Comics as Additional Lesson Material in the Vietnamese GFL Classroom

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Abstract

In the context of L2 language teaching, minor changes to teaching material can have significantly positive effects on student participation and on-task attention (cf. Masuhara 2022, Tomlinson & Masuhara 2018, Timmis 2013, Ur 2015). Using comics as learning material has been found to have positive effects on students' participation and learning outcomes (i.e. Dudzińska, 2013; Öz & Efecioglu 2015; Hoang, 2021; Engelns & Preußer, 2022). This paper presents data and discussion on the implementability and effects of specifically designed comics as additional learning material for a German as a foreign language (GFL) university course in Vietnam. In the past, students' lack of prior L2 cultural knowledge on advanced level had made interactive classroom activities difficult resulting in teacher-centred instead of student-centred teaching. This motivated the researchers to adapt the lesson material while adhering to curriculum and textbook. The specially designed comics were implemented in two B2 level courses with 51 students in face-to-face and online lessons between April and July 2024. In a mixed-method approach, notes of naturalistic classroom observation, written student productions and follow-up student questionnaires were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. The focus was on effects on student motivation, specific cultural knowledge and vocabulary learning. The paper further discusses the choice of medium and its added value in relation to practicability, effort and feasibility in the Vietnamese university classroom and GFL textbook syllable. The comics showed to be an effective medium to motivate and provide students with sufficient cultural knowledge and vocabulary to actively and independently participate in class. To foster the learning of specific learning outcomes, comics need to be integrated into a lesson plan with other exercises and teacher input. While teachers wish to have more flexibility to include additional materials, support from institutional side is needed to bring more versatile and current learning material to the classroom.

Keywords: Comics, German as foreign language, Vietnamese students, cultural knowledge, additional lesson material, GFL textbook

Introduction

A motivating introduction to a new learning topic can increase learners' interest in the subject and their motivation to actively engage in classroom activities. Orally collecting first ideas about a new topic can grant the teacher insight to students' prior knowledge and offers the students valuable talking time. Yet, if L2 learners are either hesitant to speak due to a feeling

of foreign language anxiety (FLA)1, are not motivated to participate, or do not have applicable prior knowledge, an interactive introduction to a new topic can be difficult to impossible to realise. The presented paper arises from this experience, made in German as a foreign language (GFL) classrooms at University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH) in Ho Chi Minh City. USSH runs one of Vietnam's major German language university programmes. In the past, students showed a lack of prior cultural knowledge about certain mandatory topics of the textbook syllabus, e.g. historical events. Visual prompts provided by the textbook did not elicit associations or the motivation to enquire and engage to build on conversation and further learning. This left the lecturer with the sole option of introducing the topics through teacher-centred teaching. Neither could the desired extent of student talking time and class discourse engagement be met nor a spark in students' motivation to learn more about the topic be noticed. The differences between the Vietnamese learners' cultural-historic background and that of the German target language can be significant. Specific cultural knowledge about German speaking countries that is needed to understand even simple prompts cannot be assumed. To bridge the gap between textbook and students' current knowledge, the authors decided to adapt the lesson material (cf. Masuhara 2022, Tomlinson & Masuhara 2018). To adhere to the curriculum and the textbook syllabus, the adaptation form of choice was adding material that would be specifically designed. Top-down material decisions in educational institutions and the educators' assignment to follow prescribed curricula with selected materials is an important factor in teachers' consideration on whether to adapt material or not (Masuhara 2022, Tomlinson & Masuhara 2018). Considering the challenge, formulated by Timmis (2022: 31), of developing speaking learning material that provides "practice in a range of contexts and genres", we decided to implement comics2. Using comics in the foreign language classroom has been found to have several positive effects on learners and educators. They have a motivating effect on students to engage in creative writing and speaking classroom activities (cf. Schwürer, 2005; Dudzińska, 2013; Calafato & Gudim, 2021; Hoang, 2021; Engelns & Preußer, 2022) and showed to take a supportive function in vocabulary development (Öz & Efecioglu 2015). Comics provide creative storytelling characteristics as visualization, panel-to-panel narration, and combination of image and language etc. (McCloud, 2001; Packard et al., 2019; Kesper-Biermann, 2022). In combination with the option to turn or scroll back the medium offers unique possibilities to embed and provide linguistic and culture-specific content.

This paper is the first to present a mixed method-based analysis of the implementability and effects of specifically designed comics as additional lesson material for advanced topics in the Vietnamese university GFL classroom.3 Three purposes of using comics in the L2 classroom are tested. Are comics suitable to 1) motivate students to actively participate in spoken communicative practices on advanced topics,

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1 The hesitation to speak is a phenomenon connected to foreign language anxiety (FLA) and has been found with learners of different cultural backgrounds and different target languages. Studies on FLA of learners of German language have been conducted with Greek (Chatzidimou & Sidopoulo, 2023), Turkish (Oflaz, 2019), Jordan (Rabadi & Rabadi, 2022) students. The majority of studies on students from South East Asian and Asian cultural backgrounds focus on EFL, e.g. Dinh & Thi (2022) in Vietnam; Amat Suparia et al. (2022) in Malaysia; Liu & Huang (2011) in China; Kondo (2005) in Japan; or on non-European languages, see Djafri & Wimbarti (2018) on Japanese, Korean, and Arabic in Indonesia. Hoai (2023) presents oral language mediation practices to promote speaking skills of Vietnamese GFL learners at the Faculty of German Language and Culture, VNU University of Languages and International Studies.

2 The term comic summarises a broad and heterogeneous spectrum of image-text combinations. An overview of the definition of termini can be found in Dudzińska (2013), for terminology and forms see McCloud (2001) and Packard et al. (2019), for terminology and history see Schikowski (2018), for history and (pedagogical) reception see Kesper-Biermann (2022). Differences between comics and manga are not discussed in this article.

3 While studies on the usage of pre-existing comics have been conducted with GFL learners with European cultural background (e.g. Dudzińska, 2013), no study with students in Vietnam exists. These students have no first-hand experience of the target language's culture that differs significantly from their own. Up to date, there has been one study conducted on the use of comics in the EFL classroom in Vietnam (cf. Hoang 2021). It focuses on motivating the students to speak in everyday conversations on introductory level, no deeper cultural knowledge or advanced language skills are addressed.

2) impart cultural knowledge connected to the target language, and 3) embed new vocabulary including B2-level grammatical structures to use in language activities?

To do that, two topics of the GFL textbook Aspekte neu B24 syllable were identified that had been experienced to be difficult for former student cohorts. For the cohort of 2024, one-page comics were designed as additional classroom material. Between April and July 2024, one of the authors implemented the comics in class, documented her observations and collected student products (presentation slides, comics, video clips) for analysis. To expand the data on the students' perspective and their perceived learning experience, an online questionnaire was conducted. The paper also places the question of implementability in a Vietnamese L2 classroom in a wider context. Data on Vietnamese GFL teachers' perspectives on the use of textbooks and additional learning material was collected for analysis through another online questionnaire.

The paper further discusses the choice of medium and its added value in relation to practicability, effort and feasibility in the Vietnamese university classroom and GFL textbook syllable.

Comics in the (German as a) Foreign Language Classroom

The comic genre serves as a catch-all for picture stories that tell a story via at least two consecutive individual pictures, so-called panels. By telling stories through a series of individual images temporality and complex narrative threads can be developed (cf. McCloud 2001; Abel & Klein, 2016)5. The visual design gives insight to cultural context and supports the creation and understanding of atmosphere and emotions (cf. Eisenmann, 2022; Corti & Neuhofer 2022). Situations are presented through the perspectives of the characters and thus give the reader the opportunity to see a situation through different views (cf. Volksmann 2015). This can support reflection of content and present topics with a broader perspective. Successful comprehension of comics is a complex "process of perceiving, processing and understanding" Grünewald (2000, 37). Its success depends on a comic's narration through design (e.g. usage of panel-to-panel transitions, gutters, image-text coherence) that allows the reader to follow its storyline. On the recipients' side, it depends on their multiliteracies skills6, digital competence for online/digital comics, world and culture-specific knowledge that are needed to decode the panels' (pictorial) language and symbols7. The later knowledge cannot be generally assumed for foreign language learners. When using comics in the L2 classroom, details of their design and reception must be considered for a positive learning experience and outcome.

Using comics for receptive and productive language exercises has been found to have generally motivating effects on learner groups of different cultural backgrounds and different target languages, e.g. Dudzińska (2013) for Polish students of GFL, Yalçın (2020) for Turkish students of GFL, and Hoang (2021) for Vietnamese students of introductory level EFL. Dudzińska (2013, 291) highlights, "the special potential of comics for learning a foreign

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4 The *Aspekte neu* textbooks are well established in GFL classrooms for (young) adult learners in Germany and internationally. Ottley (2016) shows how textbook adaption of Western global textbooks may become necessary when the books fail the diversity of specific interests and prior knowledge of their heterogenic international student learning groups.

5 It is the complex storytelling that differentiates comics from cartoons. While comics can tell a (complex) story, explain a process and portrait figures' feelings through different perspectives, cartoons are single drawings that show people's feelings in a snapshot (cf. David Blumstein, 2021).

6 Reading and learning with comics takes and promotes multiliteracies skills such as visual competence, understanding of meaning making by the interplay of two different media (here: text and image), or non-linear texts in different semiotic systems (cf. Volkmann, 2015, 237-238; Eisenmann 2022, 61). Multiliteracies training is central when working with comics in learn settings (cf. Eisenmann 2022, 57). The term multiliteracies has been coined in 1996 by the research group „New London Group", for further reading see Cazden et al. (1996).

7 See Corti & Neuhofer (2022) for an analysis of comics in French as foreign language textbooks regarding types of knowledge (linguistic, cultural, world knowledge) that are required to understand the comics.

language (...) could be determined by the interplay of verbal and pictorial components."[8] Abel & Klein (2016, 102-104) distinguish three kinds of visual elements that can be used to design a panel. Figurative elements are a comic's figures with their facial expressions, gestures, and actions through which their emotions are conveyed. Symbolic elements include speech bubbles, thought bubbles, onomatopoeias and narrative boxes, so-called captions. Form and shape of the speech bubbles indicate the quality of voice, e.g. shouting, calm etc. Textual elements are the actual written texts, the linguistic elements in the symbolic elements. (cf. Abel & Klein, 2016, 102-104). Text in captions adds the, usually neutral, narrator's voice (cf. Abel & Klein, 2016, 99-100). Comics' multimodality and means to visualise communicative situations create a proximity to everyday communication and make them a good basis for dialogue practise (cf. Dudzińska 2013, 296; Eisenmann 2020). L2 textbooks utilise this and implement comics to present verbal communication embedded in their conversational context, to practice dialogues, and give context for further assignments (cf. Dudzińska 2013: 292f on GFL; Hallet, 2015 & Rüschoff, 2013 on EFL). In their action research experiment, Hoang (2021) found their students well guided by the images in communicative situations. They used blank panel comics as stimulus for short dialogues practices for Vietnamese university students learning English on introductory level. Additionally, Hoang (2021) and Yalçın (2020) both found the working atmosphere amongst the students to be more social, supportive and friendly when working on communicative exercises with comics.

Introducing new foreign language and cultural knowledge goes hand in hand with the acquisition of new vocabulary in its semantic context and with its communicative function. Comics and images are used to introduce and practice vocabulary especially on introductory and intermediate levels, e.g. concrete nouns, action verbs, transitive and intransitive verbs, and local prepositions (Plein & Breslauer, 2017; Brinitzer & Damm, 1999; Dudzińska 2013). On the GFL B2 syllabus, we find vocabulary that cannot be simply visually represented by an object. Examples are abstracts nouns in fixed noun-verb combinations / light-verb constructions (e.g. einen Entschluss fassen – to take a decision, in Erwägung ziehen – to contemplate). A storyline can help to provide the context needed to establish the semantic context and capture light-verbs constructions with their complements.

In GFL textbooks the practice focus of comics tends to shift from receptive to productive skills as the target language level increases, aiming to practice productive skills on intermediate to advanced level. Of the overall fewer comics used on these levels, most are extracurricular original comics (cf. Dudzińska, 2013). Extracurricular comics could be particularly attractive to learners due to their originality as a linguistic and cultural product that addresses recipients outside of language learning. At the same time, they might present the reader more comprehension hurdles. To conduct our qualitative analysis, it is necessary to design specific comics addressing the topics of the curriculum and the learner group.

Data and Methodological Approach

Participants and GFL Textbook

The data was gathered between April and July 2024 in GFL courses at the Faculty of German Linguistics and Literature of USSH, HCMC, Vietnam. USSH offers programmes in German for Tourism, alongside majors in German for Economics and Teaching Methodology. The teaching staff mainly consists of younger educators, mostly under the age of 45, who have received tertiary education in German as foreign language in Germany. The Vietnamese

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[8] Translated by the authors from German source text.

researcher of the team of authors of this paper has been teaching at USSH since 2018 in online and face-to-face formats. Since 2021, she teaches all B2 level courses. She implemented the comics into her lessons, took notes of her observations in class, and collected written student products. The student participants were 51 Vietnamese university students of two intermediate to advanced level (B2.2 level according to the Common European Reference Framework) GFL courses. The courses ran over the span of one semester and were conducted offline in face-to-face teaching. To test the implementation of comic no. 2 in an online learning setting, one group's lesson was moved online. The textbook used in all B2.2 target level courses at USSH is Aspekte neu B2 (Koithan et al. 2015, 1st ed.). It features pictures as activity prompts on the opening double page of each unit.

At the time of data collection, the students had already practiced language skills with comics in earlier semesters (designing comics based on texts, writing texts based on silent comics) and with unit 4 in the current textbook. Unit 4 (Zusammen leben – living together) is introduced with five non-related cartoons and a one-strip comic. The cartoons are used as speaking prompt about important matters in a society (cf. Koithan et al., 2015, 56f.). In terms of digital literacy and media competence, some students had prior experiences of reading manga, manhwa or webtoons on digital platforms such as Wattpad9. The use of digital tools for comic creation was introduced in the B2.2 level course.

50 GFL teachers participated in the online questionnaire on the handling of textbooks, syllabi, and their implementation. They come from two main groups at USSH: current GFL teaching staff (n=8), current and former GFL students (n=42) with teaching experiences of German and English in Vietnam.

Material Adaptation

According to Masuhara (2022) certain questions should be considered when teachers adapt material. Two of those questions are relevant for our adaptations10: "3) Do teacher adaptations support the philosophy and goals of the curriculum? 4) Are the students achieving success in their learning? If so, why? If not, why not?" Masuhara (2022: 284) To confirm Masuhara's question 3), we designed our additional learning material specifically to complement selected topics of the textbook. Choosing the comic medium corresponds to the textbook's approach of introducing a topic using images to elicit prior knowledge. The comics will add their storytelling characteristics. Masuhara's question 4) goes in line with part 1 of our research question about the suitability of comics to motivate students to actively participate in spoken communication practices on advanced topics.

For the development of our additional material, we refer to Timmis (2022). Timmis formulates four principles for developing adequate materials for teaching speaking in the L2 classroom. Along with each principle, Timmis points out challenges to be addressed when aiming to fulfil the principle.

"Principle 1: materials should give learners speaking practice in a range of contexts and genres." (Timmis 2022: 31) The challenge is to overcome "the limitations of the classroom context, encourage learners to speak in genre-sensitive and context-sensitive ways". (ibid.)

"Principle 2: the level of challenge of the speaking activity should be carefully calibrated

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[9] As noticed by the Vietnamese researcher during class break times. A structured survey of empirical data on students' media skills was not carried out. A detailed statement about students' multimodal literacy proficiency cannot be made.

[10] The other questions are not relevant for our adaptations. Masuhara (2022: 284) poses the questions from the perspective of educational authorities on teacher adaptations. The other questions concern the effectiveness of the wider curriculum plan and existing materials on the over-all language learning of the students.

according to purpose." (ibid.) The challenge is to create material that offers teachers options to adjust level and kinds of challenge.

"Principle 3: learners should be given 'scaffolding' to help them carry out the speaking

activity." (Timmis 2022: 32) The challenge entails the preparation of students in terms of "language, content, communicative strategies, and confidence" (ibid.) as well as offering rehearsal, repetition, and transparency on how the exercises contribute to the learning goal.

"Principle 4: materials for speaking should raise awareness of features of spoken discourse." (Timmis 2022: 33) The challenge addresses the identification and implementation of commonly used linguistic phenomena in natural speech of L1 and L2 speakers that is appropriate for the learner target group.

By choosing the comic medium, we aim to meet these challenges.

Data Collection and Analysis – Procedure

Preparation, implementation, data collection and analysis followed these eight steps:

Step 1 – Topic selection: The criterion for topic selection was based on experiences the teaching researcher made with former cohorts. They had deemed the selected topics to be thematically difficult due to a lack of culture-specific historic background knowledge.

Topic 1 (unit 7): the Habsburg imperial family and the UNESCO world heritage site Schönbrunn Palace[11], grammar: text coherence

Topic 2 (unit 8): travelling back in history: medieval times[12], grammar: fixed noun-preposition, verb-preposition and adjective-preposition combinations

Application of Timmis' (2022) principle 1.

Step 2 – Analysis of material: The textbook material was analysed regarding basic specific knowledge needed to understand the topic, vocabulary, and grammatical structures.

Step 3 – Identification of applicable comic means: We identified the creative comic means suitable to design panels transmitting relevant background context and vocabulary. Background knowledge was to be picked up in figures' conversations and supported by images (e.g. a map of the Habsburg empire in the 18th century, comic 1). Nouns were visualised in pictured objects (e.g. a knight, comic 2). Verbs were to be shown through figures' actions, as part of their speech or their thoughts. In comic 2, the grammar topic "nouns with fixed prepositions" could be specifically incorporated through the symbolic and textual elements of the characters' thought bubbles.

Step 4 – Comic design: This step is related to part 3 of our research question, the suitability of comics to embed new vocabulary and B2-level grammatical structures to use in language activities. A storyline was threaded around new vocabulary and grammar introducing new information and creating options for further exercises (dialogue practices, research, presentations, creating own comics, videos etc.). For this, we made use of conversational scenes and situations close to students' everyday life. Application of Timmis' (2022) principle 2, 3 and 4.

The one-page comics were structured in three tiers:

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[11] *Aspekte neu B2,* Unit 7: *Kulturwelten*, module 1 *Weltkulturerbe*: World heritage (Koithan et al., 2015, 106f.)

[12] *Aspekte neu B2,* Unit 8: *Das macht(e) Geschichte*, module 1 *Geschichte erleben*: experiencing history (Koithan et al., 2015, 122f.)

First tier: introduction of topic through figures' dialogue, providing communication context, vocabulary; comic 1: students in Vienna deciding to visit Schönbrunn Palace, comic 2: group of friends in a café talking about time travelling

Second tier: large centre panel, introducing content-related specific aspects, providing specific vocabulary; comic 1: Habsburg family members, comic 2: characters thinking of the eras they would like to travel to and what they would like to experience

Bottom tier: providing options for further productive tasks; comic 1: research the individual sites of Schönbrunn Palace, comic 2: complement speech bubbles with new vocabulary from second tier, option to take question of time travel into a classroom conversation

The comics were designed with the paid version of the in-browser application of www.storyboardthat.com.

Image 1: Comic 1 & Comic 2
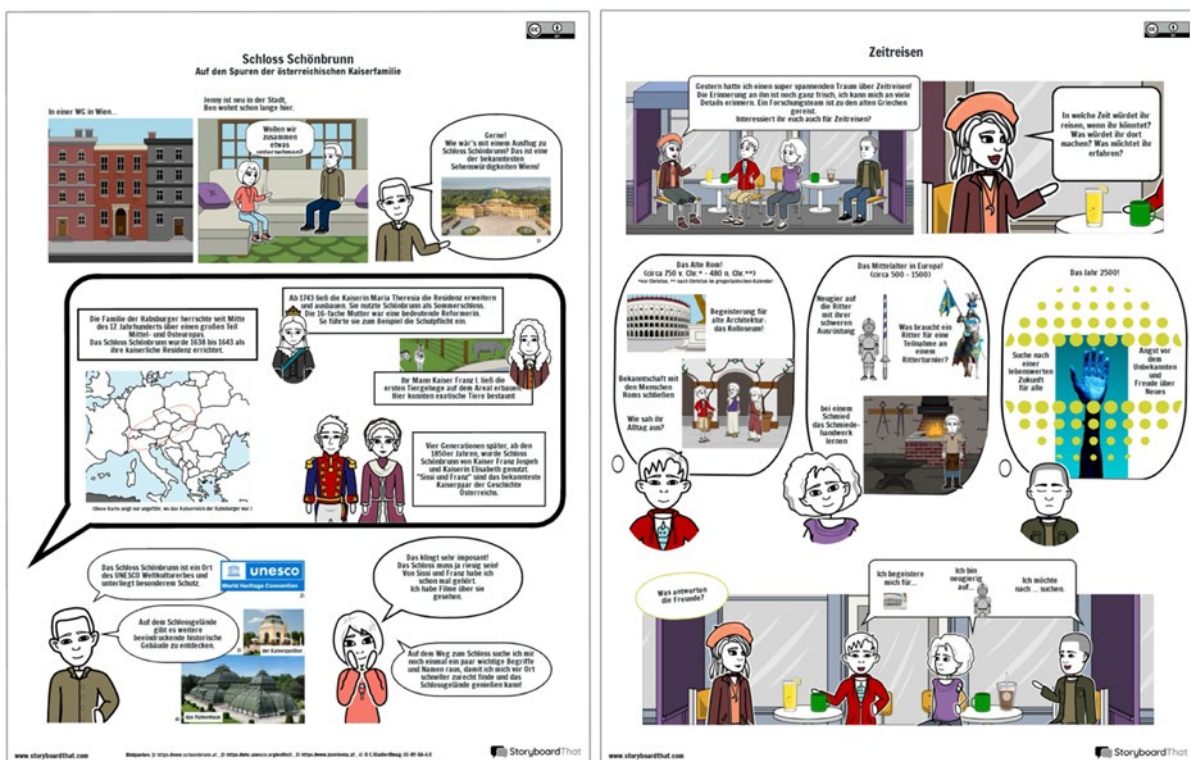
Step 5 – Implementation and documentation: In the introductory phase, the comics introduced topics and vocabulary. They functioned as speaking prompt for dialogue practice, and for vocabulary consolidation and expansion. In the transfer of learning phase, the comics served as basis for creative language production exercises to anchor new contents in knowledge.

Instructions comic 1:

In your group,13 read the dialogues and speech bubbles with assigned roles.

Work with a partner to look up words you do not know in the dictionary and clarify their meaning in the context of the comic's story. Then, do the vocabulary exercise on page 106 in the textbook to broaden your vocabulary about Schönbrunn Palace.

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13 The classroom set-up focusses on collaboration and seats students in groups around big tables.

Research online: Which tourist attractions in Vienna and Austria would you visit? Which famous Austrian personalities would you like to know more about?

In your group, research your assigned sight within the Schönbrunn Palace grounds. Prepare a presentation that you will hold in front of the class.

Instructions comic 2:

In your group, read the dialogues and complement the speech bubbles with assigned roles.

In plenum: To which time would you travel if you could? What would you do? What would you experience?14

Develop a creative product (written story, comic, short video clip) on a story about time traveling. You may work by yourself or in a group.

New content applied proficiently by a student would be counted as incorporated into a student's knowledge. With one group, the researcher met online via google meeting to conduct the lesson with comic 2. The goal was to test if any major differences in implementability and feasibility arise.

To answer part 1 of our research question – the suitability of comics to motivate students to actively participate in spoken communication practices on advanced topics – we made use of naturalistic observation. As the researcher in class was also in the role of the teacher, she noted her observations from memory after the class: Did students engage in spoken classroom activities? Were they motivated to participate? Did students use newly introduced vocabulary?

Written student productions (presentation slides, comics, video clips) were collected digitally. Based on these, and notes from the in-class observation, the usage of new vocabulary and the concepts behind it were documented.

Step 6 – Questionnaires:

Both surveys were conducted in German language. The results were translated by the authors.

Step 6.1: Conducting a voluntary online questionnaire of 1 multiple choice and 7 open-answer questions among students at the end of the B2.2 course. The open-answer format was chosen to collect more individual feedback for qualitative analysis. Questions were posed on difficulties with B2 level topics (multiple choice), which topics are perceived as difficult, how the usage of comics in class is perceived, how comics may influence learning about B2 topics as well as reading comprehension, vocabulary introduction, understanding and applying grammatical structures, speaking and writing. 29 students participated.

Step 6.2: Conducting a voluntary online questionnaire of 9 multiple choice and 1 open-answer questions among GFL teachers. The questions enquired about teaching experience and focused on handling of textbooks: degree of textbook orientation, feeling of and reasons for obligation to use textbooks, challenges and flexibility around textbook usage, implementation of additional materials, attitudes towards textbook orientation and additional lesson materials. 50 teachers participated.

Step 7 – Analyses of naturalistic observation, student productions, questionnaires:

We undertook a qualitative analysis of the teacher's naturalistic observation notes and student productions. We looked at the usage of newly introduced cultural information, vocabulary and

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14 These are the questions posed by a figure to her friends in comic 2, first tier.

grammar, as well as students' motivation to participate. We ran quantitative analyses of the questionnaires results and drew further findings from qualitatively analysing statements made in open-answer questions. Answers to open questions of identical wording were subsumed under the reoccurring notion (e.g. "history"). Synonyms and different phrasing of the same content were subsumed under an umbrella term (e.g. answers "visual support" and "suitable for visual learners" were counted as "provide visual support"). The results were compared to the experiences the researching teacher had made with previous cohorts who studied in the same programme, with the same textbook.

Step 8 – Discussion: A discussion follows about the choice of self-designed comics as additional lesson material and their added value in relation to practicability, effort and feasibility in the Vietnamese university classroom and GFL textbook syllable.

Empirical Findings

Naturalistic Observation and Student Productions

Students engaged actively in the introduction phases with the comics. After reading comic 1 and using it as a prompt to read the dialogue with assigned roles, a teacher-moderated classroom conversation about the imperial family, monarchy in Austria and the UNESCO heritage site Schönbrunn Palace could evolve. Students showed interest in the activity and engaged in the conversation. The comic also served as impulse for vocabulary acquisition and expansion through small research practises about the topics and by supplementing the introductory vocabulary task from the textbook (Koithan et al., 2015, 106.) In the textbook, Schönbrunn Palace is first introduced by listening to an audio guide of a castle tour. This exercise was now carried out after the introductory phase. In the follow-up conversation of the listening exercise, the researcher noticed how beneficial the prior pre-listening activities were for the students to complete the exercise and talk about the topic. Comic 1 would not have been necessary to simply teach the topic's vocabulary. Its format however provided a low-threshold introduction to the topic and engaging preparation for the textbook exercises.

Comic 2 was used in face-to-face teaching with one group, with the other in an online session. All activities in the online group were held in the main meeting room. Students in both groups engaged actively in the first dialogue practice. The conversation was then expanded to a classroom conversation on the topic of time travelling to experience history. The questions one character in the comic asks her friends, "What era would you like to travel to if you had the chance? What would you like to do there? What would you like to learn?", were posed to the students and discussed in small groups (offline) or in plenum (online). Students contributed ideas from their own prior knowledge and collected their ideas, by the offline group on a board, in the online group on the digital board jamboard.

For both topics and in both formats (offline and online), using a comic as initial input in the introductory phase made a noticeable difference in students' active participation compared to former cohorts. Between the offline and online group no noticeable difference of quality or extent of oral and written student productions was noted. Students used not only the vocabulary from the speech and thought bubbles, e.g. verb-preposition connections, but also contributed own knowledge and ideas. This resulted in an active co-creation in the vocabulary expansion phase. Students' contributions to the classroom conversations showed interest in the topics and new vocabulary and content could be consolidated through repetition and independent application in speaking exercises.

In the transfer of learning phases, the comics were used as bases for further research, presentations and creative writing tasks. For comic 1, the students continued the storyline and researched about the various stations of the palace tour. They worked in groups and presented their findings in oral presentations supported with presentation slides in class. Students used newly introduced vocabulary mentioned in the comics and the textbook. With the presentations, the students expanded their culture-historical knowledge and vocabulary on the topic. They practiced all four skills as well as linguistic means to create text coherence.

For comic 2, the students developed projects on the topic of "time travel". They realised their projects on a self-chosen topic through different media: as a digital comic or video. In their projects, the students did not use any of the nouns with fixed prepositions that had been newly introduced in the comic. They had not been specifically asked to use them and we assume that they did not take this specific vocabulary into consideration when conceptualising their own storylines. The vocabulary might not have been consolidated yet to find its way into creative language products, or simply not have matched the students' communicative needs to tell their story. Further, it can be assumed that the students did not refer to the comic for linguistic input when composing their own projects. Nonetheless, due to the choices of topics for their stories, students could acquire new vocabulary that is specific to their topic and is not explicitly featured in GFL textbooks, e.g. Vietnamese historical events. Students explained specific vocabulary needed to understand their story to fellow students and were thus expanding their own vocabulary in the first step and their fellow students' vocabulary in a following step. The students were highly engaged in this creative assignment and results showed skills of multimodal storytelling and digital competence as the comics and videos were created with online tools.

In comparison to the group presentation on an assigned topic (comic 1), the creative writing task on a topic of choice in the context of the main topic (comic 2) proofed less suitable to implement new vocabulary and cultural knowledge. On the one hand, with a more concrete instruction, the practice of specific vocabulary could be promoted. On the other hand, was the focus of the exercise vocabulary expansion and independent language production based on the students' interest. The lessons' vocabulary was further practiced with exercises in the textbook. The degree of student motivation about the project and the quality of the project outcomes, militates for this transfer of learning exercise at this point.

We noted surprisingly high student engaged in interactive classroom activities, in group activities, presentations and creative projects, even for this student cohort. Regarding the creative projects, we relate the engagement also to the high degree of learner autonomy on choice of project topic, design and medium.

Student Survey Results

As difficult topics, "History" and "Art, Art History" were mentioned most among the majority of students with 13 and 12 mentions respectively by 13 participants.15 The topics "Economy", "Psychology", "Politics", "Time travel: Future", "Colours and Emotions", "Berlin Wall or Division of Germany" and "Poverty" were each mentioned twice. As for reasons causing difficulties with topics, 41% (n=12) of students see a lack of prior knowledge about a topic as cause. Just as many see the complexity of texts and their specialised vocabulary as reason. 7% find the abstractness of topics difficult, another 7% complex grammatical structure in texts, and 3,4% (n=1) a lack of encouraging learning activities. This participant found the use of

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15 Topics were counted by number of mentions in the 26 given answers to the open question "Which topics in the textbook Aspekte B2 do you consider to be "abstract" or "difficult"?" leading to a total of 30 mentions of 9 topics. One student answered "all topics" adding the value 1 to each topic mentioned

comics in class "very good". These numbers align with the observations of former cohorts: a cause for low in-class participation can be assumed to base in the knowledge level, not motivational level.

Figure 1: What difficulties do you have in dealing with topics at level B2? Multiple-choice question, with option to choose one answer.
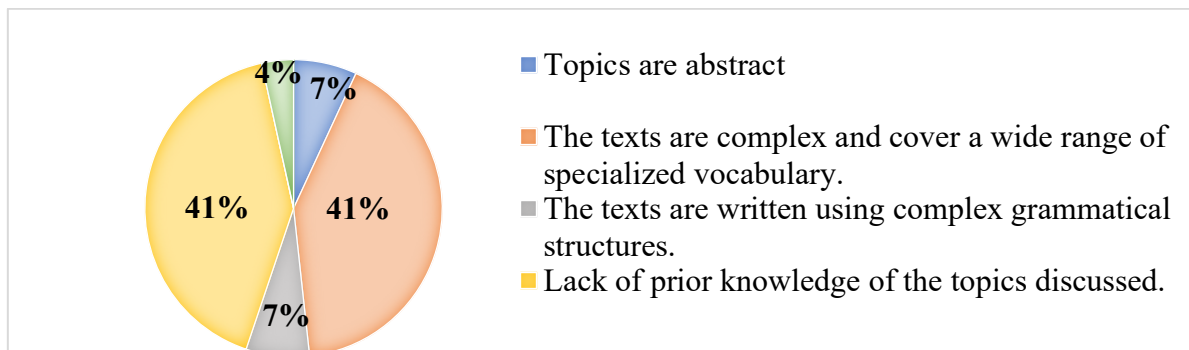
To provide an initial source for background knowledge and vocabulary, the comics had been implemented in the lessons' introductory phases. 69% of all respondents expressed positive feedback on comics' influence on vocabulary acquisition. Of the 41% (n=12) of students, finding a lack of prior knowledge to cause difficulties, 75% (n=9) reported positive feedback on comics and vocabulary acquisition and 83,33 % (n=10) on comic use in regard to text comprehension16. This shows a positive effect of comic use when introducing thematically difficult topics. We find the same values and thus successful result with the 41% (n=12) of students choosing text complexity and specific vocabulary as cause for difficulties: 75 % (n=9) gave positive feedback on the use of comics regarding vocabulary acquisition and 83,33% (n=10) see positive effects in terms of text comprehension. Figure 2 gives an overview over all students' answers when asked about comics' influence on vocabulary acquisition. 17

Figure 2: How can comics influence text comprehension?
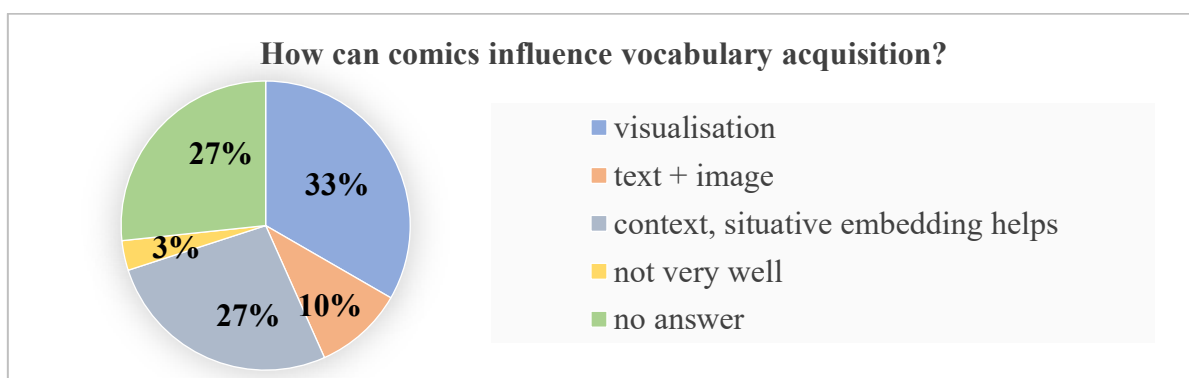
For vocabulary acquisition and text comprehension, three students mentioned how "guessing" content and meaning was made easier through visualisation of context. The process of guessing involves associative thinking basing on and developing from prior knowledge. The comics supported activating prior knowledge on textual and lexical levels.

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16 It should be noticed again that we did not translate complex written and audio texts from the textbook directly into comics. The answers relate to the comics themselves – featuring simple storylines – and the comics as pre-reading /-hearing input for the complex (audio) texts in the textbook.

17 Relevant mentions were subsumed under the listed key words. Mentions of positive effects on long-term memorisation were disregarded. On the long-term memorisation no valid subjunctive answer can be given shortly after the lessons.

In terms of grammar comprehension and application, answers that could be subsumed under "use and function in context" were mentioned by far the most frequently (n=8) 30%. Students mentioned keywords 18 such as "situation-appropriate to means of expression", "many interesting and practical sentences", "easier and more detailed on why and when we use certain grammar", "the authentic themes of the comics enable learners to use grammar appropriately". Responses show that grammar is associated with correct situational use of expressions and communicative competence in the target language. Two students (6.9%) suggest that grammatical structures might be learned implicitly as students are interested in continuing to read the comics. The question on grammar received most negative responses in the questionnaire with 15% of students seeing no influence. 7,5% having "no idea" and another 30% (n=8) leaving no answer. This suggests that the implementation of more abstract grammar topics on intermediate / advanced GFL level into comics needs further investigation.

Table 1 presents an overview over the answers on comics' influence on productive skills. Mentions of 23 students' answers categorized as follows, counted are the overall mentions.

Table 1: How can comics influence productive skills (writing and speaking)?

	Answer	No. of mentions
1	Promoting creativity	6
2	Acting out dialogues	3
3	Motivating learning environment encouraging students to speak, reducing inhibitions	2
4	Expanding vocabulary	2
5	To effectively use learned vocabulary and idioms	2
6	Working together, teamwork: collaborative writing and speaking skills	1
7	Teaching grammar	1
8	Interesting presentation of information makes it easier to understand content and therefore apply skills more effectively	1
9	Visualization makes content easier to remember, making it easier to apply	1
10	In comics, expressions are used in concrete contexts, which helps learners avoid mistakes in communication.	1
11	Dialogues as examples of effective verbalization of thoughts and feelings	1
12	Overview of topic	1
13	I don't think so	1

Table 1 shows that the most important added value for students in the area of language production lies in creative but also situationally appropriate language production. (rows 1, 2, 5, 10, 11). Three students address positive effects on teamwork and an encouraging classroom environment (rows 3, 7) confirming observations made for EFL learners in Vietnam by Hoang (2021) and GFL learners in Turkey by Yalçın (2020).

In their open question feedback, students emphasised the perceived advantages of visual support and the image-text combination. The comics' multimodality provided them with visually contextualised examples of communication situations that they perceived as authentic sources to learn from. They found confidence in the source, learning from it to communicate

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18 Translated from German by the authors

correctly and appropriately in German. This meets Timmis' (2022) principle 3 challenge to prepare learners to have speaking confidence. Having this information available can bring a certain sense of certainty and strengthen the students' self-confidence in their own linguistic and communicative skills in the target language. One student experienced "learning grammar without pressure". The written nature of comics certainly contributes to this as the presented information are permanently available. Additionally, the amount of text is much shorter compared to continuous text and with the pictorial support this can reduce the amount of linguistic information to be absorbed. Students further showed awareness about multiliteracies skills. One student demonstrated awareness about active multiliteracies skills when commenting on the influence on grammar comprehension and application from a linguistically productive perspective, "when creating comics: pay attention not only to content but also to grammar". On text comprehension, another student stated that comics can also be "misleading". This indicates an aware, reflective and critical approach to the reception of comics in foreign language lessons and shows important media and multiliteracies skills.

Teacher Questionnaire Results

The results show an overall openness amongst the teachers to implement additional lesson material. At the time of the survey, all respondents stated to use additional material (their own or from external sources) either regularly (48%) or occasionally (52%). 48% of the teachers wish to have more flexibility in using own materials.

Still, the textbook is the central teaching material in the respondents' foreign language classrooms. 66% of respondents indicated that they "strongly" rely on the textbook, using it as their main source but also incorporating other materials. 20% reported a "medium" reliance on the textbook and deviating from it often. 8% stated that they follow the textbook "very strongly," using it almost exclusively. 6% use the textbook to a "low" extent, treating it as just one of several sources. No respondent indicated that they "do not use" the textbook at all.

The most common reason to follow a textbook, chosen by 35 respondents (70%), is that the textbook provides security and structure for their lessons. The wish of security can be seen as an internal motivation. The other reasons are based on external factors. A total of 26 respondents (52%) state that they follow the textbook due to institutional or school guidelines and / or feel obliged to use the textbook due to these requirements. This corresponds to the findings collected by Masuhara (2022) and Tomlinson & Masuhara (2018) on teachers' reasons for or against material adaptation.

For 10% of teachers this is the only reason to follow a textbook. Of the 52% using the textbook due institutional requirements 23,08% (n=6) have the freedom to use additional material. Another 26,92% (n=7) of the teachers affected by institutional requirements criticise the lack of freedom to adapt their lessons beyond the textbook's structure; criticism that is noted by overall 20% of respondents (n=10). This shows that institutional guidelines are an important external factor. Other reasons for following a textbook are time constrains that prevent teachers from creating their own teaching materials (32%) and that the textbook sufficiently covers the required content (30%). Only 5 respondents (10%) agree that the textbook provides motivating content for students. Overall, 22% of teachers feel an obligation to follow the textbook because they believe it is expected by their students. 42% feel they have the autonomy to incorporate different teaching materials. One teacher positively mentioned the balance between using the textbook as support to structure and prepare lessons and the freedom to enrich their teaching with additional material.

On working with textbooks, teachers show the need for more adaptable, current, interactive and learner-centred teaching materials that better meet their students' needs and preferences:

60% of teachers feel that the textbooks do not adequately address their students' specific learning requirements. 38% of respondents rate textbooks in use to be outdated or not up-to-date. These editions of the textbooks do not reflect current topics or methodologies. 32% of respondents would also like to see more digital learning materials. One teacher states that cultural knowledge should be integrated in every lesson to provide students with cultural background knowledge. This would make lessons more interesting and give students the feeling to learn something applicable in real-life situations in a German-speaking country.

These findings go in line with the students' responses that show a preference for learning materials that are practical, current, culturally relevant, and adaptable to help them effectively use the language in real-life scenarios.

Discussion and Conclusion

The comics have shown to be an effective medium to provide students with sufficient cultural knowledge and vocabulary to actively and independently converse in spoken and written form on advanced GFL topics. The motivating effect of comics was confirmed for this group of Vietnamese B2 GFL students as was their effectiveness to practice dialogues. Regarding student difficulties with lack of prior topical knowledge, textual complexity, and specific vocabulary, 75%< of the students experienced positive effects of the use of the comics in class. The comic-exclusive combination of features can make content more easily accessible and evoke students' confidence in their own L2 speech production. This motivates to continue reading and practicing. Students spend in-class time more efficiently in active language practice based upon which further exercises can be conducted.

Considering implementability, it was essential for our project to design comics specifically complementing the textbook topics and target the desired learning outcomes. On practical design level, sufficient tools are available. Different online platforms offer easily applicable, AI-supported, tools to design comics. On conceptual level, implementing specific vocabulary and grammatical structures according to the syllable and learners' needs and L2 knowledge, needs throughout planning. This might take time and not be feasible for teachers to realise often. Especially for teachers who are already working under time constrains. Yet, the positive learning outcomes and student feedback speak in favour of using specially designed comics for selected topics.

To foster the learning of specific learning outcomes, comics need to be integrated into a lesson plan with other exercises and teacher input. The teacher questionnaire showed a general motivation and openness among teachers towards implementing additional lesson material and generally advancing lesson design and learning experience for the students. As our findings show, specific comics could be appropriate material. Yet, teachers' reasons to follow textbooks leave most with little flexibility for implementation. Positive reasons for textbook use, such as structure and security, should also not be disregarded. If more versatile and current learning material was to be brought to the classroom, support from institutional side is needed. With more flexibility to design their lessons, teachers would have more opportunities to implement material on current topics and in through different media, ensuring that the content remains interesting, culturally relevant and up-to-date. Students strive to be educated with linguistically and culturally authentic learning materials. This not only makes the lessons more engaging but also prepares students for real-life situations in a German-speaking country.

This paper presents links for further investigations into developing comics as specific additional material, for example on the conceptualisation of comics thematizing more abstract

grammar topics on advanced GFL level. We could only superficially look at the application of comics in an online learning setting. Future enquiries into comics as teaching material should be extended to the digital level in detail.

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