Japanese EFL Students and *Superman*, No. 408:
A Fill-It-Up Activity with "The Day the Earth Died"

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Abstract

   This paper reports on the use of the first five pages of Paul Kupperberg and Ed Hannigan's *Superman*, No. 408, story "The Day the Earth Died" in three Communicative English classes at a university in Japan. The comic book material was prepared for a fill-it-up activity, with all text deleted and student pairs instructed to write original narration, speech, and thought. The paper explains why the Kupperberg and Hannigan selection is significant for Japanese EFL students, describes preliminary steps taken in the classroom to help the students understand comics pages and panels, observes how the students engaged with and responded to the pictorial narrative, and discusses written output.

Keywords: *comics, communicative tasks, EFL, fill-it-up, symbolic learning, writing*

Introduction

   "The Day the Earth Died" by Paul Kupperberg and Ed Hannigan is a sixteen-page story that appeared in *Superman*, No. 408, June 1985, addressing the recurring theme in the Superman mythos that the allegorical superhero cannot solve social and political problems. The most affecting part of the tale is in the first five pages and twenty-seven panels: Superman dreams of himself in a nuclear holocaust; he looks for survivors; he finds a girl dying; he awakens in panic; and he floats out a window.[1] The section, which can stand on its own, combines social relevance and psychological angst with a fantasy element that tempers the serious subject, making it approachable and also intriguing.

   As material for Japanese students studying English as a foreign language

(EFL), the dream and awakening sequences are significant for the reason that Japan had the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 during the Second World War, as well as the tsunami and nuclear disaster in Fukushima in 2011. There is added contemporariness to the story in the fact that nuclear-armed countries still exist in the twenty-first century, and the threat of nuclear destruction remains. While there are several possible classroom applications with "The Day the Earth Died," one engaging activity to which it can be put is in a *fill-it-up* activity, whereby EFL students retell the story in their own written words.

Stephen Cary, author of *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom* (2004), describes fill-it-up as an individual or pair activity in which "[s]tudents create dialogue and captions for comics with deleted text."[2] He explains that the activity has a puzzle aspect; it challenges all proficiency levels; students use their accumulated language stock; and they can get language help from their peers and teacher. While students will read their own written words in the activity, "they're also *reading the pictures*, examining each for clues that dictate and guide the creation of their replacement text."[3] Besides that, there is self-motivation since students emotionally invest in comics.[4]

Considering emotional investment and that *manga* (comics) are the most popular reading material in Japan, some degree of EFL-student interest in a fill-it-up activity would be expected.[5] That was confirmed when the first five pages of "The Day the Earth Died" were assigned to student pairs in three Communicative English (CE) courses for freshman, sophomore, and junior English majors at a Japanese university. All text in twenty-two speech balloons and thought bubbles, twelve narration boxes, and one-and-a-quarter newspaper headlines was deleted, as were three extra panels on the fifth page. Student engagement, enthusiasm, and output confirmed the efficacy of fill-it-up.

Preliminaries

Several classes prior to the fill-it-up activity with the Kupperberg and

Hannigan story, the EFL English majors in CE 1, 2, and 3 had done visual/ textual reading, listening, summarizing, and interviewing activities with *Wolverine and Power Pack* (2009), a rated "All Ages" superhero comic book miniseries, and scripting activities with *Tor* (1994), a collection of wordless adventure comics about a prehistoric man.[6] What is important about the previous activities is that they got the students used to comics in the classroom, provided awareness of the left-right panel path of English-language comics, and taught the students that a picture is a visual sentence and that it can be translated into words.[7]

While the former activities provided foundational experience, the EFL students were still given a review of some comics principles in shorthand formulas and diagrams on the whiteboard: picture = sentence; panel = S + V + O; abstracts of pages one and four with arrows indicating the reading path between panels and inset panels, with each panel designated as a represented sentence (see Fig. 1); and illustrations of individual and fused text balloons/bubbles marked "Talk," "Think," and "Scream!" to facilitate understanding. Reviewing this information served to remind the students of the relatively complex set of skills they would be using to access and construct meaning from the pictorial narrative.
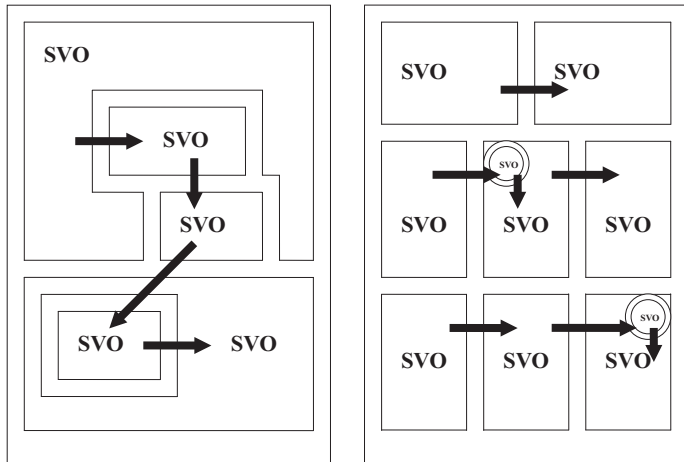

Fig. 1. Abstracts and panel paths of pages one and four in *Superman*, No. 408.

Afterwards, the students were told that some comics are "fun" and some are "serious" and that they would be doing an activity with the latter kind. This statement was made as a precaution in the event some students would find the subject (nuclear destruction) and the images (missile bombardment, a city in ruins, and an atomic bomb victim) unsettling. Once the students received textless copies of the first five pages and twenty-seven panels of "The Day the Earth Died," it was explained to them that "two people" each would be writing a newspaper headline, narration (captions), speech, and thought in the comics material, the relevant balloons/bubbles on the board being indicated.[8]

So that the students would not misunderstand where or what they were supposed to write, an additional diagram was illustrated on the whiteboard, showing a panel with a narration box and a speech balloon. While it has been observed that *manga* readers in Japan learn how to navigate the complex combination of "graphics, format, and text" by themselves, and while *manga* and American comics share similar communication devices—making what is narration and what is speech discernable—no presumption was made in assigning the fill-it-up activity that the EFL students were serious *manga* readers or that all of them read comics.[9] Indeed, not all Japanese students like reading *manga*.[10]

Altogether, the short review of comics principles ahead of the fill-it-up activity was an attempt to bring to the students' conscious awareness certain symbolic and linguistic processes they would be carrying out more or less spontaneously. Here, the students would not be using an approach with the comic as required by geometry, for example. They would not be working through the pictures, panels, and pages as mathematical problems brought into numerical correspondence according to the relations and properties of points, lines, and dimensions. Rather, the students would be writing on the basis of inferences, intuitions, and negotiations according to sequence, scene, and story.[11]

Observations

The students in the three CE classes sat in a U formation and worked with a peer next to them. As a rule, the instructor did not comment once the pairs began the activity. Students were permitted to use their dictionaries. They were also allowed to negotiate meaning, word choice, and sentence arrangement in their first language, as the focus of the activity was on *written output*. Nonetheless, the students inevitably vocalized phrases in English, such as "Can anyone hear me?" and "Are you okay?" (CE 1); "How are you?" "Good morning," "It's too late," and "Hey. Are you alright?" (CE 2); and "Oh my. Oh my," "My home. My city," "The damage is huge," and "That looks like my wife" (CE 3).

Besides the fact that writing narration, speech, and thought for the comics story got the EFL students to vocalize, to correct each other, to spell words aloud, and to translate Japanese phrases into English equivalents, there was another consequence of the fill-it-up activity that was significant—*all of the students were totally engaged, and the positive affect was palpable*. The students were completely focused on the material, reading the pictures, examining previous and following pages and panels for context clues, negotiating with their partners, thinking, writing, smiling, and laughing. There were no signs of anxiety or frustration, and the students appeared to enjoy retelling the *Superman* story in English.

On the average, it took a pair of students 50 min to complete the five-page fill-it-up activity—15 min (page 1), 7 min (page 2), 11 min (page 3), 8 min (page 4), and 9 min (page 5)—with a mean of 10 min per page. Needless to say, these figures are only a general indication and should not be taken too strictly. There was at least one pair in each CE class that could finish the activity in 40 min or needed up to 55 min; there were also pairs that completed certain pages in as little as 3 min or required as much as 21 min; and there were several pairs that did not work through the pictorial narrative in consecutive sequence, but proceeded by skipping and returning to different pages and panel sections.

Whatever the proficiency levels in each class (which ranged from middle-

high intermediate to low advanced) or the strategies each of the student pairs employed, they were all able to do the activity, applying their writing skills for almost an hour in a manner that was active and enthusiastic. Those few students who finished 10 or 15 min earlier were allowed some free time. But even so, a number of them chose to review their writing and have a related discussion. In CE 3, for example, one of two female EFL students said, "I like this story," and her partner concurred, "Our story." Afterwards, they discussed Hiroshima, nuclear weapons, and the role of nuclear power.

During the activity, a few students examined the page diagrams on the whiteboard. That information served an important purpose, and it helped students who consulted it navigate the pictorial sequence so that they could write a coherent narrative. When all the pairs finished, two teams in each class were asked to volunteer readings of their stories: one person per team handling narration, the newspaper headline, and the words of minor characters, another person handling Superman's speech and thought. Hands shot up; student pairs read in 2 min each; they received motivational applause and a "Bravo!" from the instructor; and their stories were collected for error correction.

Discussion

Kupperberg and Hannigan's "The Day the Earth Died" reflects Cold War fears in the 1980s and refers to the "Soviets" at the beginning and end of the full story. After the affecting dream sequence, however, the narrative becomes moralizing: Superman ponders how "mankind" with its weapons is "child-like"; he considers if he has the "right to interfere"; he weighs the consequence of being hated for policing the world; and he concludes that "children learn their lessons after they're burned often enough," as in "Hiroshima … Nagasaki." "They need every chance to work it out themselves," he tells the reader.[12] All this justifies the Superman mythos, but the didacticism is problematic.

By selecting the first five pages of the story, deleting text and dated references, and removing extraneous panels on the fifth page, the illustrated

narrative became more relevant, intriguing, and current for the Japanese EFL students. They related the selection to an alien invasion, to an attack on New York City or a generic urban location in "2011" or "20XX," to a movie, to nuclear war in general, and to "WWIII," though one CE 3 group wrote about the "CCCP" (USSR) attacking the "United States." These were interesting story retellings. What is more, the students were able to read illustrated facial expressions and body language cues, resulting in parallels with the print text (see Fig. 2).

Student Pair	Speech Balloon 1	Speech Balloon 2
CE 1	I couldn't help anyone!	I'm not a superman anymore!
CE 2	How terrible!	I couldn't save anyone!!
CE 3	My home,	My city!

Fig. 2. Uncorrected student writing samples and panel 13 in *Superman*, No. 408.

Graphic novel specialist Sara J. Van Ness explains that "[f]acial expressions and body language cues contribute to the reader's understanding of a particular character's demeanor, mood, level or lack of confidence, desires, and much more," including "characters' relationships with one another in a conversation."[13] As the writing samples and panel selection above show, the Japanese EFL students successfully decoded pictorial representations of human *paralanguage*, within the guiding narrative contexts of sequence,

scene, and story, and used that important information to write English narration, speech, and thought corresponding to the rhetorical form and emotional content of the original graphic story.

Understanding emotion, feeling, and mood is integral to communicative competence. "The ability to express our feelings to others is an essential part of our linguistic repertoire; so it is also for the learner of foreign languages," EFL educationalists note.[14] "Apart from choice of words, intonation, gesture and facial expression play an important role in expressing the mood of the speaker."[15] That said, the majority of retold stories ended with the students in the three CE classes writing that Superman awoke more resolved to "save the city," "save the earth," or "save the world." One CE 2 student pair, however, ended things more critically, questioning what Superman could do (see Fig. 3).

Panel	Speech, Thought, and Narration
24	"Nooooo!!! Please help me!!" [scream-thought]
25	"Oh, this is a dream, but it may come true." [thought]
26	This is a serious problem. I must save the earth, because I am a Superman. [thought]
27	"I have to hurry so I can save the people." [thought] Is it really true that a superman can save the earth. [narration]

Fig. 3. Uncorrected student writing sample doubting the ability of Superman.

On the whole, the students in the three classes wrote an average of 175 words. There were mistakes in all writing samples, the most significant being in CE 1 and longer discourse resulting in more frequent errors in CE 2 and CE 3 (see appendix). The activity being student centered and communicative, emphasis was placed on content, context, and personalization. Strictly, this was a *free-practice communicative task* in which instructor control was relaxed and students were allowed to make mistakes: the pairs used the language knowledge they possessed, and they corrected themselves. Interestingly, even though the instructor circulated from pair to pair, the students did not request writing help.

Conclusion

Superman is an allegory who represents certain social ideals and insecurities in American popular culture form. Although he is not a real person, he is known around the world and identified with an English-speaking country. The Japanese EFL students who did the fill-it-up activity with the selection from Paul Kupperberg and Ed Hannigan's "The Day the Earth Died" were aware of the character, and their writing identified generic elements of his mythos: "He is our hero" who "keeps peace" and tries to "save people." The visual form of the pictorial narrative and mythos proved engaging for the students and generated strong motivation in the 50-min course of the writing activity.

With enthusiasm and excitement, the student pairs constructed meaning from and rewrote the *Superman* story, being captivated by the power of images and the content, facts/fancies, adventures/mishaps, terrors/temptations, and joys/sorrows in the comics material.[16] What is significant and remarkable from a language learning-and-teaching perspective is that, all the while, the students were practicing concrete writing skills—affixes, articles, and auxiliaries; conditionals, conjunctions, and contractions; idioms, interjections, and interrogatives; declaratives, descriptions, and diction; and possessives, prepositions, and punctuation, to name a few—with no anxiety, boredom, or frustration.

If comics-based fill-it-up can bring out EFL students' lexical and grammatical knowledge in this way, that reflects extremely well on the activity, confirming also that pictures in narrative sequence provide positively affecting comprehensible input and that the emotional investment students bring to comics induces self-direction. Needless to say, *appropriately chosen* visual stories are important here, and the author admits some initial reluctance with the Kupperberg and Hannigan selection, anticipating that it would have added significance in a Japanese context, but contemplating that some students might regard the superhero genre as trivializing the deadly seriousness of nuclear destruction.[17]

In the end, the high degree of classroom engagement and the fact that the

students were smiling and laughing suggested that the dream and fantasy elements in "The Day the Earth Died" brought "comic relief," which tempered the serious subject and made the story easier to receive, negotiate, and reconstruct in English. With *Superman*, No. 408, the Japanese EFL-student pairs confronted a human tragedy of immense proportions; they experienced the psychological breakdown of a physically invulnerable character who blamed himself for being unable to save anyone; and they found it was all a dream, a premonition, telling the superhero to be prepared so that future disasters may be averted.

Notes

1   Paul Kupperberg (w), Ed Hannigan (w), Curt Swan (p), and Al Williamson (i), "The Day the Earth Died," *Superman*, No. 408, June 1985, DC Comics, pp. 1–16, pp. 1–5.

2   Stephen Cary, *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), pp. 78, 80.

3   Ibid., pp. 79, 80; emphasis added.

4   Ibid., p. 21.

5   Kate Allen and John E. Ingulsrud, "Manga Literacy: Popular Culture and the Reading Habits of Japanese College Students," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, Vol. 46, No. 8, May 2003, pp. 674–683, p. 674, *EBSCOhost*, Aichi Prefectural University, http://web.ebscohost.com (accessed October 26, 2012).

6   See Marc Sumerak (w) and Gurihiru (p), *Wolverine and Power Pack*, Nos. 1–4, 2009, Marvel Comics; and Joe Kubert, *Tor* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta-DeAgostini, 1994).

7   See Alzo David-West, "Sequential Art and Sentence Construction: Wordless Comics in an EFL Context," *Mulberry*, Vol. 61, 2012, pp. 141–158.

8   20 out of 20, 19 out of 21, and 9 out of 9 students were in attendance in the CE 1, CE 2, and CE 3 classes, respectively, on the day the fill-it-up activity was assigned. Odd numbers of students in CE 2 and CE 3 required one team per class with 3 students each.

9   Allen and Ingulsrud, p. 679.

10   Ibid., p. 681.

11   See Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 131, 163.

12   Kupperberg et al., pp. 6, 10, 16.

13   Sara J. Van Ness, Watchmen *as Literature: A Critical Study of the Graphic Novel* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), pp. 42, 43.

14   Peter Hubbard, Hywel Jones, and Barbara Thornton, *A Training Course for TEFL* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 201.

15   Ibid., p. 269.

16   Cary, pp. 24–25, 46.

17   See relevant discussion in the case of Marvel Comics in the section "Super-Epic and Realism" in Adam Haig, "*X-Men: First Class*: Super-Epic and Social Life," *World Socialist Web Site,* 23 June 2011, http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/jun2011/xmen-j23.shtml (accessed October 26, 2012).

Appendix

The following are three uncorrected transcriptions of student-pair interpretations and retellings of the first five pages and twenty-seven panels of "The Day the Earth Died." Character names, three scene change cues, and word count have been included, and narration has been italicized. "Clark Kent" and "Superman" are the same character. The exercise was assigned in Communicative English 1, 2, and 3 on December 20, 2011, at Aichi Prefectural University in Japan. The three samples were randomly selected.

The Day the Earth Died
(CE 1)

In a central city.
Doorman: Good morning. Take care.
Clark Kent: Hi, thank you.
Doorman: Have a good day!
Clark Kent: You, too.
[Scene change]
Clark Kent: How much is this?
Newsstand Seller: Five dollers.
Clark Kent: What happened yesterday? Oh, movie.
[Newspaper headline]
Big News!! The movie "THE DAY THE EARTH DIED!" is coming soon. Don't miss it!
[Scene change]

Clark Kent: Wow! How scarely this is!

He saw a poster of a movie. It was very impressive for him. The building where he was—became ruins. And the city was very silent. There was sound. And—

Superman: What's happening now? Oh my god! What should I do? Is there anyone here? Can you hear me?

He continued to walk. And it took a long time. He found a girl.

Superman: Oh! That girl is living! Are you OK!? Her skin … It's strange. What happened to her?

[Scene change]

Clark Kent: I'll help you soon! What a terrible dream that was! I'm relieved. But it should happen like the dream. I must go right now.

Superman: I have to prevent that. Hurry!

He left his home to save peace of the earth.

[169 words]

The Day the Earth Died
(CE 2)

One day—

Doorman: I appreciate your hard work. Do you go out?

Clark Kent: I'll go to buy today's newspaper.

Doorman: Good-bye!

Clark Kent: Good-bye!

[Scene change]

Clark Kent: Today's paper, please.

Newsstand Seller: 2 dollars, please. Thanks.

Clark Kent: Hmm, Hmm

[Newspaper headline]

A professor predicted THE DAY THE EARTH DIED!!

[Scene change]

Clark Kent: How many the missiles are there … That's the end of us.

People in other planet attacked the earth with a lot of missiles. The damage was serious. The invasion was over. The city was completely collapsed. No one seemed to stay alive. Super man was also attacked. Someone moved in the rubble.

Superman: Oh … I, of all people, No kidding! How terrible! I couldn't save anyone!! Somebody! Say something!

He wandered in the city. aimlessly…. Then—

Superman: Someone is coming!! I'm here! Oh! What? What happened? She isn't

human!

[Scene change]

Clark Kent: NOOOOOOOO YOW!! Oh…. dream … What is a terrible dream. It must not happen! I have to save everyone!!

Superman: Consider it done! Eveyone!

With this, he trys to save the future of the city*

[174 words]

The Day the Earth Died
(CE 3)

On April 1st, Something bad seems to be happen.

Doorman: Good Moring, sir!

Clark Kent: Good Morning.

Doorman: Have a nice day!

Clark Kent: Thank you!

[Scene change]

Clark Kent: What's a big news today?

Newsstand Seller: Look at this article. This is the best joke I've ever seen.

Clark Kent: Oh, my god.

[Newspaper headline]

The Last Day of the World!

[Scene change]

Clark Kent: What are those?

Nobody knows today is the end of the world. All of the nuclear bombs in the world were launched. Instantly, everything was crashed. Superman's office was destroyed, either. The news was not an April fool joke. That was real! Where's Superman? Was he killed?

Superman: Oh man, this is like hell. Mommy! Daddy! Where are my friends? Where is my girlfriend?

He walks and walks ... He could not find anyone but debris. Suddenly, he found a girl.

Superman: Are you okay? Lewis! No way! It's horrible! She's not my girlfriend.

[Scene change]

Clark Kent: Who are you? Oh, this is a nightmare. I have to stop a nuclear war. What should I do? Firstly I'll wear this suit.

Superman: I have to save my future. Go!

He decided to run a presidential election to eliminate nuclear weapons.

[182 words]