

Online Manga and Anime in Promoting Language Learning and Literacy Practices

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Abstract: The field of language learning and literacy education is vast and ever expanding. New and hybrid literacies are always given birth to within and outside the field of education, in particular the Internet realm. With the reach of the online medium these new literacies has expanded for the consumption and production of people all over the world. More often than not, these forms of new literacies develop through the consumption and production of the many popular cultures within the Internet. Realizing the importance of these new literacy practices, a number of scholars have studied the impacts, roles, and potentials of these online popular cultures with relations to language learning and literacy education. Two of the more recent areas within the sphere of online popular culture being studied by literacy scholars are the consumption and dissemination of online manga and anime. This conceptual paper analyzes several key academic papers (i.e., commentaries, conceptual papers, research studies, etc.) published thus far on the use of online manga and anime in the field of language learning and literacy education. In doing so, the author discusses briefly the notions of New Literacies Studies and Multimodality in the use of online manga and anime in language learning and literacy education. The author also discusses a brief background of manga and anime; the roles and potentials of these genres as representation of universal culture and in promoting literate practices; and the issues or problems with online manga and anime in the field of language learning and literacy education. The author offers views, recommendations, and implications for the use of online manga and anime in the field of language learning and literacy research.

Keywords: Anime, English as a second language (ESL), language learning, literacy practices, manga, multimodality, New Literacies Studies.

1. Introduction

Manga and anime are forms of popular culture that derive from Japan, and they both are very popular, especially among young adults. The hype and enthusiasm for manga and anime is tremendous not just in Japan, but throughout the world (Black, 2005). In the past two decades, manga and anime have become major forces in global popular culture, resulting in which, they have begun to receive more scholarly attention mostly from the standpoint of popular culture study (Moist & Bartholomew, 2007). Scholarly works on manga and anime too has expanded beyond popular culture studies to include studies on education, most notably on language learning or literacy education (Bryce et al., 2008). This is due to the fact that many manga and anime enthusiasts create and maintain online fan sites, such as online discussion boards, forums, chat rooms, events, and many more online social networking activities in sharing their love for manga and anime (Black, 2005). All of these activities in fact require them to practice many literacy skills, such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and learning about language, i.e., the English language, to interact with one another across the world.

Given the reach, popularity, and potential of online manga and anime in language learning and literacy education, the author reviewed a limited body of literature to learn from the discussions about and the studies on the use of manga and anime in the field of language learning and literacy education. Specifically, in this conceptual paper the author explains the notion of the universal culture that these two genres represent; the notions of New Literacies Studies and Multimodality in the use of manga and anime in language learning and literacy education; and (more importantly) the potentials and problems that have been identified with their use (or lack thereof) in the field of language and literacy education. Lastly, the author offers views, recommendations, and implications for the use of online manga and anime in the field of language learning and literacy education.

2. Manga and Anime Presenting Universal Culture and Promoting Literacy Practices

What was then a post-war development and served as a form of social entertainment conveying public service messages in Japan, manga and anime are now being marketed locally and internationally throughout the world by Japanese conglomerates as part of Japan's most marketable product (Brienza, 2009). Slowly stemming from the shades of post-war themes, manga and anime grew more and more into various other themes portraying the Japanese and universal culture. The works of manga and anime became increasingly understood as a cultural flow from Japan to Asian countries, as well as to North American and European countries (Bryce et al, 2008). Because manga and anime mainly derive from Japan, they are quite distinct in features. For example, the manga and anime are usually drawn with flamboyant and unrealistic characteristics (i.e., extremely big eyes; slim and slender legs; colorful hair and extreme hair styles; and stylized costumes and appearances). Conversely, many manga and anime also have the portraits or animations of its characters somewhat simplistic, especially with regards to the facial expressions of their characters. However, regardless of the flamboyance or the simplicity of the drawings of the characters, the characters in manga and anime represent a complex array of physical and emotional states (Adams, 2001). Due to this fact, manga and anime interest both male and female audiences of all ages (including school children) from all over the world—and as such, they have become a worldwide cultural phenomenon (Drazen, 2002).

The notion of manga and anime as an international culture lies in the processes of translating, transcribing, subbing, dubbing, and redistributing the manga and anime, which are done by the fans of these genres for international audience. In doing so, these fans learn about both the Japanese culture and the English language (i.e., the language that online manga and anime consumers throughout the world interact most with). More importantly, they also engage in many language learning and literacy practices, such as reading about, commenting on, and editing/reviewing other fans' insights on their favorite manga and anime (Black, 2009). From the view of language learning and literacy education these consumptions and (re)distributions of manga and anime genres (i.e., translating, transcribing, subbing, dubbing and redistributing the manga and anime) relied heavily on literacy practices and language competencies. Through the online medium, these fans—including English language learners—display their existing knowledge and linguistic competencies, such as writing poignant arguments, making critical reviews, reading and revising fan works, and many other literate practices. Through these linguistic activities, and other literate practices, such as creating and maintaining online fan sites and engaging in other online social networking activities (e.g., online discussion boards, forums, chat rooms, events, etc.), they also managed to “receive input from and/or interact with youths from across the globe, as they develop new linguistic and technical skills” (Black, 2009, p. 399).

3. New Literacies Studies and Multimodality

When talking about online popular culture and the use of technology in the language/literacy education field, the theories that are often associated with them are the notions of “New Literacy Studies” and “Multimodality.” The theory of New Literacies Studies posits to the need to broaden our understanding of literacy, in which it views the multitude of literacies as a range of social practices affected by social factors, such as socioeconomic status, race, or gender, and linked to broader social goals (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). The studies on new literacies or multi-literacies focus on “a new stance that recognizes literate practices as dependent on the integration of visual (including both print and image), performed, oral/aural, and embodied forms of representation” (Moje, 2009, p. 352). Scholars and educators agree that online popular cultures, such as online manga and anime, fit into this notion of New Literacies Studies.

Meanwhile the notion of Multimodality refers to the use of “image plus language in increasingly complex ways” (Brown, 2006). The notion of multimodality also fits perfectly in the study of manga and anime in language learning and literacy education. The reason for this argument is that the manga readers and anime viewers, especially those who read and watch them online, are likely to attend to more graphical information on the computer screen as opposed to on the printed text. This is a drastic change from traditional reading that involves attending first to the written text, using pictures and

illustrations only as supplements to it (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). Online manga and anime consumers are said to require “a complex visual reading on the part of the reader” (Adams, 1999, p. 71) especially if they are reading/watching online manga and anime—where there are multi-mode of medias are being projected onto the screen (i.e., texts, graphics, sounds, and animations).

Scholars of manga and anime in language learning and literacy education agree that online popular cultures, such as online manga and anime, fit into this notion of New Literacies Studies and with the idea of multimodality. Online manga and anime is different than other forms of popular culture is because these genres are the embodiment of hybrid texts. This is because manga readers and anime viewers, especially those who read and watch them online, are likely to attend to social and graphical information at the same hierarchical level as the printed text. These skills manga readers and anime viewers’ use may transfer well to other media, and vice versa (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). More importantly it may also transfer to other purposes of reading/watching manga and anime—such as developing language/literacy competencies—instead of for mere entertainment purposes.

4. Manga and Anime in Language Learning and Literacy Education: The Potentials

A number of academic discussions about and studies on the use of online manga and anime have been done in the field of language learning and literacy education. Albeit little in number these academic papers report highly positive remarks for the use of manga and anime in language learning and literacy education.

The depth of issues and themes within manga and anime is also one of the virtues that researchers find in language learning and literacy education, especially in teaching and learning English literature. Seyfried (2008) contends that manga and anime need to be used in middle and high school because students (at this age) are ready to engage with intense emotions. The popular success of manga and anime works that delve into weightier human themes have proven as robust text genres, capable of faithfully representing a wide variety of material (Galman, 2009). One feature of the manga and anime that make them suitable for the teaching and learning of literacy, such as the English language (as the first or second language), is that these genres often allow for pages to be read and scenes to be viewed in a variety of ways, leaving them open to variable interpretations and multiple meanings within the overall narrative (Adams, 2001). Graphic novels, such as manga, have been found to be very effective in the teaching of English literature. In his study on the use of graphic novels by students, Seyfried (2008) found that by using graphic novels students are introduced to complicated philosophical concepts. With manga and graphic novels’ tone being quite distinct from prose fiction, the scope for telling stories of greater complexity and depth is increased (Seyfried, 2008). The students, as Seyfried (2008) observed, managed to identify and respond to the poignancy of the stories immediately where the characters, the themes, and the conclusions made sense.

In this regard, the manga and anime genres, as argued by Galman (2009), can be a unique, highly flexible tool for the examination, understanding and representation of cultural phenomena. Bryce and colleagues (2008) agree to this notion, where they believe the appreciation of manga and anime is highly interactive, involving high literate activities, such as meaning-making ‘off the page’ by circulating as part of social identities, practices, and exchanges generative of fan-based communities. Also, the manga and anime address themes, such as politics, daily life, and autobiography in creative (often sober) composition and style (Galman, 2009). In doing so, the manga and anime capture the multiplicity of voices and the historically- and socially-situated nature of stories by making use of “systems of symbols, texts, and images that allow multiple interpretations to occur simultaneously” (Galman, 2009, p. 200).

Manga and anime can also prove to be quite the motivating factor for students in language learning and literacy education. Seyfried (2008) argues graphic novels (i.e., manga) are more than just an elective or a book group. Manga seem to increase students’ confidence as readers and to develop their enjoyment of reading. Instead of heralding a regression from the art of the written word, studies are finding that manga and graphic novels are providing a new bridge to it (Black, 2009; Moje, 2009). Moreover, as the manga are usually a single tale told over a series of volumes, this encourages a commitment on the part of the reader to spend the time and effort to read a longer tale (Poitras, 2008). In another instance, Adams (2001), in his study on the use of manga among high school students, reports that the students reading skills are influenced and heightened due to reading manga.

Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila (2006) also believe that manga and anime as a popular culture can serve as a tool for literacy development and critical inquiry, which is a very important skill in reading. The characteristics of manga and anime require multimodal reading skills and sharp critical inquiries. Hence, by using online manga and anime in a literacy classroom, students would be able to use the mechanics and multimodalities of these genres to learn “how to question their own pleasures” (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006, p. 47). Furthermore, manga and anime storylines not only afford readers a non-linear, rich imaginative read of the world, but also tap into an array of complexities in human experiences toward which young adults seem to feel great affinity (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). They also argued that in order to incorporate the manga and anime into the literacy classroom, teachers need to be critical educators who can encourage youths’ reflexivity about their use of popular culture by selecting appropriate texts for the classroom to help students situate themselves in the world around them and underscore how power shapes the students’ “emotional, political, social, and material lives” (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006, p. 47).

Another aspect of manga and anime that is highly applauded by English education researchers is in terms of their use among learners of English as a second language (ESL). This is especially for international students (or even immigrant and refugee students) who are learning in English speaking countries, such as the United States of America, Canada, and the United Kingdom, among many others. An important aspect in the consumption (i.e., reading and watching) of manga and anime contributing to their potential in teaching and learning of the English as a second language (ESL) is the translation of the Japanese manga and anime to the English-dubbed, English-subbed, or English-translated versions of the manga and anime disseminated in the online sphere for its larger universal audience. Black (2006) reports that due to the limited availability of English-language translations of Japanese texts, fans regularly produce their own translations of manga, by scanning them, overlaying English text, and then sharing them on the Web, as well as sharing their own English voice-dubbed versions of anime. The act of subbing, dubbing, or scanning the original manga and anime for redistribution is “an essential part of manga and anime fandom outside of Japan, not only because they provide new material for audiences, but because they are usually shared on websites with highly interactive virtual forums for fans” (Bryce et al., 2008). The act of subbing, dubbing, or translating the manga and anime enables and enhances meaning-making, in that fans, as translators, are in control of the meaning of the texts, and produce this meaning for the enjoyment of other fans.

In this sense, the use of online manga and anime in language learning and literacy education allows participants to create a performance “complete with pen-and-ink actors, sets, scripts, dialogue and the like to make a drama of their words” (Galman, 2009, p. 213) in that they would be allowed to explore (i.e., read) and produce (i.e., write) manga and anime interpretations of their own. Through intimate involvement with these texts, the fans engage in highly literate practices and language learning (such as, learning new vocabularies, reading critically, writing types of prose, and so on) as they re-form and re-generate these texts for others fans to create a deep attachment and build a sense of authorship over them (Bryce et al., 2008). Black (2009) supports this notion as she reports that reading/watching online manga and anime, and later producing their own manga/anime afford the students to index transcultural facets of their identities and develop meaningful cross-border relationships online. The students in her study also gained confidence and competence in a wide range of literate activities (such as reading, writing, revising, editing, etc.) and forms of representation, and the activities afforded them a “great deal of creative agency as they took up, reconstituted, and then redistributed cultural, linguistic, symbolic, and ideological material to a broad audience” (Black, 2009, p. 402).

Black (2009) also argues that the consumption and production of online manga and anime can provide a sense of relativity for foreign or international students in English-speaking countries in the way in which “technology-mediated, out-of-school literacy practices provide a counterbalance for ELL youth’s less successful attempts at using English in academic settings by allowing them to leverage a diversity of resources, including their Asian backgrounds, as they developed identities as powerful language users” (p. 420). Seyfried (2008) reiterates this notion by arguing that via manga and anime students could learn to deeply question how cultures are shown and seen, which is an important aspect of visual literacy, where they can serve to challenge readers’ observational skills while at the same time inform them. In this regard, manga and anime are also known to offer the language learning and literacy education classroom lessons on representation and identities. Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila (2006) believes the manga and anime genres can act as entry points for critically examining societal disparities in the representation of gender and sexuality. Although manga and anime is by origin Japanese genre,

inequalities in the representation of males and females persist cross-culturally, and such issue is very important for young adult students in middle or high schools to learn about. Manga and anime can also provide a way for youths to negotiate alternative identities. By engaging with a wide range of manga and anime characters, dynamic plots, and storyboards, children and young adults make connections between these popular texts and their own life experiences (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006).

5. Manga and Anime in Language Learning and Literacy Education: The Problems

Even with the positive reports on the use of manga and anime in the field of language learning and literacy education, there are still concerns with the use of these genres in education. Given the popularity of online manga and anime among young adults, and their worldwide reach through the medium of the Internet, these genres have neither been explored in greater depth in the literacy research literature nor used widely in the classroom setting. So far, discussions regarding manga and anime are dominated by scholars in the field of cultural studies (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). The academic establishment has yet to fully recognize these genres as legitimate formats for academic discourse. Galman (2009) argues that teachers and parents often undermine the ability to make meaning from the myriad of online popular culture texts to which young people are exposed. Online manga and anime, along with online comics and online games, are often perceived as contributing to students' short attention spans, passivity, and lack of creativity, and as providing distractions from educational practices (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). Hence, the discussions about and reports on use of manga and anime in the field of education is terribly scarce.

However, and more importantly, the little amount of studies on manga and anime that are readily available in the education field are not conclusive to the impacts and effects of online manga and anime in language learning and literacy education. Moje (2009) believes that the "research that exists on digital text use and its effect on achievement (as measured in tests and grades) is not extensive, and what does exist is inconclusive" (p. 357). Due to this inconclusiveness, Moist and Bartholomew (2007) calls for a nuanced and open critical approach that can deal with multiple perspectives and that builds connections between and among the positive and negative views of the use of manga and anime in language learning. There needs to be more research on manga and anime within the field of education. In this sense, Brown argues that studies on online popular culture, such as manga and anime, must not rely from other disciplines—but also contribute to them. Moje (2009) reiterates this notion by reporting that researchers need to conduct studies looking at new media literacies phenomena similar to those of other studies, with different groups, and then compare across studies (and academic fields) to generate richer and more complete theoretical insights.

Researchers need to maintain close and particular study at the "forefront of research in new media and literacies because the field shifts and changes rapidly" (Moje, 2009, p. 355). Moje (2009) believes that close and precise analyses must continue because there is still so much to learn about existing new media (such as the manga and anime), their uses, and their consequent literacy practices. In addition, Moje (2009) also strongly argues for researchers to study issues of access of new media and online popular culture in more depth because these studies can offer "comparative work across youth of different social class groups as a way of representing more fully the range and intensity of practices" (p. 356). From her analyses of studies done on new media, Moje (2009) contends that there are studies done on different age groups with different interests and experiences in new media, and how they engage in new media practices differently. However, she believes there needs to be "more attention to the range of practices of different groups might engage and to documenting practices across groups... taking into account findings across local and particular studies" (Moje, 2009, p. 356). In all, manga and anime studies need to include investigation of how these genres, through institutional recognition and incorporation as mass produced commodities, are granted wider social and cultural legitimacy and agency (Bryce et al., 2008).

6. Conclusion

The fact to the matter is manga and anime are very universal and they are very popular among young adults, children and even adults. More importantly, access to them can easily be sought through

the medium of the Internet, in which a lot of language learning and literate practices are taking place. All of the literacy elements one finds in manga and anime can draw readers of different ages and interests to a large number of works (Poitras, 2008). The use of manga and anime in language learning and literacy education is also very positively reviewed by literacy education scholars. Albeit small in number, a number of research have reported the success of using manga and anime in education for various purposes and for various intentions, such as, in teaching and learning of English literature, critical reading skills, creative writing skills, and so on. Some educators are also making use of manga and anime to develop students' traditional writing skills; to encourage urban high school students' development of reading and written communication skills; to narrate their own individual stories in a written composition; to instruct students on how to effectively convey multiple ideas in fewer words; and to develop students' analytical and critical reading of visual texts (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). And thus, these forms of online popular culture is not (and should not be) something foreign. As such, more progressive steps need to be taken by scholars, teachers, and educational institutions to acknowledge manga and anime in the world of education.

Due to the reach and access of the Internet, these genres have gained worldwide recognition due to their massive audience and their distribution in the world. The fans of manga and anime are far and wide and they range from various backgrounds, be it in terms of language, culture, age, or gender. Quite a number of studies have suggested positive educational outcomes from the use of manga and anime in English education. Yet, at the same time, these studies are still not enough to inform the scholars, teachers, and educational institutions of their true potentials and how they can actually be implemented in classroom settings. More studies need to be done to carefully learn about the use of online manga and anime in language learning and literacy education. In all, online manga and anime are here to stay, and the demand for manga and anime genres never decreased ever since the 1960s. Teachers, researchers and educational institutions need to not only recognize the appeals, potentials, and benefits of manga and anime—and take this opportunity to use employ manga and anime in language learning and literacy education—they also need to learn about the negative outcomes or possible issues that these genres have that can (and has thus far) hinder its use in language learning and literacy education. Therefore, we need to study these genres more closely, and discuss about the more openly, so that we would be more informed of them and that we can benefit more from them in language learning and literacy education.

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