Comic Books - Images, Words and Language Acquisition

Using comic books as an alternative material for teaching the English language.

English for Students in Teacher Education 15 hp

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1.0. Introduction

Teachers in modern Swedish upper secondary schools use not only literature when teaching the English language; they also use alternative material. The alternative material, such as, computers, YouTube, movies, social media, newspaper etc, is appearing more frequently in the classroom. One alternative type of material that could possibly be used is comic books.

Comic books have entertained millions of people for years, and the interest only increases. Several famous comics, such as, Avengers, Superman, Batman, X-Men, Spiderman, Arrow and Flash have become either movies or TV shows. The use of comic books in the classroom, as an alternative material for teaching the English language, is something that could be explored and researched further.

According to Skolverket, when teaching English as a second language (ESL), one of the aims of the subject (English) is described as follows:

*In teaching students should meet written and spoken English of different kinds, and relate the content to their own experiences and knowledge.*

and teaching English should give students the opportunities to develop:

*Understanding of spoken and written English, and also the ability to interpret content.*

Because they contain images, comic books as a teaching material, and text, provide an opportunity for students to encounter written English of different kinds and relate and interpreted different content.

1.1. Structure

This essay is structured as follows: Introduction, Literature Review, Material and Method, Result and Analysis, Discussion, Conclusion, References and Appendices. The “Introduction” contains the summary and overview of this essay, including the structure, purpose of this essay and thesis questions. The “Literature Review” is the chapter in which research and

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2 Ibid
applied theories in this essay are presented. The four different disciplines discussed in this essay are semantics (literal and speaker meaning), semiotics (specifically multimodality), pragmatics (Relevance Theory and deixis) and comic books in the classroom from a pedagogical perspective. The “Material and Method” chapter describes the primary data collection, i.e. how the result has been produced and the choice of material, including the background information and criteria for selecting the comic books used in the study. In this chapter, the possible issues that could occur are also discussed. The “Result and Analysis” chapter presents the result of the analysis of the exercises, how comic books could be used when teaching the English language, and offers a the comparison of the result with the theories and arguments in the literature review. In the “Discussion” chapter, the results of the study are evaluated, as are the possible issues that could arise from working with comic books and the extent to which these are described in the literature. This chapter will also attempt to provide clear answers to the thesis questions that are shown below in this Introduction. The “Conclusion” contains a final assessment of the feasibility of using comic books as teaching material and of the proposed hypothesis. Further research is also discussed in this chapter.

1.2. Purpose

Comic books provide teachers with material that contains both text and images which require students to use more than one cognitive ability in order to interpret them. The purpose of the research described in this essay is, by analysing the content of comic books, to (1) evaluate comic books as material for teaching, (2) if possible, to create an exercise that could be used in the classroom in which comic books are used for teaching ESL and (3) to suggest innovative material and related tasks that could be used to introduce students to issues related to meaning, with the focus on “literal or speaker meaning”, “multimodality” and “deixis”, and drawing upon principles and concepts described within the disciplines of semiotics, semantics and pragmatics. Accordingly, the thesis questions of this essay are described as follows:

If possible, how could comic books be used in the classroom as an alternative material for teaching the ESL?

If possible, how could comic books be used to introduce students to issues related to meaning through linguistic approaches, with the aid of semantics, semiotics and pragmatics?
It should be established at this point that there is no suggestion that school students need a
deep, technical understanding of theoretical linguistics or semiotics. However, students
learning a foreign language to a high level, e.g. in preparation to study at a university, need to
have at least a basic grasp of the mechanics of how language works and this can assist them in
formulating and interpreting utterances and written texts. To some extent, this is an inherent
feature of language teaching at all levels. New learners of any language are encouraged, for
example, to master the aspects of politeness of their target language at an early stage.

Pronouns are often used deictically and the application of deixis varies to some degree
between languages. A certain amount of knowledge of metaphors and other idiomatic
expressions is necessary for students in order to understand their pragmatic (contextual)
function and be properly decoded. Students encountering texts such as movies, TV
programmes, journalism and advertisements which incorporate other components such as
images, graphics and music will need to be able to construe intended composite meanings
from these additional modes. Teachers may or may not think it appropriate to refer to specific
linguistic theories or technical terms that are used in this essay, depending upon the level
taught and the ability of the students they are teaching. That is a matter for their professional
judgment according to the circumstances and it is not something that will be discussed further
in this essay.

2.0. Literature Review

The literature review describes three different philosophical and linguistic disciplines, namely
(1) semantics, (2) semiotics, (3) pragmatics and also a pedagogical approach, i.e. (4) comic
books in the classroom. Each of them is connected to the exercise and purpose of this essay.
The three linguistics disciplines contain several facets within each of them. Hence, the
literature review will present a short explanation of the main focus within each subject, and
then it will only discuss the parts that are relevant for this essay and the exercise.

2.1. Semantics and Semiotics

Semantics is the study of literal meaning of words and the meaning are created in the way
they are combined\(^3\), while semiotics is the study of signs, symbols and signification. In
semantics, the linguistic approach aims to study the properties systematically and objectively

\(^3\) K Kearns, *Semantics*, in , 1st ed., New York, St. Martin's Press, 2000,
with reference to utterances and language. In modern lexical semantics, the linguistic approach considers the meaning of words through a detailed analysis of how words and sentences are used in a specific context. Semiotics is an all-inclusive subject and focuses on patterned human communication in all modes, such as sound, taste, sight, touch and smell, in all contexts. (movies, politics, eating, clothes, etc.)

Semantics and semiotics contain several facets and incorporate theories and, since this essay is about using comic books when teaching the English language, the focus in semantics will be centred on “literal- and speaker meaning” and in semiotics the chief focus will be “multimodality”, which is the study of text that use more than one semantic system, including non-verbal ones.

2.1.1. Semantics – Literal- and Speaker meaning

From a semantics perspective, this essay will discuss parts of “theories of meaning”, though the term “mean” can be understood from a variety of perspectives and not all of these relate to language. The two terms that Akmajian uses, which also will be a part of this essay, are “linguistic meaning” and “speaker meaning”. He uses two examples to define both terms as followed:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a.} & \quad \text{Procrastinate means “to put things off.”} \\
\text{b.} & \quad \text{In saying “It’s getting late”, she meant that we should leave. }
\end{align*}
\]

Comic books often exploit both a linguistic meaning (a.) or speaker meaning (b.). They contain verbal expressions and, according to Akmajian, (1) linguistic meaning of an expression is simply the literal meaning or meanings of an expression, (2) speaker meaning in an expression can differ from the literal meaning, depending on whether any particular verbal contribution is “literal” or “non-literal”. Akmajian states that, when people are speaking literally, they mean what the words literally mean and there is no difference between the lexical/semantic meaning, and speaker meaning. However, when people are speaking non-literally, they mean something other than what is contained within the denotative meanings of the words. For example, people use non-literal words when they express sarcasm or irony.

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6 Ibid. p.229
since, most of the time, they mean something other than what is relayed by the denotative meaning of the words or phrases uttered. Metaphors are also a form of non-literal expression, where the words are not intended to be understood by their literal meaning when spoken or written.  

When discussing the literal meaning, Akmajian emphasises two factors that need to be taken into consideration, namely dialect and individual speakers. In some dialects, or for individual speakers, the literal meanings of the same expression may be prone to different interpretations. Akmajian compares the word “bonnet” to American English and British English, where, (1) in American English, “bonnet” refers to a type of hat, and (2) in British English, “bonnet” refers to a hood of a car. This means that some words cannot be confined to a single meaning within the English language. Furthermore, the meaning of a word could change with time. As an example, the word “gay” used to only mean “full of joy, merry, light-hearted, carefree”, whereas in the latter part of the twentieth century it began to be used commonly to refer to a homosexual person. This is now an example of homonymy, and the definition of homonymy is:

A homonym is a word that has the same pronunciation and spelling as another word but has a different meaning. An example of homonymy in English is the word stalk which means to follow someone around and it also refers to a part of a plant or flower. The meanings, unlike in cases of polysemy, are not related to each other in any way semantically, they are completely different.

When discussing homonymy, it is also important to distinguish it from “polysemy”:

Polysemy comes from the Greek word πολυσημεία which means ‘multiple meaning’. An example is where mole refers to a small burrowing animal and also a spy burrowing for information, mole refers to different things but the meaning derives from the small burrowing animal meaning. In polysemy

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7 Ibid. p.229
8 Ibid. p.229-230
meanings are usually etymologically and semantically related and have often at one point been used in metaphors.\textsuperscript{12}

Homonymy and polysemy are vital parts of the analysis included in this essay. Depending upon which comic books, and what year they were was published, words that are used in the story could have several meanings or another meaning from the time when it was written. Therefore, if students are working with specific words, they need to be able to select which from among a range of possible meanings was the one intended by the writer.

\textbf{2.1.2. Semiotics – Multimodality}

Kress and van Leeuwen discuss the semiotic landscape, and the concept that language (written or spoken) has only existed as one mode in \textit{the totality of modes involved in the production of any text, spoken or written}.\textsuperscript{13} They argue that a spoken text is not only verbal, but it is also visual with ‘non-verbal’ modes such as gestures, facial expressions, posture etc. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, a written text involves more than a language; it also includes: (1) the material the text is written on (paper, metal, stone, computer screens etc.), (2) what it is written with (gold, ink, engravings, dots, digital etc.), and (3) the letters that are formed from a system with influences, such as aesthetic, pragmatic, psychological etc.\textsuperscript{14}

Kress and van Leeuwen give an overview of comparison between visual and linguistic narrative process, and present it as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual narrative process</th>
<th>Linguistic narrative clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-transactional action</td>
<td>One-participant (Actor) material process (‘action’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidirectional transactional action</td>
<td>Two-participant material process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--</td>
<td>One-participant (Goal) material process (‘event’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bidirectional transactional action</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-transactional reaction</td>
<td>Behaviour process (fields of looking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactional reaction</td>
<td>Mental process: perception (visual only)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental process</td>
<td>Mental process (cognition and affection)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal process</td>
<td>Verbal process (quotation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--</td>
<td>Verbal process (affection)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.108
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. p.39
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. p.77
The purpose of the table is to highlight that human experience can be represented and realized linguistically, visually, or both. The table is also useful as a background for analysing multimodal texts like photographs and their captions, diagrams and their verbal glosses or stories and their illustrations. Kress and van Leeuwen emphasise that this role of distribution is not fixed, nor does it entirely accord with the description of the two modes of communication. For example, the verbal process has been restricted to comic strip or cartoon drawings until recently, but now dialogue balloons and visual quoting devices have become more common in other domains.16

According to Kress and van Leeuwen, there are three interrelated systems when analysing images for representational and interactive meanings, namely (1) information value, (2) salience and (3) framing. “Information value” refers to the placements of elements, the specific informal values attached to various ‘zones’ within the image: top, bottom, left, right, margin or centre. “Salience” concerns the elements, and how they are made to attract the viewer’s attention to a different degree: placement in the foreground/background, size, contrasts, colours, or difference in sharpness. “Framing” focuses on how the absence presence or presence of framing, connects, or disconnects the elements of the image and that they, in some sense, either belong together or they do not. These three systems that Kress and van Leeuwen discuss do not only apply when analysing a single picture; they also apply visuals, visuals with images and text or other graphic materials.17

Kress and van Leeuwen consider whether a multimodal text, or texts where more than one semiotic system could be used, should be analysed separately or in an integrated way, if the meaning of a text or image, or both, should be the sum of the meaning of parts or whether the parts should be looked upon as interacting with and affecting one another. The authors insist upon drawing comparisons between language and visual communication, because their purpose is to remove the disciplinary boundaries between the study of language and images. From their point of view, the integration of different semiotic codes (systems) is the result of an overarching code whose rules and meanings provide the multimodal text with the logic of integration.18

Jaworski and Coupland emphasise that discourse analysis, in the context of communication, could be extended and include non-linguistic semiotic systems, such as non-

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16 Ibid. p.78
17 Ibid. p.183
18 Ibid. p.183
verbal or non-vocal communication which accompany or replace speech or writing. Both authors also discuss the possibility to include something that ‘embodies’ the communication or a physical system of representation, such as sign language, performance art, paintings, sculpture, photography, music, or design.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{2.2. Pragmatics – Relevance Theory and Deixis}

Implicatures are the main focus of any pragmatic investigation and, according to Cruse, are described as follows:

\begin{quote}
These are parts of the meanings of utterances which, although intended, are not strictly part of ‘what is said’ in the act of utterance, nor do they follow logically from what is said.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

As with semantics, there are several facets of pragmatics, and these consist largely of theories which attempt to explain speaker meaning and how that meaning is recovered. Thus, what Mey refers to as “the language user” is of key interest to pragmatics\textsuperscript{21}. Mey argues that there are also several aspects surrounding the term “use of language” and defining this and pragmatics is considered problematic. However, he continues to define it anyway as,

\begin{quote}
Pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society.\textsuperscript{22},
\end{quote}

though that definition does not:

\begin{quote}
delimit pragmatics either clearly and neatly, or to everybody's satisfaction.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

For the purposes of this essay, the description and application of pragmatics will be limited to facets and theories proposed within Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory, and to deixis. In order to present a better understanding, both terms will be described next.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. p.6
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. p.7
2.2.1 Relevance theory

When discussing relevance theory, Mey refers to Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber\textsuperscript{24} (the authors of \textit{Relevance – Communication & Cognition}) and, according to them, pragmatics only needs one of Grice’s conversational maxims to explain the processes of implicature, i.e. relevance:

\textit{the principle of relevance is essential to explaining human communication … how it is enough on its own to account for the interaction of linguistic meaning and contextual factors in utterance interpretation.}\textsuperscript{25}.

Sperber and Wilson state that:

\textit{The central claim of relevance theory is that the expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise and predictable enough to guide the hearer toward the speaker’s meaning.}\textsuperscript{26}

Billy Clark, the author of \textit{Relevance Theory}, specifies three terms that must be distinguished when working on linguistic meaning: “sentence”, “utterance” and “proposition”. Clark (who also refers to Sperber and Wilson) defines “utterances” as physical entities and as such capable of being recognised both aurally and visually. Also, an utterance is either written or spoken by a specific person at a distinct time and where the utterance is made. He defines a “sentence” as both linguistic- and abstract entity, since it does not take account of properties such as speaker, time and place. The last term, “proposition”, is a kind of abstraction that focuses on logical properties. According to Clark, a proposition can be expressed as the specific concrete realisations of sentences which refer to the term utterance.\textsuperscript{27}

According to Sperber and Wilson, relevance is anything that provides an input to a cognitive process (like an external stimulus or an internal representation). Sperber and Wilson argue that relevance is a potential property not only of utterances and other observable

\textsuperscript{24} J Mey, 2001, p.85
phenomena, but that it also includes thoughts, memories, sights, or sounds. Hence, anything could be relevant as an input for the auditor. Depending on the individual, it could connect with background information (s)he has available to draw conclusions that makes her/him understand.  

Therefore, according to relevance theory, the process of communicating does not only involve an “encoding”, “transfers” and “decoding” (the basic of communication): it also includes numerous of other elements and context.

This theory creates a foundation for the research in this essay. Comics contain images and words, and some words become relevant for the meaning of the image, or images that become relevant for the meaning of the words.

2.2.2 Deixis

According to Susan Strauss and Parastou Feiz, deixis comes from the Greek word “deiktikos”, which means ‘to point’, ‘to show’, and that, A deictic expression is one that requires context in order for the speaker or hearer to know what is being referred to. They continue by explaining that deictic expressions include:

- personal pronouns - such as ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘he’, ‘she’.
- adverbs of time and place - such as ‘here’, ‘there’, ‘then’, ‘now’, ‘yesterday’.
- demonstratives – such as ‘this’ and ‘that’.

Strauss and Feiz also explain the importance of knowing time or place for the participants of the communication. Without knowing when ‘now’ is, or where ‘here’ is, the recipient will not fully understand the content of the conversation or information. This applies to both written and spoken communication.

Kirsten Malmkjær also alludes to the personal pronouns, time and place, when she discusses pragmatics and deixis. However, she highlights something else that is essential for this essay, namely the “social deixis”. Social deixis is a subcategory and it, has been identified for cases where social identity is relevant for linguistic choices. Social deixis is an interesting perspective when conducting an analysis, especially when working with comic books. The stories in comic books often contain some kind of social circle or environment.

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28 Ibid p.608
30 Ibid. p.103
portrayed in the story, and something that could create a specific vocabulary from the characters.

Since this essay focuses on comic books in which the characters, situations and places are fictional, the analysis becomes abstract and is contingent upon the reader’s ability to interpret the images and emotions portrayed. On the other hand, comic books consist of a language and a cast of characters (a context) which creates an environment that could be analysed, even though everything portrayed is fictional.

2.3 Teaching through comic books

This chapter contains: (1) a theoretical/pedagogical perspective on teaching the English language, (2) comic books as a third language and (3) the use comic books in the classroom.

2.3.1 A theoretical/pedagogical perspective on teaching the English language

The theoretical/pedagogical perspective is “reading comprehension”. When working with reading comprehension for teaching students about internal meaning and context (i.e. semantics and pragmatics) as in this essay, Bo Lundahl states that it is a process between knowledge and understanding, and something that cannot be regarded as static. Reading comprehension is dynamic, where re-interpretations, conversations and writing about text, could create new insights.32

However, Lundahl’s description of reading comprehension does not only apply exclusively to linguistic texts. Since the students are working with comic books which contain images and words, they need both knowledge and understanding of the words and situations portrayed. Lundahl states that it is hard to estimate how the relationship between colloquial language and images works. If a person were only to listen or read something without any pictures, that person would need to understand approximately 95-98% of the words to achieve an adequate understanding of what is read or heard. When images are present, they alone could provide enough information for a bare bones understanding, and colloquial language could be partly or fully removed.33

Comic books contain a smaller amount of text when compared to a novel. The combination of text, image and emphasis of a story provides the reader with more than sufficient information and understanding. Comic books often contain numerous dialogs, and

33 Ibid. p.67
the blending between text and image and the symbolism within the text creates the possibility of multiple interpretations and subtleties. This means that the content is in need of interpretation. Lundahl argues that, because of what is previously mentioned, comic books offer an exciting complement for literature (both youth and adult versions) and an entry point for students that are not used to reading literature.\textsuperscript{34}

2.3.2 Comic books as a “third language”

The first argument for using comic books, such as “Spider-Man” and “Peanuts”, is based on Jan-Erik Anders's book, \textit{The third language - communication with several senses}, where Ander discusses the term “the third language”. “The third language”, as a concept, was created by the encyclopaedist Sven Lidman, and deals with the interaction of words, image, form, light, moving image and interactivity. “The third language” also deals with the interaction between different forms of expression to convey information, whether it concerns advertising, information, encyclopaedia, ancient art or comic books.

Ander discusses how people have communicated with each other for thousands of years and conveyed impressions with images and sounds. Until about 3,700 years ago, almost all communication was based on sound and image only, and the printed word has been the dominant deliverer of information these last 500-years. Even though text has functioned as the leading mediator of the actual message, the image has become a tool which is intended to convey to a receiver the physical appearance of an object or scene.\textsuperscript{35}

Communication requires some form of encoded behaviour which can be decoded or interpreted by an intended recipient. In modern education, spoken and written languages dominate in terms of communication (either students read about something or a teacher tells them about it), but most impressions in modern society (for example social media, computers etc.) are also visual. According to Ander, between 70\% and 90\% of all information received is from sources that are neither spoken nor written. The majority of communication consists of photographs, drawings, graphics and moving images. The choice of pictures can convey the feelings experienced by the producer of the message, relay factual information or express a point of view.\textsuperscript{36}

A key requirement in any educational process is the ability to transfer instructions and information as clearly and efficiently as possible. According to Ander, it is the informant’s

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid. pp.68-69
\textsuperscript{35} J Ander, \textit{Tredje språket}, 1st ed. Stockholm, Arena i samarbete med Bild och ord akad, 2003 p.15
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid p.12
responsibility to organise and deliver the information in such a way that the recipient understands and uses the content as intended. In cases where two texts are in competition for the attention of a reader, then efficiency in conveying the message is of outmost importance. An example of this might occur when two rival politicians are seeking to attract votes of electors and each has to optimise the clarity and persuasive qualities of their respective message.37

People collect information differently; some prefer to listen or read texts, while others prefer to look at pictures or watch TV. Alternatively, there are people who prefer to read comic books, not only for entertainment, but also use it as a source of information.38 Comic books consist a sequence of images and are structured to create an understanding for the reader. The structure and content of each image, or series of images, creates a visual language similar to the sign language. In order for the reader to understand what is happening or conveyed, the creator uses different motives / shapes / characters as tools. There are also clear markings to facilitate the reader understanding and drawing the desired interpretations. In comic books, text, image and form are integrated, and everything is visual. This makes the boundaries between imagination / reality, realistic drawings / blurred symbols.39

Ander continues to discuss knowledge of, and interest in, drawn pictures. To create knowledge and interest, copywriters and graphic artists need to have a shared understanding of the intended narrative. He argues that there are a number of skilled cartoonists, illustrators, journalists and writers, but that does not mean that they are efficient communicators. To be able to explain requires more than knowledge about texts and images but, according to Ander, it also requires an interest in what the creator wants to convey. Others point out that having an interest as a creator makes it easier to understand and simplify the subject, but still keep the truthfulness.40

An essential component of a series is the talk bubble, or balloon. The balloon conveys not only a text, but also a thought or feeling. By forming the balloon in a certain way, the author can create an understanding of the environment.41 A character that is angry, freezing, scared, thinking or shocked can be identified as such with a balloon. Understanding how a character feels and behaves makes it easier for the reader to interpret the image. Others say that the

37 Ibid. p.17  
38 Ibid. p.17  
39 Ibid. p.140-141  
40 Ibid. p.160-161  
41 Ibid. p.135
balloon can be seen as a “pictograph”\textsuperscript{42}, which means: \textit{A pictorial symbol for a word or phrase}\textsuperscript{43}. For example, the crossed cigarette in the sign of "smoking forbidden", where the form/shape of the sign, reinforces the text.\textsuperscript{44} When discussing balloons as pictograms, a balloon that is designed as a cloud signifies that a character is thinking (“thought balloons”), a bursting balloon signifies that someone screams and a balloon with a single note signifies that a character is whistling.

Anders points out that, regardless of whether they relate to an information sheet on an airplane or message in a serial page, there are several requirements / elements in the pictures that are required in order to create and convey something to the reader.

\textbf{2.3.3 Comic books in the classroom}

Fredrik Strömberg provides a general perspective on using comic books in the classroom. According to Strömberg, comic books are an art form that can be adapted to the knowledge requirements of the Swedish National Agency for Education. In his “Teacher’s manual”, Strömberg discusses comic books as an art form, how to read them, the three dominant types of series, Swedish series, terminology and series in school. He refers to the old proverb, “An image says more than a thousand words”, and he considers that it offers an explanation of how humans assimilate narratives in comic books. Also, he claims that the proverb gives an understanding on the amount of information a comic book can contain.

When it comes to working with comic books in school, Strömberg argues that there are several advantages in using these as an educational tool.\textsuperscript{46} Comic books could be used to develop students' cognitive abilities since:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Reading series stimulates reading comprehension, image interpretation, and not least associative ability} \textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{42} Ibid.136-137
\bibitem{44} Ander, 2003 p.136-137
\bibitem{46} Ibid p.15
\bibitem{47} Ibid. p.15 - my own translation
\end{thebibliography}
... decoding words and images in combination, a skill that is becoming increasingly important in today's image-based society.\textsuperscript{48}

This is also essential when analysing a comic book as a tool for teaching meaning, comprehension and context in English for Swedish school students.

The tutorial continues by suggesting comic books as a gateway to different subjects within school, then demonstrating how they can be used when teaching Swedish, image, social studies, foreign languages and cooperation across the subject boundaries. In social studies, Strömberg describes an exercise that he calls “historically correct?”, where the goal is to "acquire and allow students to analyse series presenting a historical time, to see how historically correct they are.” \textsuperscript{49} Strömberg gives an example that teachers could work with, namely Art Spiegelman’s “Mause”, which is a story about the Holocaust\textsuperscript{50}. In the story, the Jews are portrayed as mice, while the Nazis are cats. This plays on the classic view of the relationship between a cat and a mouse, that the cat is the most common nemesis of the mouse, similar to the cartoon “Tom and Jerry” (which is also about the conflict between a mouse called “Jerry” and a cat named “Tom”).

\subsection*{3.0. Material and Method}
\subsubsection*{3.1. Method}
This is a qualitative study on using comic books for teaching meaning creation and interpretation. The method for this study is divided into three different parts, (1) choosing two comic books, (2) extract two scenes and create a blueprint of an exercise, and (3) analyse and evaluate for possible use in the classroom. The method also presents possible issues, both pedagogical and ethical.

The first part of the method is choosing two types of comic books. There are thousands of comic books, and choosing two of them requires an overview of their content. To narrow the number of comic books, the choice of comic books will be based on recognition and content. By reviewing different rankings of popularity, this study will be based on two different comics. Furthermore, both comics will also be analysed for their possible use for teaching multimedia approaches to communication (through multimodality theories), literal or speaker-
meaning- and deixis. The two comic books that will be used for the exercises are Marvel’s “The Amazing Spider-Man” and Schulz classic comic strip, “Peanuts”.

The second part, the extraction of scenes that will be reconstructed into exercises, is based on the text and images of each scene or strip. The exercise is going to be “Connect the text to the balloon”, and it will be a blueprint of a future exercise for introducing aspects of semiotics, semantics and pragmatics. Therefore, the parts that are used for the exercise needs to contain some specific elements of the semantic and pragmatic facets discussed in the literature review.

The last part of the method is analysis and evaluation. The exercises will be analysed and evaluated on their ability to create an exercise for introducing semantics-based topics, context-based topics, or both. Since “Spider-Man” and “Peanuts” are different types of comic books, where “Spider-Man” is an adventure story and “Peanuts” is a comedy, a story in “Spider-Man” is often portrayed in one or over multiple numbers of comic books, while “Peanuts” is generally told in one strip or one page. Depending on the number of the pages, a story often provides exercises that focus more on features that fall under semiotics, semantics or pragmatics. A short story might play more on puns and speaker meaning, while a story with several pages might use a wider variety of modes, and contain more deictic references.

The exercises will not be tested in class because of time constraints. However, they will be tested on two test subjects, and their thoughts and approach to the exercise will be transcribed and evaluated. In order to understand and observe their thinking and mind-set, the test subjects will be instructed to think out loud while working on the exercise. The observation could provide possible approaches and mindsets of students working with the exercises in class. Everything that is said and related to the theories presented in this essay will be transcribed into a “Think-out-loud” transcription.

The result will include parts from the “Think-out-loud” transcription, though it will only include parts that appear relevant to the theoretical approaches which are of interest in this essay, or provide an input for the result; otherwise the transcript would contain unnecessary information that serves no purpose for this study. Both test subjects are learning English while detained in a Swedish prison and preserving their anonymity is essential. For this reason, no video or audio files could be created and the subjects are referred to by fictitious names. Furthermore, they will be provided with suggested vocabulary in the form of relevant names and terms. The reason for this is to simplify evaluation of the transcript, and facilitate the connection to the theories in this essay. For example, they will be supplied with the names of the characters and that the speech bubble is called a “balloon” etc.
The possible issues that could occur when creating these exercises, since they are going to be a blueprint and only theoretical, is that they might be too difficult; the students might not fully understand them or they might not provide meaningful data. A teacher may be confronted with students without any knowledge or interest in comic books, which could result in them finding the exercises boring, unnecessary or not challenging enough. Another issue that could occur is the lack of prior knowledge about the different ways meaning is conveyed semantically and pragmatically. Even though the exercise is about teaching the operation of communicative modes, the distinction between literal and speaker meaning and deictic referencing, the students might not have enough knowledge to understand what they are learning or its significance.

An obstacle that teachers’ frequently encounter is the lack of time. They might not have enough time to give their students adequate prior knowledge through a comprehensive briefing process. Even if a student succeeds with the exercise, it does not mean that (s)he understands the implications or value of what they learned. Finally, due to the lack of time, the exercises in this essay will not be practised on any students. The exercises will only be analysed and compared with what was mentioned in the literary review. Hence, these exercises could only provide data which could indicate the validity of the hypothesis and thus only be considered at best a potential blueprint for teaching about features that are described in semiotics, semantics and pragmatics, including multimodality, literal or speaker-meaning- and deixis.

There are some aspects of comic books that might create an ethical issue. Since the exercises are based on comic books, there is a possibility that the characters portrayed in the story might promote a particular perception of an idealised body image. Several comic books, such as “X-men”, “Spider-Man” or “Justice League” etc., contain characters that have bodies that could reinforce existing preconceptions of unrealistic body shapes, and a possible impact on the readers perceptions as to how people should look. The male characters have defined abdominal muscles, arms and legs similar to competing bodybuilders, while the women might have slim waists, a large bosom and revealing outfits (some barely wear clothes). In “Peanuts”, which contains theological messages, there could be students that might find it offensive, and therefore an obstacle to their learning, if they do not share the same religious beliefs. This scenario could occur if a student is Muslim or Jewish discuss “the Great Pumpkin”, which could be interpreted as a religious metaphor. Since Linus (a character in Peanuts) is waiting for the Great Pumpkin to appear every Halloween, the metaphor could be interpreted differently. In Islam and Christianity there have been messianic figures, namely
Mohammed and Jesus respectively, but in Judaism it is believed that the messiah has not arrived yet. “The Great Pumpkin” could be a metaphor for the second coming of Jesus and, to a Jewish student, the messiah who has yet to arrive. In a scenario, where the pumpkin is a metaphor for Mohammed, there will be no second coming of the messiah. However, the absence of the Great Pumpkin could also be a metaphor for faith because people believe in God (or Allah) even if they never witness any signs of existence.

Both “Spider-Man” and “Peanuts” could be offensive in terms of how they portray the characters depending on their colour of their skin. There is a possibility that, if the comic books contain stereotypes, that they could be based on the colour of their skin. Since both of them were founded in the 1950’s and 1960’s, that is something that needs to be taken into consideration. This could also include gender stereotypes, where the men and women play a particular role that follows preconceptions about past gender roles. However, a teacher could make the students aware of this and what they could expect to traditional or clichéd representations of gender, for example men work and provide for the family, while the women taking care of the children and the household.

3.2. Material – “The Amazing Spider-Man” and “Peanuts”

Strömberg's definition of comic books is that they consist of side-by-side, motionless images in a conscious sequence. Strömberg continues with that they:

...usually consist of sequential narratives with both words and images, and it is both the relationship between image and image and the relationship between image and words that creates meaning.51

The material that is used for this analysis comprises two comic books, “Spider-Man” and “Peanuts”. In order to create a better understanding of these two comics, a short summary on what they are is provided in the following subchapters.

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51 Strömberg, 2016, p.6 – my own translation
3.2.1. The Amazing Spider-Man

Marvels “The Amazing Spider-Man”, was created by Stan Lee and Steve Dikto, and the character first appeared in “Amazing Fantasy #15”, from 1962. The story is about Peter Parker, a boy who was orphaned as a baby when his parents died in a plane crash. Later, he learned that they were spies for the U.S. government. As their only child, Peter Parker was raised by his Uncle Ben and Aunt May. Peter was academically gifted and displayed an affection for science.52 However, he was extremely shy and bullied by his peers at his high school.

Peter was 15-years old when he was bitten on the hand by a radioactive spider on a field trip and while attending a public science exhibit. The spider was accidentally irradiated by a particle beam, and the bite empowered Peter with the superhuman strength and agility, and the ability to cling to almost any surface, just like a spider. Furthermore, he had gained a sixth sense that gave him the ability to sense danger before it happened.53

With his newly acquired powers, Peter started wrestling under his new name, “Spider-Man”. After a show, Peter witnesses a robbery, something that he could easily have intervened in as the burglar had run past him, and then escaped. Afterwards, Peter returned home to find out that Uncle Ben had been shot and killed. Peter confronted the killer, who was hiding from the police, and he discovered the burglar he let pass by him was the one that murdered his uncle. Consumed by the guilt for his uncle, he became aware of what his uncle has taught, namely that “with great power comes great responsibility”.54 This has become the major theme of the comic book ever since, as Spider-Man fights crime and villains like, The Vulture, Kingpin, Dr Octopus, Craven, Mysterio, Shocker, Scorpion, Hobgoblin, Green Goblin etc.

Though there are several characters in “Spider-Man” with different personalities, the story revolves around good vs evil and does not require a complete understanding of each character’s personality. The focus lies on characters’ relationship with Spider-Man and if they are friend or foe, something the scenes in the comic books often portrays rather clearly. Furthermore, “Spider-Man” cartoons contain several stereotypes of heroes and villains and traditional moral stances regarding what is right and what is wrong. There are characters that are connected to some kind of animal (including Spider-Man himself) and are often portrayed

52 “Spider-Man (Peter Parker) - Marvel Universe Wiki: The definitive online source for Marvel super hero bios.”, in <http://marvel.com/universe/Spider-Man_(Peter_Parker)#axzz5E8x1iQye> [accessed 30 April 2018].
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
after people’s preconceptions and myths about the respective animals’ characteristics and abilities. For example, vultures and scorpions often correlate with evil and death, and therefore two villains in the comic books are based on these two animals.

Since “Spider-Man” is one of the most famous superheroes in all of the Marvel Universe, and known to general public (because of comic books, animated series, movies, clothes, toys etc.), these comics appear to be appropriate to work with in class. On Marvel’s official website, “Spider-Man” is considered one the most popular characters. However, there are people (including students) that may not be familiar with “Spider-Man”, and this something a teacher will need to be mindful of when working with the comic books.

3.2.2. Peanuts

Created by Charles M. Schulz, “Peanuts” was first published in 1950, and for half a century, it has been one of the world’s most popular comic strips. Peanuts has provided the readers with simple art and profound messages; several of them are theological.

Since October 2, 1950, the story has been about the characters, Charlie Brown, his dog Snoopy and their friends, Lucy, Linus, Sally Brown, Schroeder, Pig Pen, Franklin, Peppermint Patty, and Marcie. Since “the “Peanuts” cartoon often comprises small comic strips, it is necessary to understand each character’s personality and how their presence could affect the environment (the context) in each strip. Therefore, a brief summary of each character relevant for the exercises described in this essay follows:

Charlie Brown, the main character, is a boy who always strikes out and may be considered a “lovable loser” who never gives up. He manages the world’s worst baseball team (yet he shows up for every game) and never finds the courage to talk to his crush, the girl called “the Little Red-Haired Girl”. Franklin, Charlie’s quiet friend, is his confidant and might be the only one who never said anything cruel word about Charlie. Peppermint Patty, or Patricia Reichardt, is a fearless, natural born leader and athlete. She takes on any challenge except studying since she hates school. Though she is tough, she has a soft side and is hopelessly in love with Charlie “Chuck” Brown (something Charlie does not know about). Her opinion about life is that “sports are easy and it is life that is hard”.

The rest of the characters in

Peanuts are described in greater detail in Appendix 3 in order to illustrate how the characters are able to influence the environment in the scenes, or strips, they are participating in. Some anonymous characters (a character that mostly appears ones, often without any name) could appear in the comic books, and one of them does in the exercise. “Peanuts”, according to Ranker (a leading digital media company for opinion-based, crowdsourced rankings, with 80 millions visits worldwide each day), is considered one of the most recognizable comic strips in the world\(^5^9\), and this would justify its consideration as a suitable comic book to work with. However, there are likely to be students who do not know about “Peanuts”; therefore, a teacher needs to take that into consideration if working with it in the classroom. Some students might need a review of the comic book, as mentioned previously, to fully understand the various characters and their roles, and also the environment in which they function.

### 3.2.3. The exercises

The exercises are created from parts, or scenes, from both Peanuts and Spider-Man. The purpose of the exercises is for students to connect a small text to the correct balloon. In order to connect the text and balloon, they need to analyse the images and understand when and why a person would say that particular thing at that specific time.

The first exercise is “The Peanuts Exercise” (Appendix 1), which contains a scene where Peppermint Patty tries to get rid of a pumpkin after Halloween. She fails to give it away, so she conceives another use of the pumpkin. The exercise contains three major characters, Peppermint Patty, Charlie Brown, and Franklin. It also contains one anonymous character.

The second exercise is “The Spider-Man-exercise” (Appendix 2), and the scene takes place in the beginning of the Spider-Man origin story. In the scene, Peter just realised that Uncle Ben is dead and he blames himself for it. Also he blames himself for putting him and Aunt May in their current financial difficulty. He is angry and he sneaks to his aunt and eavesdrop on her conversation with the landlord.

4.0. Result and Analysis

With the basis in relevance theory and by analysing the content of a comic book, the aim of this essay was to, (1) if possible, create an exercise that could be use in the classroom for teaching the English language (ESL) and (2) create material and related tasks that could be used to introduce students to concepts and theories that are to be found in the disciplines of semiotics, semantics and pragmatics, as described in the Theoretical Background, with focus on “literal or speaker meaning”, “multimodality” and “deixis”. The result and analysis of the exercises are divided into five parts, literal or speaker meaning, multimodality, deixis, using comic books for teaching the English language and the testing of the exercise.

4.1. Literal or Speaker meaning

Since most of the scenes in both exercises are presented as conversations or dialogs, most of the text should be interpreted from a speaker meaning perspective, though in the “Spider-Man-exercise”, there is also an explanation of the scene.\(^\text{60}\) However, both exercises provide good examples of the difference between literal and speaker meaning and the importance of context, that everything external to the text but which has a bearing on it and is thereby connected to the utterance needs to be taken into consideration. This also requires students to use more than one semiotic system (or semiotic code), which is the basis of relevance theory: that anything that provides an input to a cognitive process (such as, an external stimulus or an internal representation) is relevant for the meaning of the words. In the first image of the “Spider-Man-exercise”, Peter uses two semiotic systems; he is speaking (though it is written) and uses body language. He says that it his fault that Uncle Ben is dead, and by throwing his suit into the closet, the body language signifies that he is angry/sad/disappointed.\(^\text{61}\)

In the “Peanuts-exercise”, there are a couple of utterances that could be used to define literal or speaker meaning. In “Peanuts”, some of the utterances used in this strip are, “rats!”, “he is a neat one…”, “Hello, Chuck?” or “hang on…”, and all of them could be misinterpreted if taken literally. The expression “rats!” literal meaning is two or more rodents, while the speaker meaning in the exercise is a milder curse word and an exclamation of disappointment. Therefore, “rats!” is also an example of polysemy or, perhaps, it may be viewed as a metaphorical expression. “He is a neat one” literally means a male entity, mostly

\(^{60}\) Appendix 2

\(^{61}\) Ibid.
human or at least animate, who is is nice, handsome, proper etc., but in the exercise “he” is a pumpkin, something that becomes clear in the context and what is previously said in the balloon, though “he” on its own, becomes unclear since pumpkins do not have genders and so the expected pronoun of choice would have been "it". “Hello, Chuck?” is evidently a greeting by the speaker of a person named "Chuck". However, the presence of the question mark suggests that the speaker aims to establish if Chuck is the person being addressed, or if someone called Chuck is still present. When Peppermint Patty says “Chuck”, she refers to Charlie Brown. Since all letters in the balloons are in capital letters, the reader cannot distinguish proper nouns from common nouns, “chuck” could also mean to throw, dismiss, or reject something, (like a chuck a ball or chuck a relationship), or the name of an attachment for holding a workpiece or tool in a machine (for example on a drill). Hence, “chuck” is also an example of a homonym. Patty’s use of "Chuck" has the potential to confuse a reader who is not familiar with the story. Since Patty uses this sobriquet, the writer is relying on the reader either calculating the meaning through implicature (i.e. the environment generated by the pictures supplies a context), or from previous knowledge of the comic book. The last sample, “hang on” is a phrase which literally means that someone needs to hang on something and keep hanging. However, in the scene Patty is talking on the phone, then the phrase has a specific meaning in relation to telephony, specifically that Charlie is instructed to wait on the telephone and not end the call (i.e. “hang up”). “Hang on…”, in this context, is phrasal verb used as a metaphor. “Hang on” is also an established metaphor and the presence (or mention) of the telephone in the scene invites the reader to recover only the metaphorical meaning, as that has optimal relevance, and to discard any literal meaning.

“The Amazing Spider-Man”-exercise is somewhat different. There are of course literal and speaker meanings, but there are more literary elements in this exercise. In the beginning of the scene, there is a small white balloon where some kind of narrator (possibly the author turned himself into the narrator) that explains the first image and sets the mood of the scene. It continues with, though they are portrayed as thoughts, the yellow balloons that turn Spider-Man himself into a narrator. Both of these are used to set the mood and explain how the character feels in the same way a narrator often does in a novel. These are all literal meanings, since the reader does not need the pictures in order to recover the context as the words are sufficient to convey all the intended meaning. 

62 Appendix 1
63 Appendix 2
There are some utterances that, if only taken literally and without context, will not be fully understandable. For example, “I was too late to save him”, “Y-you aint human!” and “Got you!”.

The utterance “I was too late to save him” explains that someone was too late to save a particular male entity, but the words do not identify the referent of the pronoun “him”, nor do they specify from what this entity needed to be saved, but not who or from what. “Save” has also a polysemic value, such as, “I save money”, “I save a goal”, “I save a life”. It could be a small dog from being locked inside a car, a taxi driver from drowning or, as for the story, someone from being killed. “Y-you aint human!”, if taken literally, means that someone is not human, that (s)he is a dog, cat, car, balloon or something else. The double ‘y’s is clearly indicating the speaker is stuttering and the exclamation mark adds stress to the utterance. The cumulative effect is suggestive of a person that is experiencing fear. In the exercise, the murderer accuses Spider-Man of being inhuman because he is seen scaling down a wall and then he shoots the murderer with spider web to incapacitate him. Nonetheless, Peter is supposedly human, but he has super-human abilities because of an incident with a radioactive spider. The third sample, “Got you!”, means that someone has achieved or acquired something or someone (like a fish, deer, butterfly or a person). The utterance could also mean that (1) a person understands what another person described, explained, told or order them to do, (2) that a person has tricked or fooled someone, (3) a person beats another one in a game (for example chess), or (4) a pat or nudge under the chin. The literal meaning works, but the student would not fully understand who or what without the context recovered from the image (which confirms that the speaker has captured the criminal and other possible meanings can be disregarded as one follows the principles of relevance theory). All three texts contain examples of multimodal features, and these will be outlined in the next subchapter.

4.2. Multimodality

Multimodality, in the context of the analysis, focuses on interpretations and the relationship between texts and images. Both exercises are based on interpreting and connecting a text to an image, therefore both of them present an opportunity for the students to learn about multimodality. If students are to attempt to connect either the “No, I don’t want it” in the Peanuts-exercise, or “Ouch!” in the Spider-Man-exercise, they need to analyse more than

64 Ibid.
65 Appendix 1
66 Appendix 2
one semiotic system because both utterances contain a non-verbal system (hand gestures). Furthermore, both exercises are based on comic books and they automatically require students to use more than one semiotic system, thereby introducing students into one of the concepts of multimodality. The samples in the in previous chapter could also be used as examples of multimodality.

Comparing the exercise with what is discussed in the literature review, both of them contain enough elements for the students to help secure a basic understanding of multimodal communication. Students could use the table with the comparison between visual and linguistic narrative process. This is the case where, for example, students are to work with the difference between visual and linguistic “mental process” in the scene where Peppermint Patty talks to Charlie Brown. She tells the reader that she has an idea, starts working in the kitchen on something and finally she tells the reader that she is making a pie.  

Students could also work with the three aspects of analysing a picture, (1) information value, (2) salience and (3) framing, as part of the exercises. For example, if a student undertakes an analysis of the Spider-Man-exercise, they could start with information value. In Spider-Man, they will notice that the Spider-Man is not always in centre and the positioning changes, depending on the scene. When Peter eavesdrops on Aunt May, he is on the right side of the image behind a curtain, while Aunt May and the landlord are on the left. The positioning of this scene provides the reader with the impression that Peter does not want Aunt May to know that he heard them. When it comes to salience, and looking at the scene when Peter talks about being bitten by a radioactive spider, (1) there is a picture of Peter’s head in the upper left corner, making it clear that Peter is the narrator, (2) the image shows him being bitten, in the lower left corner, (3) climbing on a wall in the centre and (4) a picture of him in his Spider-Man suit on the right side. In this small frame there are four images that, if read from left to right, depict the course of events showing how Peter becomes Spider-Man. The last aspect is “framing”, and the students are presented with different types of framing in the exercise and the way it creates a different flow in the story (e.g. the scene where Peter becomes the narrator and he talks about Uncle Ben murder). The images are connected and become a timeline in the story.  

The exercises also could compare the types of balloons and their content. In “Peanuts”, there is one type of balloon, while in “Spider-Man” there are different types, distinguishing between silent thoughts and utterances in the scene. The letters are also presented differently, 

67 Appendix 1  
68 Appendix 2
depending on what type of feeling they are intended to convey (e.g., bold letters highlights the stressed word in a sentence.). Both exercises are useful when working with multimodality, depending on the precise learning outcomes intended. There are aspects of multimodality that need to be covered using another exercise (for example if they should work with sign language), but overall, they work rather well as an introduction to multimodality.

4.3. Deixis

For teaching about deixis, both exercises offer usable examples for the students to work with. When they connect the text to the balloon, they need to know the referents of “I”, “me”, “he”, and what “it” refers to; images provide the students with information and context to enable the intended referents of these pronouns to be identified by the reader. Both exercises use several samples of personal deixis, and they also provide information about time and place, although some information might need to be recovered through deeper analysis or prior knowledge.

Looking solely at a text or utterances, it is difficult to comprehend their meanings. However, since there are images, the respective referents for the deictic expressions become understandable. There are examples of the first deictic expression, personal pronouns, which includes words like “he” or “you”. For example, in “Peanuts” Charlie talks on the phone and says, “Yes! I’m still here”\(^{69}\), and in “Spider-Man” Peter hunts down the killer and says, “He won’t escape Spiderman!”\(^{70}\). These examples, together with an analysis of the images, are associated with a specific person and also provide some examples of the second type of deictic expression, which include adverbs of time and place (directly after Uncle Ben was murdered). Another example of the adverbial parts are, (1) the first image of the Spider-Man-exercise; the scene is described with a balloon, who is in it and where it takes place\(^{71}\), and (2) in the Peanuts-exercise, the reader will know that the incident has occurred following Halloween, so it occurred after the 31\(^{st}\) October (this means it is autumn and the time of year when the holiday is celebrated)\(^{72}\). The third type of deictic expression, “demonstratives”, is the one that is excluded in the exercises. Demonstratives are pronouns and determiners like ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘these’ or ‘those’, and points to a particular noun or to the noun it replaces. No part of the exercise uses these expressions; therefore, demonstratives have to be explained.

\(^{69}\) Appendix 1
\(^{70}\) Appendix 2
\(^{71}\) Ibid.
\(^{72}\) Appendix 1
separately. However, the lack of demonstratives could be taught through elimination. If a student has prior knowledge about demonstratives, they will know and are able to explain why it is excluded (because of the missing words ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘these’ or ‘those’). Finally, if another scene or comic books had been chosen, there is an opportunity to exemplify demonstratives also.

When discussing the social deixis in the exercises, the characters in Peanuts use certain titles when greeting adults or specific characters. Marcie, though she is not in the exercise, addresses Peppermint Patty as “sir”, which is an example of social deixis. It is also an oddity, as Patty is female. However, Patty could be interpreted as a tomboy (because of her personality and skills). If so, Marcie could be respectful or sarcastic. If she is sarcastic, then “sir” is not a social deixis in that context. The characters often address the adults, such as parents or teachers, as “Mr”, “Mrs” or “Ms”, while such honorifics are not used towards the characters in return. However, there are no examples of social deixis in the exercises, but during the research for the material there were other strips or scenes that could be used as examples.

The language might be more dependent on target audience than the environment portrayed in the scenes. Another aspect to take into consideration is that both of the exercises were devised from comic books founded in the 1950’s and 1960’s, and this was a time when most authors and readers expected a certain style of language to be used that would have resonated with the reader according to their age group and social situation. Therefore, even if there are modern versions of both comics, their background in terms of origin and how people greet each other, could affect their choice of language.

**4.4. Using comic books for teaching the English language**

In theory, the result of the analysis provides arguments for using comic books when teaching the English language. Comic books provide a teacher with relevant material and they demand the students use more than one of their cognitive abilities. Since the students need to understand the intended meaning of the words used, and in conjunction with the images associated with those words, it does not matter if they were to focus on specific semantic or pragmatic features. There are several different types of comic books, and each of them contains different types of stories, artwork, languages, meanings, messages etc. The vast number of comic books and their potential range of material and exercises only reinforces the case for working with comic books.
4.5. Comparing to the literature

The result establishes a connection between the exercises and the theory in this essay. The main pragmatic theory applied within this essay is “relevance theory”, and both exercises demonstrate that everything needs to be taken into consideration when analysing the content in order to succeed with the task. As mentioned previously in the essay, Sperber and Wilson assert that relevance is anything that provides an input to a cognitive process (like an external stimulus or an internal representation), including thoughts, memories, sights or sounds\textsuperscript{73}. In order to connect the text to the balloons, and to interpret what information that a specific balloon wants to mediate, students need to analyse the images and identify any signifiers which may contribute to the meaning. Furthermore, there are some balloons that mediate feelings or sounds, and not only thoughts, speech, memories etc., something that students have to identify and take into consideration when discerning.

Reading comprehension, as mentioned in the literature review, is a process between knowledge and understanding and it cannot be regarded as static and that does not apply to linguistic texts exclusively. Comic books provide both images and texts; therefore, the amount of text can be reduced while students would be able to understand the meaning of the utterance, even if there was only one word. This could be connected to what Lundahl discussed about images and their ability to mediate information without any text. The result could also be compared to Lundahl’s description of comic books, with blending between text and image and the symbolism within the text offering the possibility of multiple interpretations and subtleties. Both exercises provide the students with material that could be interpreted differently, though it is not their main purpose and the variety of interpretations is rather narrow.

Ander’s discussion about “the third language”, and the different aspects of comic books and their content, is also taken into account in the exercises. One aspect is the balloon’s role in comic books, and how balloons can convey information and express feelings. In the “Peanuts-exercise”, there is only one type of balloon; therefore, it portrays only short conversations between characters without emphasising any emotions. In the “Spider-Man-exercise”, there are balloons that are conversations, thoughts and narrative, and all of them create a setting and foreground different emotions. Ander also explains that, in modern education, spoken and written languages are dominant in terms of communication. The result

\textsuperscript{73} Sperber and Wilson, 1995
provides an opportunity for teachers to create a more diverse course. Students still have to read some kind of text, but they will also work with images. This also refers back to Strömberg’s manual, where he stated that decoding words and images is essential when analysing comic books.

The exercises also accord with Strömberg’s arguments on comic books, specifically that they could be used to develop students' cognitive abilities and stimulate reading comprehension, image interpretation, and associative abilities. Even though both exercises contain a small quantity of images and texts, these provide enough material for the students to practise these skills. The result of this research supports Strömberg’s assertion that comic books could be a gateway to teaching different subjects within school.

4.6. Testing the exercises

The testing of the exercise provides this essay with two aspects, one that could connect the exercise to the theories of this essay, and one that establish the need of improvement. The two anonymous test subjects ("George" and "Lennox") thoughts considering the exercises were shifting. There were parts that they found easy, and some more difficult. George and Lennox completed both exercises. Though the tests took the students almost 15-minutes each to complete, only the parts that could be connected to this essay and theories are presented in the result and analysis.

According to George and Lennox, the “Peanuts-Exercise” was the one they found difficult one. The second part of the exercise, where Peppermint Patty is on the phone, was easier to solve and connect the text to the context. George said:

*This must be when she talks on the phone! That is something someone would say when someone answers the phone. Then comes the question if he wants a pumpkin. It's the only image where she explains the pumpkin.*

and Lennox continues with:

*Yes! And, 'Wait a minute, I have an idea...Hang on’, must be here (Lennox points at the sixth picture). It looks like she got an idea, moves towards the kitchen, and it should probably come before Charlie says 'I'm still here...'*

This means that both of them could identify and evaluate the text by using different semiotic codes (e.g. language, body language and implicatures), even if they did not know about them. Both of them interpreted the body language of the characters; this occurred when, for example, Patty asked the first two characters if they wanted her pumpkin. They raised their
hands towards her, using their body language to amplify that they did not want her pumpkin; a physical action is a form of mode as described in multimodality and is combined with language in this case to emphasise the message and is therefore a multimodal communicative action. They also identify deixis and literal- and speaker meaning, without thinking about it:

*True...’ rats ’ should probably be in this balloon* (Lennox points at the first image). *Since she probably becomes annoyed when he didn’t want it.*

and

*...I think so too, since it’s a kind of curse word...*

it continues with:

*And ’I’m still here...’, is what Charlie says while he is waiting on the phone... Because he is wondering what is going on, because he cannot see what she is doing....*

These quotes demonstrate that people understand the use of the range of signifiers, e.g language, body language and implicatures, even if they know nothing about semiotic theories. However, they also use the physical attributes of the exercise when comparing the text to the balloons:

*Could there be two correct answers? Since they are very similar...*

and

*I think not, but both of them fits. Unless we compare the size of the text...then only, ’No thank you. I wouldn’t know what to do with it’, fits in the first balloon. Both of them make some kind hand gestures, so they don’t want it.*

This happens in both exercises, where the subjects compare the shape and size of the text to the balloon, though they argue that it was easier to work with the exercise based on Spider-Man. They also discover that there could be two answers that fit:

*This could fit here (“No thank you…I wouldn’t know what to do with it”), since he is holding hand up. So, he probably does not want a pumpkin...*

and
But? This also fits...  ´No thank you. I don’t want it. Besides, I have one on my own to get rid of ´... Doesn’t it? Since both of them tells us someone rejecting the pumpkin. Also, both of them got their hand raised towards her.

This proves that there are some issues with the exercise, and why the subjects find it more difficult.

The “Spider-Man-exercise” gives rise to similar thoughts and approaches, with a focus on body language and enables a deduction to be made as to when and where a person might make that particular utterance (finding the context). For example:

The first image must be where he talks about Uncle Ben’s death. He looks angry and he throws the suit away.

followed by

And he wishes there weren’t Spider-Man...

Compared to the “Peanuts-exercise”, the subjects found the “Spider-Man” easier, because they thought that it was easier to find the context by the portrayed body language and by the construction of the scene. Their first connection was the origin story of Spider-man:

This must be here! Ouch! He is bitten by a spider, so  ´It all started when I was bitten... ´ should be there...And you can see that he climbs a wall, so he talks about his powers here.

and

Yeah! He is wearing the suit there. Showing how he ended up as Spider-Man

These quotes portray a reaction to the framing of that image, and how it made the subjects identify which balloon that should contain what text rather quickly. The framing when Spider-Man hunts down the killer also made it easier for George and Lennox to place the text in the correct balloon:

The  ´He won’t escape... ´and  ´Got you´ must be the middle part. Because he looks like he is after someone and then he catches him with his web
Yup. And the criminal guy is scared and thinks he is a monster. I would think so if I was caught by someone climbing on the wall (laughing).

They also identified different types of balloons when discussing the last scene. When George says, ‘What does he say then? ’, which refers to someone saying something, but Lennox answers:

*I would guess that he is thinking about the bills.*

This means that he could identify the “thinking balloon”, something they did not encounter in the “Peanuts-exercise”.

Another reason for them to preferring the “Spider-Man-exercise” is the narration, though they did not mention it during the test. The balloon that explains the scenes made it easier for them to put the text into context. Furthermore, this exercise contains more diverse scenes, which could affect their cognitive abilities to identify and apply different codes.

### 5.0. Discussion

The result of the analysis discusses the possibility of using comic books in the classroom for teaching the English language, including applying some of the analytical principles that can be found within the disciplines of semiotics, semantics and pragmatics. The exercises presented in the appendix strengthen the arguments for using comic books for language teaching. Furthermore, comic books could provide teachers with a variety of materials and methods of teaching, depending on the intended learning outcome.

This essay demonstrates that, by comparing the exercises with the theories and arguments that the authors discuss in the literature review, comic books could be an asset for future language teaching. There are thousands of different comic books, all with different content and possibilities. Creating an exercise that is based on the thoughts and ideas of Lundahl, Strömberg or Ander (with the reading comprehension, image interpretation, associative abilities, identifying the elements of a comic or stimulate cognitive abilities), working with comic books lets the students practise and possibly improve all these skills that all three authors discuss. Furthermore, comic books could also be used when teaching subjects that are
not directly connected to language. Varying the choice of comic books, for example exchanging “Peanuts” to “Tintin” or “Batman”, could provide different exercises and examples when teaching language, social studies, history, etc., making it an adaptable material.

The study indicates that the use of comic books for teaching some of the mechanics of language production and interpretation as suggested in semantics, semiotics and pragmatics, (or deixis, literal or speaker meaning and multimodality) is, as confirmed by this study, hypothetically feasible. Both exercises contain samples from all facets and, while recognising the limitations of this study in terms of its scope and the sample size, enough data was gained to suggest that the approach is worthy of consideration and further investigation. The exercises contain both aspects of both pragmatics (relevance theory and a couple of deictic expressions) and semiotics. Demonstratives are not present in either of the exercises, but these could be taught with other cartoon examples, or using other methods. Students could, for example, be asked to insert one or more demonstratives of their own into the cartoon in such a way as to make sense. Otherwise, the material needs to be changed to fulfil that criterion.

The testing of the “Peanut-exercise”, though it shows some aspects that could be connected to the previous research and thesis questions, are the thoughts and of two individuals. However, their thoughts present some ideas of how this exercise could work in class, at least to some extent. They use some expressions that could be connected to the theories presented in this essay. For example, the speaker meaning of the word “rats!” where George and Lennox identify the words as a curse word. They identify the thinking balloon and tells us that he is “thinking”, not “talking”. Another example of the theories is the personal deixis, where they see that Charlie Brown says, “I’m still here”. They know that it is something that is said when someone could be on hold on the telephone (this could be connected to the relevance theory (anything that provides an input to, (1) a cognitive process, like an external stimulus or an internal representation, (2) relevant as an input for the auditor, (3) anything that could connect with background information (s)he has available to draw conclusions that makes her/him understand), e.g. Charlie holding the phone and Paddy asked for him in the previous scene). Hence, the theories and definitions discussed in this essay are used in the exercises, even if the test subjects do not know about it.

There are some issues considering these exercises that need to be discussed. The first issue is the teacher’s role in finding material for the exercises. The exercises are only two out of hundreds of thousands of pages, and there are thousands of comic books that could be suitable for teaching students how meaning is generated through text or images. The positive aspect of
working with comic books is the vast variety of material to choose from, while the negative aspect is the time and effort required to work through all possible materials and find those which are the most appropriate for the intended learning outcomes. Since a teacher needs to take several aspects into consideration, such as whether the material fulfils the criteria, contains enough examples of aspects relevant to the teaching and that are receptive to analysis. All of this takes time and, even though there are thousands of comic books, a majority of them may be unsuitable for various reasons. Hence, depending on what they plan to teach, a teacher might need to invest many hours in order to find material that is suitable and usable. This makes comic books a possibly overwhelmingly large source of material, and that is not necessarily positive.

The second issue is the use of “Peanuts” and “Spider-Man” for these two particular exercises. Both “Peanuts” and “Spider-Man” provide material that could be worthy of analysis by students, though neither of them fulfil all of the aspects discussed in the literature review on their own. In “Peanuts”, most of the scenes are structured similarly to the one used in the exercise; they comprise short stories focusing more on conversation or the punchline rather than relating a clear message. This could make “Peanuts” seem somewhat one-sided and narrow to work with. In “Spider-Man”, the story focuses on providing the reader with a certain feeling or an emphasis on the environment, but the scenes often extend over several pages. Also, some pages might only contain one or two utterances, which is a problem when the purpose of the is directed mostly on what is said. Therefore, the amount of material analysed in this essay would be insufficient in order to provide students with even a basic level of understanding about deixis, literal or speaker meaning and multimodality.

The third issue is the purpose of the exercise, since it covers only a small part of semiotics and pragmatics. Both semiotics and pragmatics are vast subjects and each of them contain several facets. The exercises on their own would be insufficient to instil within the students anything beyond a narrow and superficial understanding of how meaning is generated and recovered; other materials and activities would be needed to bolster and extend their knowledge sufficiently that they could apply it in their own language comprehension and production. Hence, the exercises in this essay could only be considered an introduction to semantics, semiotics, and pragmatics, or at least parts of them.

Finally, the findings of this essay will remain academic and the efficacy of using comic books in education will be uncertain until the hypothesis is properly tested. In order to establish a trustworthy result, the exercises have to be presented and carried out in several classrooms with clearly defined learning outcomes and the results evaluated. However, what
could be established is that the exercises could be used for a particular purpose or need and at the discretion of individual teacher, since they examine students' reading comprehension and ability to interpret pictures when combined with texts.

6.0. Conclusion

Comic books, in theory and in practice, could be used in the classroom as an alternative material for teaching the English language and introduce students to issues related to meaning through linguistic approaches, with the aid including semantics, semiotics and pragmatics.

The aim of this essay is to analyse and evaluate the content of a comic book and (1) evaluate comic books as material for teaching, (2) if possible, create an exercise that could be used in the classroom for teaching ESL and (3) to suggest innovative material and related tasks that could be used to introduce student to issues related to meaning, with the focus on “literal or speaker meaning”, “multimodality” and “deixis”, and drawing upon principles and concepts described within the disciplines of semiotics, semantics and pragmatics. The first one, the evaluation of comic books as a material, is in theory a varied material. Depending on the particular age group being taught, and/or the topic of the lesson, comic books could be considered as being a resource with potential for use in language teaching, or in other areas of education. The versatility and range of genres of comic books, such as, humour, adventure, horror etc, reinforces the case for using comic books in language education. The second one, a possibility to create an exercise to use in the classroom, is certainly feasible. Comic books provide teachers with material that could be adapted to the purpose of the learning outcome. The third and last one, a material that could be used to introduce students to issues related to meaning, with the focus on “literal or speaker meaning”, “multimodality” and “deixis”, is also a possibility worthy of consideration. The exercises suggest practical ways in which these books could be used by teachers.

The material used in this essay is just a small fraction of possible material that is available to teachers, and there are numerous ways of using comic books in teaching aspects of language from varied perspectives. It also introduces concepts from semiotics and linguistics in order to deepen their understanding of how language works at a structural level; how words are supplemented with other modes of communication and how context contributes to understanding. The exercises could also be used to facilitate some sort of measurement of students’ knowledge of the English language.
The use of comic books in language teaching is still something that needs to be researched and evaluated further. Since this essay only provides a hypothetical perspective on comic books as a material, the effect or result of using them for teaching the English language is still unclear. For this reason, future research could focus on, (1) a wider range of the comic books used in this essay, (2) if comic books could be used for something with another learning outcome (history, social science, etc.), (3) for a broader range of theoretical approaches (e.g. denotation and connotation, conversation analysis, etc.), or (4) testing them properly with different classes and students at different levels, including students that are attending primary school to gymnasium, and possibly adult learners (e.g. municipal adult education, immigrants, prisons etc.). However, since teachers are seeking alternative material to work with, such as movies, newspapers, social media etc., this essay provides a theoretical blueprint on how comic books could be useful as an alternative material.
7.0. References

Literature:


**Articles:**


"Spider-Man (Peter Parker) - Marvel Universe Wiki: The definitive online source for Marvel super hero bios.”. in , <http://marvel.com/universe/Spider-Man_(Peter_Parker)#axzz5E8x1iQye> [accessed 30 April 2018].


8.0. Appendices

8.2. Appendix 2 – “The Spider-Man-exercise”
8.3. Appendix 3 – Peanut characters

- **Snoopy**, the dog whose best friend (except for Charlie) is a small yellow bird called Woodstock (who speaks a language only Snoopy understands). He takes naps and ponders life on the roof of his doghouse, engages in aerial combat with the notorious Red Baron (the name applied to Manfred von Richthofen, a German fighter pilot in World War I\(^{74}\)), writes the great American novel, travels to the moon, and plots revenge on the neighbour’s cat.

- **Lucy** is a crabby and bossy girl that can often be found proffering advice from her psychiatrist’s booth (cost only 5-cents per consultation) or humiliating Charlie Brown and has an unrequited love for Schroeder.

- **Linus**, Lucy’s little brother, is a boy with an enormous affection for his blanket and is often the voice of reason. Linus also believes in the “Great Pumpkin”, and he suffers more than most when people (or pumpkins) let him down.

- **Sally Brown**, Charlie’s little sister, is a girl that believes the world owes her an explanation about everything. She is always on the hunt for answers and, if she does not find any, she comes up with a whole new philosophy: “Who cares?”.

- **Schroeder**, Lucy’s crush, a blond boy that loves the music of Beethoven and is frequently playing on his toy piano. He is also the catcher in Charlie Brown’s baseball team. Most of his time is spent fending off unwanted advances from Lucy, his curse in life.

- **Pig Pen** is always surrounded in a small dust cloud but he always has his dignity and is comfortable in his own skin

- **Marcie**, is Peppermint Patty’s best friend, a loyal follower and her character is the complete opposite from Patty. Marcie is the intelligent one of the pair though she does not know the difference between baseball and hockey. She is dreadful at sports, but formidable at friendship, especially with Charlie. She calls Charlie “Charles” and she calls Peppermint Patty “sir”.


Though more is said during this test, only what is useful is presented in this appendix. Otherwise this transcript would be full of unnecessary information, inappropriate language and jokes, none of them useful for this essay or the reader. They are instructed with certain information, including characters, story and some terminology. Both test subjects are learning English within the Swedish criminal justice system, hence, serving time in prison. Therefore, no video or audio files were allowed when preforming the exercises, and their names are fictional to sustain their anonymity. Everything is presented in the order when it was said and by whom, including the turn taking that was going on during the discussion.

“The Peanuts-Exercise”

Lennox:

This could fit here (“No thank you… I wouldn’t know what to do with it”), since he is holding hand up. So, he probably does not want a pumpkin.

George:

But? This also fits (“No thank you… I don’t want it. Besides, I have one on my own to get rid of”). Doesn’t it? Since both of them tells us someone rejecting the pumpkin. Also, both of them got their hand raised towards her.

Lennox:

True… ’rats’ should probably be in this balloon (Lennox points at the first image). Since she probably becomes annoyed when he didn’t want it.

George:

I think so too, since it’s a kind of curse word. (George looks at the at both images where Paddy tries to give the pumpkin away) Could there be two correct answers? Since they are very similar.

Lennox:

I think not, but both of them fits. Unless we compare the size of the text… then only, ’No thank you… I wouldn’t know what to do with it’, fits in the first balloon. Both of them make some kind hand gestures, so they don’t want it.

George:

Do you think she says ’rats’ to ’I don’t know what to do with it’? Without the ’I have one at home’?
Lennox:

Maybe, what could be more irritating, someone that has one, or someone that doesn’t know what to do with it?

George:

Don’t know, I believe both could be right... Feels like pick and chose...

This must be when she talks on the phone! ‘Hello, Chuck? ’ is something someone would say when someone answers the phone. Then comes the question if he wants a pumpkin. It’s the only image where she probably explains the pumpkin.

Lennox:

And this is what Charlie says while he is waiting on the phone... Because he is wondering what is going on, because he cannot see what she is doing.

George:

And, ‘I said, I’m trying to make a pie’, must be here (George points to the last picture), because she is holding a frying pan with the pumpkin in it.

Lennox:

Yes! And, ‘Wait a minute, I have an idea... Hang on’, must be here (Lennox points at the sixth picture). It looks like she got an idea, moves towards the kitchen, and it should probably come before Charlie says ‘I’m still here’

George:

The ‘Well, what do you do with a pumpkin... ‘must be in the fifth image than! Because she asks something, then she gets the idea. Right?

Lennox:

Yes! And Charlie Brown says he is still there before she explains about the pie.

George

This means that we are pretty certain of the last part. So... should we just guess on the first two images?

Lennox:

Yeah, one is right and one is wrong... I believe we did rather good anyway.
“The Spider-Man-Exercise”

George:

*This must be here! Ouch! He is bitten by a spider, so ‘It all started when I was bitten…’ should be there...*

Lennox:

*And you can see that he climbs a wall, so he talks about his powers here.*

George:

*Yeah! He is wearing the suit there. Showing how he ended up as Spider-Man.*

Lennox:

*The first image must be where he talks about Uncle Ben’s death. He looks angry and he throws the suit away.*

George:

*And he wish there weren’t Spider-Man.*

Lennox:

*Yes. I think so.*

George:

*The ’He’s not escape...’ and ’Got you’ must be the middle part. Because he looks like he is on the hunt, and then he catches him with his web.*

Lennox:

*Yup. And the criminal guy is scared and thinks he is a monster. I would think so if I was caught by someone climbing on the wall (laughing).*

Lennox:

*This must be where she asks for more time. It would be something that someone would say to a landlord. And Peter is hiding behind the curtains.*

George:

*What does he say then?*

Lennox:
I would guess that he is thinking about the bills.

George:

This means that ‘And now Uncle Ben is gone... ’ must be when he walks down the stars.

Lennox:

I like it when you only need to takes what is left.

George

This felt a lot easier. There were more specific balloons and it just felt easier.

Lennox:

It felt like there were no places that could get two correct answers, even if it probably is possible.