondary Education students in the EFL classroom. The specific objectives that derived from this general objective were: to evaluate the effect of the graphic novel in fostering the students' critical thinking, to determine if the coming-of-age story is a genre that promotes critical thinking and to engage students in activities that activate their higher-order thinking skills.

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4. Methodology

Context

The context of this research was Centro Escolar San Francisco, in the district of Sant Martí (Barcelona) during my external placement. The school is highly committed to creating a reading culture as every day, from 8 to 9 am, students read a book that they have previously selected or which is part of a given subject. While doing playground monitoring, I observed that students brought different books with them, most of which were graphic novels, so I was surprised by the fact that none of the selected readings for the academic year was a graphic novel. Through casual conversation with secondary teachers, I discovered that none of them considered the graphic novel as a valuable format to be used in the classroom to motivate students despite the considerable evidence that students were motivated by the format. This led me to consider the graphic novel as a motivating reading alternative to be used in the English classroom to address the topics that students were learning and a tool to promote critical thinking. This allowed me to reflect on how important it is for teachers to do a previous research on comics and graphic novels to select the most appropriate works before including them in any teaching plan.

Participants

The research focused on 3rd of CSE students class, which was a relatively homogenous group of 30 students, who had gone to the same school since early childhood education. There was a low percentage of newcomer students from China and Eastern Europe, who had adapted well to the rhythm of the classroom. Moreover, the classroom also counted with five students with special educational needs (SEN) who kept a low profile with it came to participating and engaging in collaborative work; some of them even exhibit behavior problems. One of the aspects that called my attention was the enthusiasm and eagerness to participate that students showed in general: while doing activities, facing challenges, solving classroom problems...The sense of community built in the classroom was quite strong as students had developed healthy relationships based on

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companionship, respect, and communication with both the classmates and the teacher, to whom they addressed when they were seeking for some guidance or personal advice.

The vast majority of the students were bilingual speakers of Catalan and Spanish, except the newcomer students who were gradually learning Catalan as they have mastered Spanish. The general English level in the classroom was a Pre-intermediate English level (CEFR level A2), a level that allows students to have everyday conversations and express their opinion in a simple way as well as understand and talk about basic topics like personal and family information, routines, shopping...; they can read short and simple texts and they start learning past simple and the future *going to* to talk about plans (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2020).

During the research, participants were in their current classroom, where they had been arranged in tables of four in order to promote collaborative learning. I decided not to divide the classroom in groups when we were reading as I considered that reading a graphic novel out loud was an innovative way of reading which required students to be following the story and trying to guess the order of the panels. *Smile* is very easy to read and follow as panels are organized in an intuitive way and the plot is not complex. I selected this graphic novel as it promotes a lot of opportunities for discussion; moreover, most of students are already familiar with the American culture as they watch movies and TV series from the country. However, students may not be familiar with other themes that appear in the book such as dental issues and its corresponding vocabulary, so recalling some of their prior knowledge, could be a good manner to reflect on their experiences: "Although critical thinking needs to be nested in subject matter, when students don't have much subject matter knowledge, introducing a concept by drawing on student experiences can help" (Willingham, 2007, p.18). Two of the students in the classroom, who were wearing braces at that time, shared their experience with the class in order to provide some vocabulary hints.

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Instruments

The topic selected allowed me to use a mixed method research, which combined both quantitative and qualitative data. At first, I considered appropriate to have some numerical data on the amount of students that held a positive view of the graphic novel in order to predict the success that introducing this format could achieve. A first step was creating a poll that would collect quantitative data on the students' perceptions on the graphic novel. For this reason, I used *Supersurvey* an online poll maker, which allows to create polls easily.

The results extracted from the poll are represented in a pie chart in the results section as it provides more visual representation. To determine how graphic novels foster critical thinking and if the coming-of-age genre also contributes in boosting it, I adapted some activities from the book *81 Fresh & Fun Critical-Thinking Activities. Engaging Activities and Reproducibles to Develop Kids' Higher-Level Thinking Skills*, whose content was designed by Laura Rozakis and edited by Scholastic Professional Books. As the book contained a lot of ideas, I also invented some activities. I decided to introduce pre-reading activities as according to Basol and Sarigul (2012) "are appropriate techniques both to teach the concept of graphic novels and to develop schemata about the text that would be read." (p.1624).

Throughout the classroom sessions, I used a qualitative research method as I choose observing how students performed in the activities, who were created to measure the enhancement of students' critical thinking skills. The assessment tool that I used was a rubric that I adapted from Universitat de Valencia (2016) in which I added my own criteria as well as more concrete and numerical indicators.

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Each value means:

0- 4.9	Below average
5- 6.9	In process
7- 8.9	Good
9- 10	Outstanding

Four teachers validated the critical thinking skills rubric that I used to assess the students throughout the pre-reading, during reading and post-reading activities. I created two activities for each stage: pre-reading, during reading and post reading. The first activity before reading wanted to introduce students the author of the graphic novel and promote some discussion on experiences in pairs. This activity was also done with the whole classroom. In the second activity called **Guess who**, students had two different pages extracted from the novel in order to make inferences and detect if there was any contradiction or ambiguity between the text and the image. They also had some questions which guided them and some lines to write their assumptions. In these first activities the criteria that was evaluated according to the rubric I created was “Possesses an enquiring mind that wonders why and how”.

The first activity done by the students when reading the novel was **Getting to know the elements of the graphic novel**, in which they had to compare different pages as well as saying the parts of the graphic novel and do a little research on them. The second activity called **Is it a fact or an opinion?** wanted to measure students’ ability to distinguish from facts and opinions and find reliable information that supported their arguments. After they finished reading the novel, students did an activity called **Mirror, mirror** where they needed to complete some sentences about Raina, which evaluated the criteria “Draws conclusions from the information that he/she extracts from the text and the image” and then complete the same sentences about themselves, which evaluated the criteria “Relates the context and content of the text with his/her own reality or experiences”. In the final activity, called **Changing society** students needed to reflect on a big problem they had found in the novel and propose solutions from the education, the technological and the human perspective. This activity evaluated the criteria “Relates the context and content of the text with his/her own reality or experiences”.

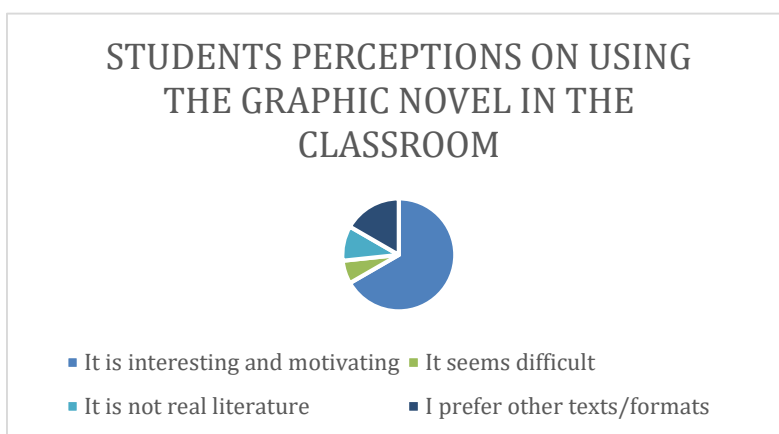
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5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the main contributions and results extracted from the students by using the coming-of-age graphic novel *Smile* by Raina Telgemeier. Through students' observation and some preliminary conversations with teachers I decided to create an initial poll in order to become acquainted with students' perception on using the graphic novel in the classroom. In the classroom there were 30 students, 20 of which (representing a 67% of the total) considered that the graphic novel was interesting and motivated them; 2 students (7% of the total) found the format quite difficult; 3 students (10% of the total) did not consider graphic novel as literature, as they were used to read the format outside the classroom, so they associated it more with entertainment. Lastly, 5 students (17% of the total) showed their preference for other types of texts and formats as they found that the genres were more varied.

Figure 4

Pie chart



Note. This figure was created with Microsoft Word

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Poll results shed light on the potential that graphic novel could have within the classroom as an innovative and interesting format for learning. Furthermore, results extracted from the students' performance in the activities revealed two major findings. The first finding from the research revealed that students' embraced the coming-of-age genre as a beloved genre as they saw themselves reflected to a greater extent in the story. Through **Mirror, Mirror** activity, students learned more about themselves that they had initially expected by also learning more about Raina. As the graphic novel was based in an autobiographical memoir, students perceived the character as the embodiment of an existing person, living in the real world, with real experiences.

The second finding showed that there is a predominant number of students whose critical thinking skills are outstanding as they have the ability to solve problems by drawing from their own experiences or even their own intuition. Activities where students had to make inferences by looking at the pictures, promoted really interesting and creative answers and situations. Students in the classroom enjoyed solving problems and guessing, as for some of them constitute scenarios for practising those abilities that they know that will be important in the future.

6. Conclusions

6.1 General Conclusions

The use of the graphic novel has proven to deliver both benefits and challenges for the students within a classroom setting. Moreover, it is also a motivating and innovative format that helps boost students' critical thinking by incorporating interesting and funny plots as well as colourful characters. Although there is still some reluctance towards using this format in the educational environment, selecting a significant genre such as the coming-of-age story or theme such as friendship or self-confidence as portrayed in *Smile* (2010) by Raina Telgemeier will not only provide students with a valuable reading that will resonate in the students' minds, but it will also encourage them to apply higher-order thinking skills in order to disentangle the meanings and the visual surprises which are hidden between its pages.

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6.2 Limitations of the Study

A significant amount of research has been carried out about comics in different classroom settings. However, research on implementing graphic novels in the classroom is still scarce. Even databases are being constantly updated with new researches, most of them are still related to the comic book or the novel so I was not able to find a recent investigation on my topic. The research also had a limited number of participants as the school had only one line per educational level. I believe that a larger sample across different classes or levels could have been interesting, as I could have created a control group and an experimental group, where the activities and the methodology implemented have been varied.

6.3 Future Lines of Research

Further research may focus on the exploration of how different genres in the graphic novel contribute to critical thinking and its use in education as performed by Van der Sluis (2021). Other abilities such as visual literacy and visual intelligence could be explored by using this graphic novel or other work which are considered visually challenging and enriching. A further study that could derive from this could be performed with participants at different educational levels and with different genres such as science fiction, adventures or romance. A research on the different methods (Project-Based Learning, Communicative language teaching (CLT...)) to be used for implementing critical thinking in the classroom could provide teachers some guidance for promoting different ways of thinking and solving problems in the classroom.

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8. Annexes

Annex I. Proposed Activities

Pre-reading activities

Do this survey: <https://take.supersurvey.com/Q4WHIFM3B>

Activity 1. Presenting Raina Telgemeier, author of the graphic novel *Smile*

Watch the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tZYFjBbmNA>

What do you think does the phrase “Everyone has a story to tell” mean? Discuss with your partner

Activity 2. Guess who?

Who is the girl? Where is she? Why? Look at the pictures and compare them



Here you can write your ideas

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During activities

Activity 1. Getting to know the elements of the graphic novel

These pages have been extracted from pages 93-101. What is the difference between them? Why? Read that part again.



What are the elements of a graphic novel? Do you know them in your language?

Do a little research. Name these parts and explain each of them



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Activity 2. Is it a Fact or an Opinion?

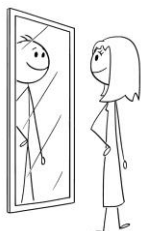
Read the following statements on *Smile* and decide if they are **facts** or **opinions**. In case the facts are **false**, rewrite them.

You need to support your arguments with evidences from the text or from other sources.

- a) Raina suffers an accident and needs multiple dental surgeries.
- b) The novel portrays real events such as the San Francisco earthquake.
- c) The story is quick to read as it contains a lot of pictures and short dialogues.
- d) The protagonist of the novel does not have very good friends.
- e) *Smile* addresses some controversial topics such as bullying or racism.
- f) Raina Telgemeier was born in the city of Chicago in 1979.
- g) *Smile* is a comic book written in 2010 by Raina Telgemeier, a British writer.
- h) Most of the characters in *Smile* are kind, friendly and funny.
- i) *Smile* is an autobiographic work, where the author recounts her memories and events from childhood.

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Post reading activities



Activity 1. Mirror, mirror

After having read *Smile* you know more about Raina. Complete these sentences about her

About Raina

1. Raina is very good at _____
2. Raina has an argument with her friends when _____
3. Raina's family is composed of _____
4. When she grows up, Raina wants to be _____
5. Raina is very scared when _____
6. Raina feels sad when _____
7. When she was little Raina, _____
8. Raina feels insecure about _____
9. Raina's personality is _____
10. One of the worst moments in Raina's life is _____

Now complete these sentences with information about you

About Me

1. I am very good at _____
2. I have an argument with my friends when _____
3. My family is composed of _____
4. When I grow up, I want to be _____
5. I am very scared when _____
6. I feel sad when _____
7. When I was little, I _____
8. I feel insecure about _____
9. My personality is _____
10. One of the worst moments in my life is/ was _____

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Activity 2. Changing society



There are many topics appearing in the novel. Some of them include *natural disasters, bullying and self-confidence*

What do you think is the **biggest problem** in *Smile*? How would you solve it?

The biggest problem in the book is

How would you use **education, technology and people** to solve the problem?

Education:

Technology:

People:

CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS RUBRIC

CRITERIA	DESCRIPTORS			
	Below average (0-4.9)	In process (5-6.9)	Good (7-8.9)	Outstanding (9-10)
Possesses an enquiring mind that wonders why and how.	Never questions reality and assumes that any information given is true without examining it nor making judgements.	Questions some situations from his/her reality but is not able to make judgments on his/her own.	Wonders why and how by investigating on its own but he/she is still a bit influenced when making his/her own judgments.	Possesses a strong sense of enquiry which leads him/her to investigate and reflect on reality thus delivering thoughtful judgments.
Detects contradictions or inconsistencies between the text and the image.	Does not detect any inconsistencies or ambiguity between the text and the image.	Begins to detect inconsistencies or ambiguity between the text and the image with the help of the teacher or the classmates.	Detects some inconsistencies or ambiguity between the text and the image autonomously.	Detects inconsistencies and ambiguities between the text and the image easily and in an autonomous way.
Draws conclusions from the information that he/she extracts from the text and the image.	Fails to draw conclusions or draws conclusions which contradict the information from the text and the image.	Begins to draw conclusions from the information extracted from the text and the image but needs help.	Draws some conclusions from the information extracted the text and the image autonomously.	Draws conclusions from the information extracted from the text and the image easily, in an autonomous way and discusses conclusions.
Relates the context and content of the text with his/her own reality or experiences.	Does not identify or relate his/her own experiences or reality with the context and content of the text.	Begins to relate his/her own experiences or reality with the context and content of the text.	Relates some of his/her own experiences or reality with the context and content of the text.	Relates his/her own experiences or reality easily with the context and content of the text.

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Annex III. Validation form sample

Validez del contenido de un instrumento

D/Dña. Maria Pujol Valls, con DNI 36571511Q, especialista en literatura infantil y juvenil, valida / no valida (*marcar con una x*), el cuestionario sobre Critical Thinking Skills, creado por Irene Galera Puga, con DNI: 43570047C.

Para lo cual firma el presente documento en Sant Cugat del Vallès, 22 de Junio del 2022.

MARIA PUJOL
VALLS -
DNI
36571511
Q

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Firma del experto.