



Research article

Bridging the Technological Gap in English Language Teaching Classrooms of India with Comic Books

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Abstract

With the turn of the century, as new forms of media emerged along with technological innovations, it transformed how students perceive information, making them mostly audio-visual learners. However, despite various educational benefits, there is a gap in the accessibility of these technological innovations across schools in India, depriving students of an engaging way of language learning. This study examines the potential of an easily available and appealing multimodal resource, the comic book, for English language learning. It delves into the potential of physical comic books as an innovative tool to bridge the gap between traditional approaches and technology-assisted approaches in schools of marginalized areas of India. As it is crucial to understand students' interests and perspectives for the successful implementation of an innovative tool, this study was conducted among 369 students of private and government schools in Assam, India and observed a positive response. It also highlighted the potential for improvement in certain language skills using comic books under proper guidance.

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1. Introduction

Technological innovations in the 21st century have transformed how we live, work and learn. This has also made English language proficiency an essential skill in this generation. As English is the Lingua Franca of the world, there is also an increase in demand for candidates competent in English communication to compete in the global markets. Considering the changing scenarios, policymakers in educational sectors have encouraged the use of technology in language-learning classrooms to enhance students' language skills and prepare them for the techno-centric world. Likewise, many studies have found that incorporating technology in the classroom creates an engaging, productive and motivating learning environment. It also facilitates different learning abilities and strengths of the students (Giannikas, 2019).

However, there is a significant technological gap in the usage and access to these resources in educational contexts across the world (Lim et al., 2013). This concern is more pronounced in the context of developing nations like India. The All India National Sample Survey (NSS) Report highlights this technological and digital gap among 15-year-olds in rural and urban households across India. It states that comparatively, individuals from urban areas had better access to mobile phones, mass media and the Internet. Whereas individuals from rural areas are deprived of the same (MoSPI, 2023). This also indicated a gap in the socio-economic conditions of urban and rural areas, which in the long run impacts individuals' educational and career opportunities in the technologically dominated world. Though the Government of India has launched many initiatives like 'smart classrooms', among others, for better technological accessibility and enhancing the educational sectors in rural areas of India, studies have observed that it has not yielded satisfactory results (Chand et al., 2020).

To successfully integrate a technological tool in a classroom, the educational beliefs of the teachers and curriculum developers, the students' perceptions towards technology, and the pedagogical and institutional practices all come into play. The diverse beliefs of teachers and institutes regarding the use of technology in classrooms (Chand et al., 2020) and the inadequate training of teachers to manage multilingual and multigrade classrooms in government schools in India leads to the continued reliance on traditional approaches like the grammar-translation method, despite the development and availability of many modern and engaging education tools (Bhattacharya, 2022; Mohanty, 2020). This complex interplay of various factors explains the dissatisfactory results in Indian schools, particularly the government schools of India. The use of traditional approaches in Indian schools also indicates a gap in learning experiences among students. These students are deprived of a learning experience that is enjoyable, productive and that caters to the different learning abilities of the students, which further helps in enhancing various language skills. Moreover, since English language proficiency in India is associated with better job opportunities and better education, and as most electronic gadgets and the content of the internet operate primarily in English, learning and being proficient in the language has become a necessity in the present generation. Thus, students with poor English language proficiency are deprived of an opportunity for upward social mobility in a developing country like India.

Integrating physical comic books as pedagogical tools in the language learning classroom will help bridge the gap in schools with limited access to educational technologies. Through comic books, these students will be exposed to a rich multimodal learning experience that will cater to

the visual learners of the modern generation and also develop visual literacy in others, thus fostering an engaging environment for language learning.

2. Literature Review

In the realm of language learning, proponents such as Stephen Krashen, Will Eisner, Neil Williams, Neil Cohn, Stephen Cary and others strongly promoted the use of visuals, mainly cartoons and comics, to teach a second language, especially in a multilingual setting. Comic books have a “visual permanence” (Yang, 2008, p. 188), unlike films and animations, that allows slow learners to read and re-read and comprehend the text at their own pace (William, 1995), which is a useful feature for learners with low English language proficiency with limited exposure to the English language. Movies and animations cannot fulfil this feature when used in a multilingual classroom setting, as every student has a different reading and comprehension speed. Moreover, in rural areas, accessing and availability of classroom projectors for screening movies and animations may not be economically feasible.

Considering the powerful impact of the amalgamation of visuals and text in comics, there is a surge in its use in Indian schools. Teachers in rural areas of Uttar Pradesh, India, have been using comic books in their classes to help students understand their lessons in a better and easier way. They have also made comics like *Champak* available in the school library. This approach has also led to an increase in attendance and a decrease in school dropout rates. (Bhatia, 2018)

Moving away from the traditional approach, the Indian Ministry of Education published over a hundred curriculum-based digital comic books and graphic novels for joyful learning and to enhance digital outreach for education (Press Information Bureau, 2021). In addition, to address India’s culturally and linguistically diverse population, visual storytelling with the help of comic strips has been used. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s ‘Mann Ki Baat’ episodes are adapted into comic books and made available in online portals and schools to inspire and motivate young readers (Ministry of Culture, 2023). However, as there is a significant digital and technological gap across schools in the country, one cannot assume that these initiatives is accepted and practised widely.

A study related to health awareness among children in rural areas used comic books due to their cost-effectiveness, visual appeal, and easy integration into classrooms as an alternative to multimedia (O, 1983). In addition, for most students, comic books are a break away from mundane classes, thus increasing their enthusiasm. Teachers can take advantage of this and make comic books available in their school libraries and encourage students to read more comics to inculcate a habit of reading (Bucher & Manning, 2004). This habit of reading comic books is the best form of comprehensible input to learn vocabulary in a second language for visual learners of the present generation (Krashen, 1994).

Furthermore, it has been observed that curriculum-based textbooks contribute to poor English language proficiency in most Indian schools. Bhattacharya (2019), in her study, states that the learners felt disconnected from the content of the English textbooks used in Indian schools, resulting in poor classroom engagement and low motivation. This is because the content of the textbooks differed from their everyday realities, especially those of marginalized schools. In the

same context, using texts that are culturally familiar to language learners makes it easier for them to comprehend the content, as the learners see themselves within the characters of the story (Billings, 1995). Culturally authentic pictures and images act as visual stimuli and help in vocabulary learning and retention of words in a second language (Bush, 2007). Cohn also states that comics can be seen as a visual representation of the culture of a particular region, much like how novels and storybooks use written language to depict society and culture (Cohn, 2021). As most of the comic books published in India are centered around Indian folktales, history and mythology, among others, they have been integrated into the curriculum of private educational institutes as supplementary reading materials across the country (Sinha & Malshe, 2017).

Likewise, another study in rural Indonesian schools stated that the language issues of rural area students, such as lack of vocabulary and reading skills can be enhanced with the use of educational comic books that are based on local folktales (Sumarwati et al., 2023).

These innovative strategies with comics are being widely used because pictures and images are universally understood and have the power to transcend language and cultural barriers and deliver the intended information successfully (Hope, 2020). Images and pictures require minimum learning to decode as today's children are consistently exposed to compelling sources of visual media from a young age (Hope, 2020) this makes the use of comic books an appropriate alternative to technological innovations in schools of marginalized areas.

3. The study

This study explores the potential of physical comic books as an innovative tool to bridge the gap between traditional approaches and technology-assisted approaches in schools of marginalized areas of India. As most rural households are deprived of computers, mobile phones and the internet, comic books present a cost-effective and accessible alternative to these technological innovations. However, it is crucial to explore students' interests and perspectives on the same for successful implementation and outcome.

3.1. Aim of the Study

- To explore the perceptions of students from private schools and government schools regarding the use of multimedia, extracurricular books and teachers' guidance on the same for English language learning
- To explore the perceptions of students from private schools and government schools regarding the integration of comics in English Language classrooms and schools
- To assess existing language issues of students and propose effective strategies using comic books to enhance their language skills

3.2. Research site and sample for the study

The study was conducted in 12 schools across Assam, a state in Northeast India. It included a total of 369 students from grades 7 and 8. In total 7 government schools with Assamese (regional language of Assam, India) as the medium of instruction and 5 private schools with English as the medium of instruction were part of the study.

Category	Total Schools	No. of Students
Government Schools	7	192
Private Schools	5	177
Total	12	369

Figure 1

3.3. Instruments

A questionnaire was designed to collect data for the study. As this study focuses on the perception and attitude of middle schoolers regarding using comics and other multimodal materials in their ESL classes, the questions included dichotomous, multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The study also explored the prevailing issues of the students towards English as a second language. Considering the generally low English proficiency levels among the students, especially in government schools, the questions were kept simple and comprehensible for their proficiency level.

Part I of the questionnaire had 4 questions enquiring about personal information such as age, gender, class, and school while ensuring anonymity. Part II had 2 yes/no answers and 1 multiple choice question that enquired about the use of multimedia and multimodal material in their school and classrooms. Part III had 4 yes/no questions, 1 multiple-choice question and 1 open-ended question that enquired about the students' familiarity with comic books. Lastly, Part IV had 1 yes/no question and 1 multiple choice question that enquired about the prevailing issues of students with the English language. In total, the questionnaire contained 15 questions, providing an overview of the existing use of multimedia and multimodal material in the classroom for language teaching in schools in Assam, India.

3.4. Analysis and Interpretation

The following analysis presents the frequency distribution and percentages of various preferences among private and government school students in Assam, India. This provides insight into the willingness to use comics and other multimodal materials in classrooms. This study also explores and highlights the prevailing challenges of the students while engaging with the English language. Most of the questions were direct and simple, with just yes/no answers, considering the low English language proficiency of the middle school students.

Part I - Personal Information

The average age of the students in 7th and 8th grade was 13.35. An average of 45% of male students and 55% of female students participated in this study.

Part II- Multimedia and multimodal material usage in the classroom

This section gives insight into the student's perspective of the prevailing use of multimedia in language learning classrooms and the extent to which teachers encourage their students to learn English both inside and outside the classroom settings.

1. Does your English teacher make you watch movies and animated videos in the classroom?

Category	Private Schools		Government Schools		All School	
	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage
Yes	65	37%	34	18%	99	27%
No	112	63%	158	82%	270	73%
Total	177	100%	192	100%	369	100%

Figure 2

Figure 2 gives insight into the student's perspective on the use of multimedia by their English teachers in the classroom. It is observed that there is a significant difference in the use of multimedia in classrooms among both types of schools. In private schools, 37% of the students stated that teachers use these resources whereas in government schools only 18% of them responded positively. However, overall, 73% of the students stated that teachers do not use any kind of multimedia in the classroom.

2. Does your English teacher advise you to read English storybooks, novels and Comic Books?

Category	Private Schools		Government Schools		All School	
	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage
Yes	143	81%	71	37%	214	58%
No	34	19%	121	63%	155	42%
Total	177	100%	192	100%	369	100%

Figure 3

The information presented in Figure 3 gives insight into the students' perception of their English teachers' guidance regarding using extracurricular books for English language learning. There is a significant gap between the two types of schools. In private schools, 81% and 37% of government schools responded positively to the question. Likewise, only 58% of the students stated that their teachers encourage them to engage with extracurricular books.

However, there is an overall high preference for extracurricular readings (58%) to using multimedia in classrooms (27%) across the schools. This indicates that there is a potential for using comics as a supplementary or extracurricular reading if made available in school libraries for easy access.

Part III- Learners’ familiarity with comic book

This section gives insight into students’ experience with visual literacy, comic books and intrinsic learning. It also explores the interest of the students in implementing comic books as a pedagogical tool for language learning.

1 Have you ever read a Comic Book before?

Category	Private Schools		Government Schools		All School	
	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage
Yes	153	86%	179	93%	332	90%
No	24	14%	13	7%	37	10%
Total	177	100%	192	100%	369	100%

Figure 4

Information presented in Figure 4 gives insight into students’ exposure to comic books. It is observed that overall 90% of the students are familiar with this type of multimodal text. Government schools present a higher percentage of students i.e. 93% of students responding positively as compared to 86% positive response from Private schools. This indicates a higher potential for the educational use of comics in government schools. However, 14% of students from English schools and 7% of students from Assamese schools have never read a comic book.

2 Do you want to use comic books in your English classes?

Category	Private Schools		Government Schools		All School	
	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage
Yes	160	90%	178	93%	338	92%
No	17	10%	14	7%	31	8%
Total	177	100%	192	100%	369	100%

Figure 5

Information presented in Figure 5 gives insight into the interest and openness of incorporating comics as a pedagogical tool in their English classes. Both types of schools have a high percentage

of positive responses, 90% in Private schools and 93% in Government schools. Whereas, overall 8% of the students responded negatively.

3 Do you have Comic Books in your school library?

Category	Private Schools		Government Schools		All School	
	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage
Yes	118	67%	63	33%	181	49%
No	59	33%	129	67%	188	51%
Total	177	100%	192	100%	369	100%

Figure 6

Figure 6 gives insight into the student's awareness of the accessibility and availability of comics in their school library. It also gives insight into the school's approach to include diverse forms of conventional and non-conventional reading material, considering the interests of the students of a visually dominant society. It is observed there is a significant difference in the response among the two types of schools. 67% of students in Private schools and 33% of students from Government schools are aware of the availability of comic books in their schools. And overall, 51 % responded negatively.

4 What do you like about Comic Books?

Category	Private Schools		Government Schools		All School	
	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage
Colourful Images	38	21%	68	35%	106	29%
Short Dialogues	7	4%	3	2%	10	3%
Easy language	23	13%	21	11%	44	12%
Picture helps to understand dialogues	49	28%	51	27%	100	27%
Funny	55	31%	44	23%	99	27%

I don't like Comic Books	5	3%	5	3%	10	3%
Total	177	100%	192	100%	369	100%

Figure 7

The following figure, Figure 8, is the pictorial representation of Figure 7.

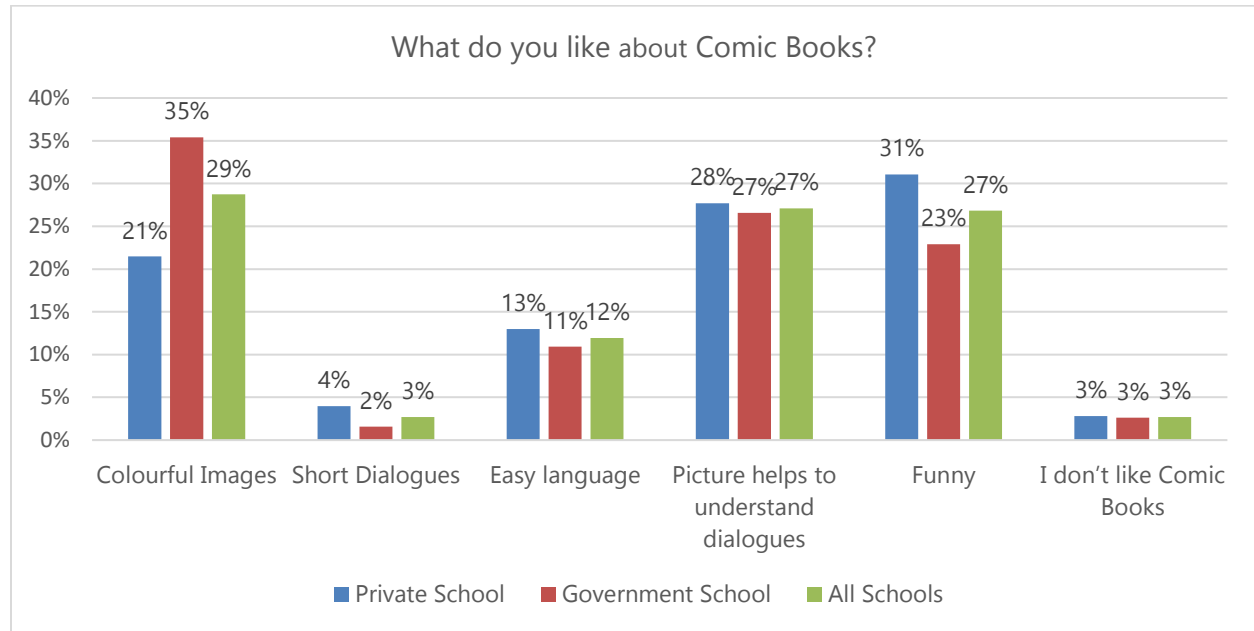


Figure 8

Information presented in Figure 7 and Figure 8 explores the features of comic book that appeals the most and the least to students of grades 7 and 8. In private schools, "funny" content or humour appealed the most to students (31%), followed by the feature "pictures help to understand dialogues" (28%), and then "colorful images (21%). Whereas, in Government schools, students had a high preference for 'colourful images' (35%), followed by the feature 'pictures help to understand dialogues' (27%) and 'funny' content and humour (23%). Overall, 'short dialogues' of comic books appealed the least to students with an average of 12% opting it in all the schools. Furthermore, a mere 3% of the students disliked comic books, which indicated that the general perception of comic books was positive.

5 Do you have a favourite book? Name it.

The responses to this question indicate that most of the students have a reading habit outside their classrooms. This also gave insight into the type of English books and language the students are engaging with. A total of 85 unique responses were received from the students across all schools. The most popular books among private school students were J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, Shakespeare's *The Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Marvel and DC comics, along with Indian comics and storybooks like *Tinkle*, *Mahabharat*, *Akbar Birbal* and *Panchatntra*, among many others were also listed as

favourites by many students. Whereas *Tinkle*, *Grace Chang's Jin Jin The Dragon*, *Panchatantra*, *Chandamama*, and *Champak* were a few of the most popular books among government school students.

The two types of schools had different reading levels. Along with advanced literary texts, the private school students also engaged with children's literature and comic books. In contrast, children's magazines, comics, and other children's literature were more prevalent in government schools.

Overall, it's observed that comic books are widely accepted and used among students, with only a few exceptions. Comic books visually appeal to the students and have the potential to be used as a pedagogical tool in schools, particularly government schools of Assam, India. Comparatively, the students of government schools displayed a higher preference for this multimodal text than private school students. Since there is potential for integrating comics into language learning, schools should also include comic books that reflect Indian culture and heritage in their libraries. This would cater to students' interests, motivate them and also provide language learning benefits.

Part IV- Prevailing issues with the English language

1. Do you think English is a difficult subject?

Category	Private Schools		Government Schools		All School	
	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage
Yes	10	6%	54	28%	64	17%
No	167	94%	138	72%	305	83%
Total	177	100%	192	100%	369	100%

Figure 9

Information presented in Figure 9 gives an insight into the students' attitude towards English, which also impacts their motivation to learn the language. As 83% of the students stated that they do not think English is a difficult subject, it also reflects their confidence and positive attitude towards it, and with the appropriate guidance, they will be able to improve their language skills. While 6% of the students in Private schools and 28% of students in government schools positively responded, indicating there might be obstacles in their language learning process.

2. What makes you nervous about using English?

Category	Private Schools		Government Schools		All School	
	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage	No. of Responses	Percentage

Don't now appropriate vocabulary	52	29%	66	34%	118	32%
Cannot form proper sentences	45	25%	60	31%	105	28%
Teacher will scold if I make mistake	8	5%	3	2%	11	3%
Friends will laugh if I make mistake in English	24	14%	32	17%	56	15%
I do not get nervous while using English	48	27%	31	16%	79	21%
Total	177	100%	192	100%	369	100%

Figure 10

The following figure, Figure 11, is the pictorial representation of Figure 10.

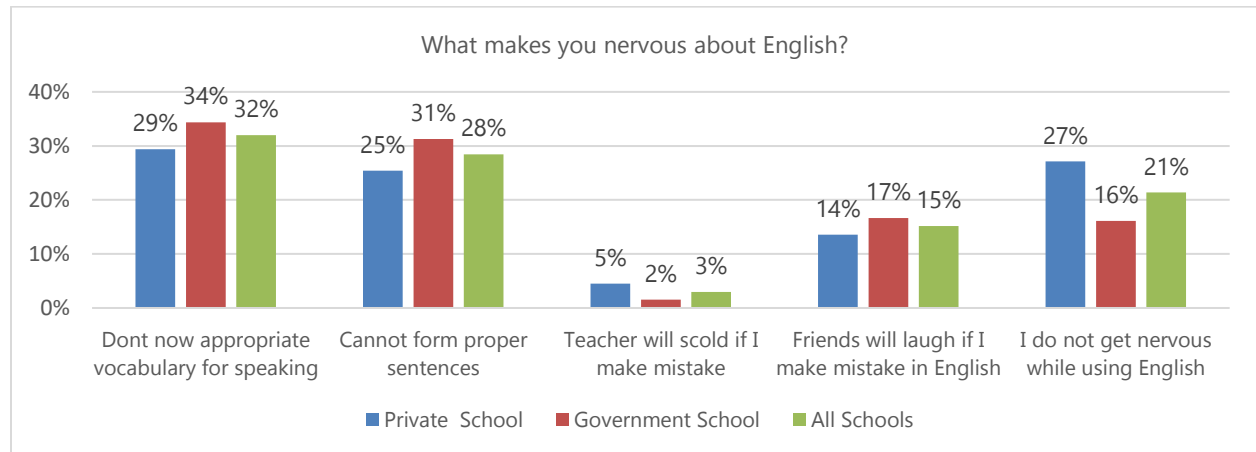


Figure 11

The information presented in Figure 10 and Figure 11 indicates the prevailing issues faced by the students while using the English language. The most concerning issue in both types of schools was the lack of vocabulary, which was opted by 29% of the private school students and 34% of government school students. This was followed by difficulty in forming proper sentences, which opted by 25% and 31% of the private and government school students, respectively. It was further observed that only 5% of private school students and 2% of government school students were afraid to make mistakes in the classroom, which indicates that the teachers are generally supportive and encouraging, which creates a positive learning environment. In addition, 21% of

the students stated that they do not get nervous while using English, but this does not imply a high level of language proficiency.

Though students had a few language issues, they displayed a positive attitude toward the English language in both private and government schools. This indicates a potential for improvement in their weak areas with appropriate guidance from teachers and pedagogical tools.

3.5. Findings and Discussion

This study revealed that there is a significant gap in the use of multimedia and extracurricular reading habits and guidance among private and government schools in Assam, India. Classrooms continue to employ traditional language teaching methods despite the existence of a wide range of multimedia and multimodal tools for language learning. This suggests that some students are deprived of adequate resources and facilities in certain schools while others are receiving these resources and displaying better academic performances. These issues are more prominent in government schools than in private schools in Assam, India. The lack of proper infrastructure in schools, limited awareness of the benefits of visual aids in language learning, and the language barrier, as most online and multimedia devices operate in English, are reasons why most government school teachers avoid using multimedia tools in their classrooms (Roy, 2015). Another reason for sticking to the traditional language teaching approach is that the teachers are not adequately trained to manage the multilingual and multigrade nature of Indian classrooms (Bhattacharya, 2022; Mohanty, 2020).

This study observed that as compared to the use of multimedia in classrooms (27%), most schools encourage the use of extracurricular books (58%). This indicated that print-based and physical books like comics have potential, and they will be more welcoming in classrooms than implementing digital comic books in schools. In addition, aligning with previous studies about second language learning, culturally familiar texts should be utilised for a successful learning process (Billings, 1995; Bush, 2007; Sumarwati et al., 2023). Therefore, comic books depicting the Indian lifestyle, culture and heritage should be made available in school libraries for easy access for the students.

This study further explored the interests and openness of the students regarding reading comic books in general and using them in their English classes. The findings observed a positive perception from the students. Most of the students preferred comics due to their strong visual appeal and humorous content. Cartoons in comic books often capture the attention of learners immersed in a visually saturated society as they provide a comprehensible form of input that helps lower their affective filters (Krashen, 1982). As picture books are one of the first multimodal texts a learner is exposed to in the present generation, they are considered less intimidating than traditional black-and-white text (Cohn, 2021, Hope, 2020). Likewise, humour can also be an important element in classrooms, especially in the process of second language teaching and learning (Ziyaeemehr et al., 2011). It has been found that the use of humour in classroom instruction can make the learning process enjoyable and relaxed (Spencer, 1996), lowering the learners' affective filter and producing a positive learning outcome. These findings also aligns with Tomlinson and Masuhara's (2018) emphasis on implicit language learning and Krashen's (1985, 1993) use of comprehensible input like comics for second language learning for modern generation students that lowers the affective filter while engaging with a second language.

Furthermore, it was observed that the most concerning language issue, according to the students, was the lack of vocabulary and difficulty in sentence formation. Krashen (1983) stated that pleasure reading comic books can contribute to learning new vocabulary in a second language which further helps in developing speaking skills. Instead of reading complex texts, new language learners and learners with lower language proficiency should engage with simple texts like comics and children's literature and gradually move towards more complex ones.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, incorporating comic books in language classrooms can help bridge the technological gap in Indian classrooms, particularly in regions like Assam, India, where the medium of instruction is mostly the regional language. Considering students' enthusiasm for comics and their potential for enhancing language and visual literacy with appropriate guidance, this approach offers an inclusive alternative to technological innovations in language learning in marginalized areas of the country and schools with inadequate infrastructure and skilled teachers for multimedia usage. This also indicates that these technological innovations are not widely embraced and utilised in Indian classrooms, particularly in Assam, despite their language learning benefits. Until technological innovations become the norm and are universally embraced without leaving any exceptions, especially in marginalized areas of the country, teachers in these areas need to use easily available resources like comic books to improve students' English language proficiency. The findings of the present study can also be beneficial for developing appropriate language learning material that will enhance language skills and visual literacy in less privileged areas of the country and give students of these areas a chance for upward social mobility in a developing country like India to function comfortably.

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