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# Comics as a multimodal resource and students' willingness to communicate in Russian

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## ABSTRACT

The multimodal nature of daily interactions in the twenty-first century has led to growing calls for the inclusion of multimodal content like comics in foreign language classrooms. Such content, as opposed to traditional language textbooks, can boost learners' self-confidence and more effectively develop their multimodal competence, including their willingness to use foreign languages via diverse media. This article reports on an exploratory study involving a teacher of Russian as a foreign language (RFL) and her students that investigated how the use of comics as a pedagogical resource affected the students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in Russian, the teacher's level of engagement with her students, and her professional development. The study drew on interviews, classroom observations, and samples of students' written production over two semesters. The study's findings revealed that the use of comics boosted the students' WTC in Russian multimodally, as well as their desire to read in the other languages they knew. The students exhibited a greater willingness to speak Russian during lessons, interact with others in Russian via social media networks, produce art that incorporated Russian, and engage in performative behavior using Russian in the classroom and beyond.

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willingness to communicate; comics; foreign languages; language teaching; multimodal resources; Russian as a foreign language



## 1. Introduction

Developing the communicative competence of students and their willingness to communicate (WTC) are key goals of foreign language education seeing as these comprise

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core elements of the successful language learner's skill set. Yet, realising these goals can be a challenging task. Studies show that foreign language learners are often hesitant to use the target language during lessons due to various reasons, including worries about proficiency (Liu 2006), low motivation (Shirvan et al. 2019), or cultural mores (Wen and Clément 2003). This hesitancy can be compounded when the study materials they use contain language that does not reflect real-world interactions. Such is often the case with foreign language textbooks (Gilmore 2004), which have been found to contain outdated authentic content (Calafato and Gudim 2020) and are sometimes described by teachers as being of poor quality (Calafato 2018b). These shortcomings in textbooks have prompted calls for a greater focus on using authentic content in the foreign language classroom (Calafato and Paran 2019). Authentic content is material that was not originally conceived for language learning purposes (Peacock 1997). It has been shown to boost foreign language learners' communicative competence (Bora 2020; Gilmore 2011), motivation (Kung 2019), and semiotic awareness (Abrams 2016). Recent studies indicate wide support among foreign language teachers for the use of authentic content, with many reportedly having benefitted from such content as learners (Calafato and Paran 2019).

Selecting appropriate authentic content is complicated by the fact that individual and group interactions have become increasingly multimodal, with text meshing with images, symbols, video, and other semiotic sources across multiple languages (Ntelioglou et al. 2014). This multimodality can render some types of authentic content used by language teachers (Calafato 2018a), for example, novels and short stories, less than ideal for developing students' ability to interpret and engage in communication multimodally (Cocchetta 2018) given their purely textual nature. Some writers have pointed to comics as a potentially effective multimodal resource for learning languages (Gallo and Weiner 2004; Issa 2018; Leber-Cook and Cook 2013; Schwarz 2010) and a limited number of studies have explored their use by language teachers, mostly those teaching English (Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak 2017; Shirvan et al. 2019). As for the use of comics as a pedagogical resource when teaching languages other than English (LOTEs), only a handful of studies have been conducted (Bernales 2016; Krueger 2016; Missiou and Anagnostopoulou 2012). Moreover, studies on the use of comics in the language classroom have concentrated primarily on how they can be used to develop students' literacy skills (Cook 2017; Paré and Soto-Pallarés 2017) rather than on how they can affect learners' desire to interact in the target language.

This article reports the findings from an exploratory study that contributes to research on the use of comics as a multimodal resource in foreign language education, specifically how comics can influence students' WTC when learning Russian as a foreign language (RFL). The study was conducted at a private English-medium (EMI) secondary school in Russia and involved an RFL teacher and her students from Grade 7 and 8 who had intermediate Russian proficiency. Seeing as the relevance of multimodal resources to foreign language pedagogy is only set to grow, the findings contain important insights for LOTE teachers interested in using such resources, as well as for course designers and teacher educators who would like to help students boost their WTC in today's multimodal and multilingual environment.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. *Willingness to communicate and the foreign language classroom*

In this study, willingness to communicate (WTC) is defined as an individual's readiness or desire to interact with others using a foreign or second language (MacIntyre et al. 1998). It is seen as a byproduct of the language learning process, as well as boosting said process (MacIntyre 2007; Zhang, Beckmann, and Beckmann 2018). WTC has been investigated at the trait- (e.g. personality, culture, and age) and state-levels (MacIntyre et al. 2002; Peng and Woodrow 2010; Yashima, MacIntyre, and Ikeda 2018), and was found to correlate with motivation and language anxiety (Shirvan et al. 2019), although not necessarily with learning outcomes (Joe, Hiver, and Al-Hoorie 2017). The lack of correlation between WTC and learning outcomes reported in some studies might be due to these relying on questionnaires for data collection. Questionnaires capture learner WTC at a point in time instead of tracking its effects on learning outcomes over a specific period, for instance, during a sequence of language lessons at school or university (e.g. MacIntyre and Legatto 2011). Questionnaire-based studies on learner WTC are also, by nature, composed of self-reported rather than observed findings, which has implications for how accurately the findings reflect the actual levels of WTC that learners exhibit. Moreover, the majority of studies on learner WTC have investigated learners of English, generally in the collectivist cultures of East Asia (Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak 2017; Shirvan et al. 2019).

Studies have also frequently conceptualised WTC as solely representing an individual's willingness to interact with others *orally*, which does not reflect the multimodal nature of interactions in the twenty-first century, where, as already mentioned, interactions involving a mix of images, symbols, and text are just as commonplace as those involving speech. By only investigating learners' oral WTC, researchers run the risk of overlooking the other ways in which learner WTC may manifest, especially in response to using multimodal media. Lastly, much of the research on learner WTC has not taken into account the role played by language teachers, although they can have a significant impact on their students' WTC and language learning motivation (Wen and Clément 2003). Even where studies have factored in the influence that teachers have on their students' WTC (e.g. Joe, Hiver, and Al-Hoorie 2017), the teachers themselves are not present in the participant sample and their influence is explored indirectly. Such studies hold strong relevance for teachers, yet often do not include their voices or involve them in the planning and implementation of data collection in any notable way. Teacher participation in research can not only promote greater reflexivity on their part and self-development (Macaro 2003; Rathgen 2006) but it also provides researchers with additional insights into the pedagogical practicability of their projects.

### 2.2. *The use of comics as a multimodal resource*

Comics, which also subsume graphic novels (Thomas 2011), are defined in this study as a medium, a 'hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially' (Chute 2008, 452; for approaches or guides to using comics, see Elsner 2013; Issa 2018; Monnin 2010). Studies show that comics can help develop learners' critical literacy (Chun 2009), knowledge of culture and history

(Chisholm, Shelton, and Sheffield 2017), and linguistic structures (Ludewig 2017), media literacy (Cook 2017), and cross-disciplinary literacy (Park 2016). Comics also promote meaning-making and aid teachers in lessening students' cognitive load when acquiring vocabulary through reading activities (McClanahan and Nottingham 2019). Most studies that have investigated the use of comics in language teaching have focused on their use in the learning and teaching of English as a first or, more rarely, second language, overwhelmingly in tertiary education (Boerman-Cornell 2016; Lawn 2011; Schwarz 2010). Few studies have explored their use in the learning and teaching of foreign languages, where the dynamics are markedly different from first language contexts. This represents a notable gap in our understanding of how comics interact with learner WTC, their language learning motivation, and achievement.

Indeed, given their cross-discursive and static nature, comics can provide learners with several affordances or 'opportunities for action' (Aronin 2014, 158) to develop their communicative repertoire, their understanding of different registers (Carter 2007; Frey and Fisher 2008), and their ability to synthesise a multiplicity of visual, linguistic, and spatial information (Jiménez and Meyer 2016) in foreign languages. As for teacher attitudes towards the use of comics as a pedagogical resource, studies indicate that teachers occasionally express ambivalence regarding comics and do not use them when teaching, often due to a lack of familiarity with the medium (Farías and Véliz 2019; Lapp et al. 2012). In Russia, where this study took place, little empirical research exists on the use of comics in the language classroom despite an abundance of publications expounding on the theoretical benefits of using comics (e.g. Belyaeva 2018). At the same time, comics have enjoyed a steady rise in popularity among younger generations in Russia, who sometimes see these as an extension of films or TV shows (Alaniz 2010). As for the language curriculum for schools in Russia, it contains no explicit references concerning the use of multimodal resources, including comics, although it does stress the need to prepare students to work with a variety of textual content (Minobr, 2010).

### **2.3. Research questions**

Given the dearth of studies on the use of comics to teach LOTEs, as well as how their use affects WTC in learners of foreign languages, this study explored the following research questions:

- To what extent is RFL learner WTC influenced by the use of comics?
- How does RFL learner WTC manifest during lessons?

As a secondary objective, the study investigated how the participating RFL teacher used the comics in light of the abovementioned research questions. The teacher's involvement in the study also provided us with additional insights into the use of comics as a pedagogical resource, including with respect to planning, teaching materials selection, and teacher development, and benefitted the teacher by raising their awareness of the potential benefits of using comics as a pedagogical resource (see Section 4).

**Table 1.** Participant profiles.

Name	Age	Country	First Language	Second Language(s)	Status	Grade
Marya	51	Russia	Russian	English	Teacher	-
Metin	12	Germany	Turkish	English, German	Student	7
Nur	13	Turkey	Turkish	English	Student	7
Lars	14	Netherlands	Dutch	English	Student	8
Zoe	14	Netherlands	Dutch	English	Student	8
Matteo	14	Sweden	Swedish	English	Student	8
Sophie	12	Switzerland	German	English, French	Student	7
Nikhil	12	India	Hindi	English	Student	7

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Participants

Seven expatriate students and their RFL teacher, Marya, participated in the study. The participants were selected through convenience sampling and attended a private English-medium school in Moscow. The students studied in Grade 7 and 8 and were recruited by Marya to participate in the study. Based on Marya's feedback, the students' Russian proficiency was pre-intermediate to intermediate (between A2 and B1 on the CEFR scale). [Table 1](#) provides more information about the participants' backgrounds.

Marya had been teaching RFL for the past 20 years and had periodically taught English as a foreign language in a private capacity. She was fluent in Russian, proficient in English, and reported limited knowledge of German and Turkish. She had learned German at school and was learning Turkish as a hobby. The students had been living in Russia for between three and five years at the start of the study.

#### 3.2. Data collection

The study employed a qualitative, interpretive case study format (Yin 2003) and gathered data over two school semesters. We felt that such a research design satisfied the study's wider aims, which involved tracking changes in the participants' behavior, thought processes, and practices over a period and providing space for reflexivity, deeper engagement with the participants, and the co-construction of data (Duff, 2014). Multiple instruments were used to aid in triangulation, including semi-structured interviews with Marya and the students and classroom observations (see [Table 2](#)). These were supplemented by samples of students' written production involving the use of comics and periodic email exchanges with Marya. The samples served as a tangible record of how the students had used comics during their lessons and supported the data gathered from the interviews and classroom observations. The email exchanges served several purposes. First, they allowed us and the teacher to maintain regular contact throughout the project and even following its completion. The exchanges also reflected the shared responsibility that both we, as researchers, and the teacher had towards the project and led to a more collaborative and friendly atmosphere, one that was conducive to open discussion. Moreover, Marya's comments and reflections from these exchanges provided insights into her thought process when selecting and using comics and echoed the information she provided in her interviews. In this study, WTC is conceptualised as a dynamic process that is situational and evolving instead of being specifically trait-based

(Bernales 2016). Moreover, it covers communication in both spoken and written form since such an approach more accurately represents the nature of communication in the present.

An EMI school in Moscow, where there were pre-existing contacts with the administrative staff, was selected as the site for the study. The school administration was sent an email explaining the project and was asked to help in recruiting teacher participants. The school had a handful of RFL teachers, with two teachers expressing a willingness to participate in the study. However, one of the teachers dropped out due to personal circumstances. The remaining RFL teacher, Marya, was invited to discuss the project. During the discussion, which functioned as an onboarding session of sorts, Marya was asked about her language teaching experiences and background, as well as the types of materials she used to teach RFL. The subject of using comics as a language resource was broached and ideas were discussed regarding possible activities and content. We learned that Marya had not used comics as a resource during RFL lessons, although she had read comics in English and Russian for pleasure. We decided early on that the project would be teacher-driven and collaborative (Macaro 2003; Rathgen 2006), and that Marya would choose how best to use comics during lessons. Given her lack of experience using comics, we encouraged Marya to *reflect* on the use of comics as a language resource throughout the two semesters, with the belief that the trial-and-error process of using comics during this period would strengthen her sense of ownership and awareness of the affordances that multimodal resources like comics provided.

The selection of the students was based on Marya's recommendations. She taught Grade 7 and 8 and wanted to try comics with a group of students she said had difficulties learning Russian and staying motivated. Permission was sought from the parents of these

**Table 2.** Data collection schedule.

Semester	Period	Data Collection	Mode	Length	Participant(s)		
1	September October	Interview M1	Face-to-face*	45 min	Marya		
		Observation C7.1	Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 7		
		Observation C8.1	Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 8		
	November	Interview M2	Face-to-face*	45 min	Marya		
		Observation C7.2	Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 7		
		Observation C8.2	Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 8		
	December	Interview M3	Face-to-face*	45 min	Marya		
		Observation C7.3	Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 7		
		Observation C8.3	Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 8		
		Observation C7.4	Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 7		
		Interview S7.1	Face-to-face*	20 min	Grade 7 Students		
		Observation C8.4	Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 8		
		Interview S8.1	Face-to-face*	20 min	Grade 8 Students		
		2	January	Interview M4	Face-to-face*	45 min	Marya
				Observation C7.5	Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 7
Observation C8.5	Field notes			45 min	Marya + Grade 8		
February	Observation C7.6		Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 7		
	Observation C8.6		Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 8		
	Interview M5		Face-to-face*	45 min	Marya		
March	Observation C7.7		Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 7		
	Field notes		45 min	Marya + Grade 8			
	Interview M6		Face-to-face*	45 min	Marya		
	Observation C7.8	Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 7			
	Interview S7.2	Face-to-face*	20 min	Grade 7 Students			
	Observation C8.8	Field notes	45 min	Marya + Grade 8			
May	Interview S8.2	Face-to-face*	20 min	Grade 8 Students			

\*audio recorded

students, with seven students from the group eventually participating in the study. Following the first meeting with Marya, semi-structured 45-minute interviews were held with her at the beginning, mid-point, and end of the two semesters in which she was asked to reflect on her use of comics, the students' reactions to specific comics and related activities, and their level of engagement and desire to interact in Russian (see [Table 2](#) for the collection schedule). The interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded (audio only).

The semi-structured interviews with the students from Grade 7 and 8 lasted 20 minutes, were conducted face-to-face, and recorded (audio only) following the classroom observations (i.e. on the same day) towards the end of each semester. In the interviews with the students, we elicited their thoughts regarding the use of comics when learning Russian and whether they had enjoyed and benefitted from these during lessons. Lastly, we organised four lesson observations per student group (i.e. Grade 7 and 8) per semester, agreed in advance with Marya, where we took field notes. In our field notes, we noted down how the students and teacher used the comics (e.g. activities and language skills targeted), their reactions when interacting with the comics (e.g. emotions and comments), and the students' written and spoken production. Marya had organised the use of comics in the classroom in such a way as to coincide with periods where the lessons focused on textual content. As already mentioned, we wanted to encourage reflexivity and the teacher's sense of ownership of the project and felt that this would be best ensured if Marya took charge of deciding how to use comics when teaching.

### **3.3. Data analysis**

The data collected from the teacher and student interviews, as well as the field notes, were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was data-driven and primarily inductive, although we used affordances theory (Aronin 2014) as a general reference when analysing the opportunities for interaction that the comics afforded the teacher and her students during lessons. The interview data were first transcribed and, along with the field notes, read separately and sequentially. Marya's interviews were read as one unit (they were read first), followed by the interviews with the students (these were read second), and finally the field notes (these were read last). Each unit of transcribed data was read line by line multiple times (including utterances, extended discourse, full sentences, single words, short phrases, and descriptive information concerning classroom activities, as well as student and teacher behaviour and their emotional state). This process led to the creation of a set of initial codes, which were specific to each of the three data units, though there was also considerable overlap between the codes across the three units due to the sequential nature of the readings. Following the creation of these initial code sets, we reread the units and checked each unit against the codes from all three units until the process reached saturation (i.e. no new codes could be found). This iterative reading process resulted in the creation of a final set of codes and categories, which were collated and combined into themes. Next, we checked the themes with all three units of data, as well as the email exchanges with Marya and the samples of written production, to determine the extent to which they accorded with the entire data set and refined them where necessary.



## 4. Findings

In presenting and discussing our findings, we have divided these into three main sections based on the themes identified during data analysis. Examples of the RFL teacher's reflexivity appear across all three sections.

### 4.1. Reading engagement

Over the two semesters, Marya's views about comics became more nuanced. For example, in her first interview, when asked about her experiences with comics, Marya mainly discussed reading these in Russian and English for pleasure. She mentioned how she had enjoyed the colourful panels and the way the images and languages complemented and enhanced her reading experience, making it more vivid and memorable. She said that she could still recall specific panels from the comics she had read. When asked if she had used comics to teach RFL, she said she had not used them systematically as a pedagogical resource. In her second interview midway through the first semester, she touched on the visually striking nature of comic books when talking about the ones she had selected to use in the lessons. She felt they provided good examples of common Russian phrases and expressions and said that she had read them herself in her free time. She admitted, however, that she was starting to read comics not so much for enjoyment but more analytically to see what activities she could do with them and how she could incorporate them into her lessons. In her third interview, she remained positive about the use of comics in RFL lessons:

I think that comics is a good choice for those students who need motivation, a positive vibration, simplicity, calming up struggling with the new language. (Marya, M3)

During her later interviews, Marya began to note how the use of comics had affected her notions of reading as a class activity. Asked to clarify, she revealed that her students had grown more interested in reading in general, with many searching out illustrated books by authors from their home countries that they could read. They wanted to discuss the stories they read with her. She narrated how Matteo, her student from Sweden, told her about a book by Barbro Lindgren that he liked, recounting the story in Russian narrative fashion. She also mentioned how Metin, who had not been interested in reading, instead preferring to play video games and record short videos, and Lars, who had difficulty forming full sentences in Russian, became more interested in reading in the language and showed more confidence when speaking it.

He (Lars) understands well Russian grammar but felt lost reading texts from our textbook. I was even afraid that he would give up study. (Marya, M5)

In her final interview, Marya remarked on the complexity of using comics as a pedagogical resource, specifically how it required much planning and preparation on her part. The students, too, were asked about their experiences working with the comics Marya had selected and their responses were mostly positive. Metin said that the comics they had used during lessons were more interesting and vivid than their RFL textbook, pointing to the images and dialogue found in the comics. Nikhil and Matteo said they had enjoyed reading Major Grom (Майор Гром), a series from Bubble Comics, during their

lessons with Marya even though some of the phrases in the comics were difficult for them to understand. They said that Marya had provided them with links to Major Grom-linked discussion boards on the Russian social media network VK (В Контакте) where they could interact with other fans of the series. When asked why she had provided them with such links, Marya explained that she had suggested that they get on the discussion forums on VK and interact with Major Grom fans ‘because it’s interesting and good, free practice for them’ (Marya, M4). During the observations, we regularly noticed the students laughing to themselves in class while pointing at specific panels in the comics they were assigned and chatting with their peers about the comic art. Sometimes the students would stare at a page for several moments in silence and trace their fingers back and forth across a particular panel. Their reactions were more variable when it came to completing activities linked to the comics.

#### 4.2. Activities and approaches

While Marya assigned some comics to all the participants, for example, *The Golden Key* by Aleksey Tolstoy and Major Grom, she gave some students additional comics. When asked what criteria she relied on when assigning these, she said that she based her selection on her students’ interests, which she had learned of while teaching them. For Lars, Marya selected Russian versions of *Let’s Go for a Drive!* (*Поехали кататься!*), *Waiting is Not Easy!* (*Как трудно ждать!*), and *We Are in a Book!* (*Мы попали в книжку!*) from the *Elephant and Piggie* series by Mo Willems (generally meant for three- to five-year-olds). She was unsure how he would take to comics in Russian and so had chosen something easy with ‘big letters, short phrases, and well-designed pages that would make him brave and more positive’ (Marya, M2). She had selected *Hilda and the Troll* (*Хильда и тролль*) by Luke Pearson for Nur because she knew that the student was a fan of fantasy. For Zoe, Marya chose *The Journey around The Hermitage: The Queen of Tulips* by V. Pomidor and D. Agapova, a comic book for 8–11-year-olds about the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg and its collection of Dutch paintings. Marya said that using this comic book had allowed her and Zoe to open up to each other about culture and art and discuss their travel preferences, the paintings and museums they liked, and how people spent their free time in the Netherlands and Russia. As for Sophie, Marya chose the graphic novel *Little Robot* by Ben Hatke, explaining:

The comic book reminded me of the stories by Isaac Asimov and was really interesting for both of us. I chose it because the girl (Sophie) likes science fiction. Practically, Ben Hatke almost does not use words, so the book gave us an opportunity to create the story together, expanding the vocabulary, and practicing grammar. (Marya, M2)

During the observations, we saw that the activities Marya implemented with the comics focused on developing the students’ reading and speaking skills, as well as their grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The activities could be broadly categorised into storytelling (and retelling), verbal/visual critique, role-playing, and word games (including the use of flashcards). Storytelling consisted of Marya helping the students create comic strips or single-panel memes (e.g. like the type one sees on the internet), after which the students were asked to tell a story based on the strips or panels they had created. Marya used the activity to check her students’ knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, notably

descriptive words, everyday phrases, action verbs, reported speech, and case endings (e.g. the accusative case). Using sentences and short phrases, she modelled the use of new vocabulary and grammar patterns orally in front of the groups and then asked them to make additional sentences with these. Retelling involved the students reading a series of comic panels and orally summarising the story progression from the panels. Marya asked them questions about the story to check whether they had understood everything. During verbal/visual critique activities, Marya asked the groups to study a series of panels from the comic books she had given them and then verbally comment on the details found therein (e.g. art, dialogue, etc.).

During one of our observations, we saw that Metin found it difficult to engage in verbal/visual critique but had not declined to do the activity and remained quite positive throughout. When asked about her use of storytelling, retelling, and verbal/visual critique activities, Marya explained that these helped with reviewing and refining the students' grammar and vocabulary knowledge and speaking skills. She asked them to save their panel creations so that they could review these at home and build on them in subsequent lessons:

We expanded the vocabulary, got new words, and repeated them the next lessons, got new grammar, or repeated the constructions, which they already knew but did not use before very often. And the most important thing, we really enjoyed chatting in Russian. (Marya, M4)

Verbal/visual critique, storytelling, and retelling activities were occasionally followed by word games to practice the new vocabulary and grammar patterns that the students had learned. These games involved the students matching words to either their definitions or synonyms. Marya modelled the activity by saying the definition of a word and then asking the groups to guess the word. The student who was first to guess the word correctly received a point. After modelling the activity, she had the groups do the activity on their own, with students taking turns defining a word and the others having to guess it. She monitored the groups and helped individual students if they had difficulties finding a synonym or definition for a particular word. We observed these games being implemented orally but Marya also reported giving the students handouts and flashcards in subsequent lessons to review vocabulary and grammar patterns learned in previous lessons. Concerning role-playing activities, Marya implemented these with the comics that she had assigned to all the students (e.g. the Golden Key and the Major Grom series). The groups were randomly assigned to play characters from the comics and tasked with writing small skits that they would perform. Marya helped the groups write the skits, including helping with morphosyntax. The skit writing process also allowed Marya and the students to discuss their impressions of the various comic book characters. Besides skits, Marya also had the students play characters (behaviour, mannerisms, etc.), with the rest of the group trying to guess their identity.

In a few lessons, we noticed that Marya read aloud parts of the comics with the students and then had an open discussion with them about what she had read. During these instances, the rest of the class would also listen to her intently. In her final interview, when asked to reflect on her decision to read aloud extracts from the comics, she explained that she had done so because there were times when she felt she had run out of fresh ideas for activities. She added that engaging in open discussions with the students

after the read-aloud would, in any event, aid in developing their speaking ability and self-confidence, as well as improve their vocabulary knowledge, notably of Russian slang. As an example, she mentioned how the students had asked her about the word *копюша*, which loosely translates to *slowpoke* in English. During the observations, we also noticed that Marya did not assign any reading-at-home assignments involving the comics, a decision which she justified in her second interview by saying that her students already received a lot of homework and that she did not want to add to this. She wanted them to enjoy reading the comics and felt that, if they wanted to, they could continue reading the comics at home for pleasure, not as part of homework.

### 4.3. Oral and written production

In her final interview, Marya noted that while she had not expected her students to speak Russian at an advanced level as a result of using comics during lessons, she was happy that they had begun to perceive Russian as ‘a living material’ (Marya, M6) with which they could experiment. She also said that they had started using Russian more confidently and regularly, especially collocations and analogies. She noted, however, that while they had started using phrases like ‘native speakers do’ (Marya, M6) and even making the same mistakes, it was important for her, as an adult and their teacher, to explain to them when to use specific phrases from the comics, what these conveyed in terms of meaning, and when not to use them. During our observations, we saw some students using expressions from the comics, performing scenes from these, and even imitating comic book characters outside of the role-playing activities. When asked about the changes she had observed in her students, Marya gave the example of Metin and how he loved Igor Grom from the Major Grom series.

He likes this hero so much that he copied his expressions and comments. Then later I found out that he tried to read our comics in English. And he began to speak Russian language more and more enthusiastically even making mistakes and searching for the words in his memory. (Marya, M5)

The students responded in different ways to the use of comics. Some, like Metin, became more talkative, using phrases from the comics when interacting with classmates during lessons and imitating comic book characters. In others, the use of comics did not lead to more oral production in Russian. Nur, for instance, who had been seen to shy away from role-playing and discussion-oriented activities during the first semester of the project (she had not been very talkative throughout the project), developed a preference for drawing and creating comic panels with Marya. When asked about Nur, Marya noted that the greatest change that she had seen in her had been that Nur had become more expressive in her artistry and creation of panels.

Nur stopped to be frustrated and started to feel more free and brave. The reading of comics did not improve the level of this student immediately but her involvement and self-confidence have increased. (Marya, M5)

Marya revealed that, in her conversations with Nur, she learned that working with comics had made Nur less afraid of making mistakes when speaking and less self-conscious of

her Russian language proficiency. She felt that Nur still needed to work hard to build up her vocabulary knowledge and review the words she had learned when reading the comics, although she reported that Nur also seemed more willing to take on non-comic texts that she had previously considered difficult to read and was more open to watching films in Russian, an activity that had previously intimidated her. During the final interview with Nur, when asked to sum up her experiences using comics during RFL lessons, she stated that she had bought some comic books in Russian and was reading them at home.

## 5. Discussion

The study explored how the use of comics affected RFL learner WTC, how this WTC manifested during lessons, as well as the role of the teacher in this regard. As such, the findings indicated that the use of comics in the RFL classroom positively affected the students' WTC over the two semesters, as well as Marya's engagement with them. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed us to chart how learner WTC evolved over several months via the observations, interviews, students' written production, and email exchanges. The findings indicated that WTC manifested in different, individual-specific ways. The use of comics led to a greater willingness on the part of students to interact not only with the teacher but also with Russian speakers outside of lessons (e.g. Nikhil and Matteo's use of Major Grom-related online discussion boards). The students adopted the mannerisms of their favourite comic book characters (e.g. Metin), developed a greater interest in reading overall (e.g. Matteo), started to express Russian through art and were less intimidated by the prospect of watching Russian films (e.g. Nur), and, as reported by Marya, began to perceive Russian as 'living material' (Marya, M6) and use it more naturally, that is, like 'native speakers do' (Marya, M6). In other words, the comics engaged the students on multiple levels, including textually, visually, and communicatively, raising their awareness of the different ways in which they could use Russian. Crucially, the use of comics increased their desire to interact through Russian while also boosting their self-confidence and language skills.

In the classroom, student WTC manifested both during and outside of activities. For instance, it manifested when the students were engaged in verbal/visual critique, storytelling, and role-playing activities, as well as outside of such activities like when Metin copied the mannerisms of Igor Grom. In Nur, WTC took the form of increased self-confidence, less frustration, and greater artistic expression. Her WTC did not manifest orally, instead, she developed a willingness to communicate using media other than speech. The findings indicate the need for researchers to consider diverse forms of communication when investigating WTC since this can manifest multimodally and not exclusively as an individual's desire and readiness to communicate orally. As for Marya, the use of comics as a pedagogical resource created several occasions for her to engage with her students at a deeper level, for instance, discussing art and culture with Zoe and referring Nikhil and Matteo to online discussion boards for Major Grom. In some ways, then, the comics could be said to have boosted Marya's WTC vis-à-vis her students, as well. Based on the findings, Marya's approach to using comics could be described as combining language-focused, reader-response, art critique, and visual storytelling approaches (for a discussion of these approaches, see Calafato 2018a; Cary 2004; Issa

2018; Serafini 2011). Her approach bears a slight resemblance to that employed by other language teachers in Russia when using authentic, if not necessarily multimodal, materials in the language classroom (Calafato 2018a).

Other language teachers, had they participated in the study, may have developed a different combination of approaches when teaching with comics based on their abilities, beliefs, and experiences. It was, in any case, beyond the scope of this study to investigate the effectiveness of all possible approaches, or combinations thereof, that different teachers might employ when using comics. Rather, one of the study's objectives was to provide an example of how language teachers might be involved in the research process and, over time, develop, through reflection and experimentation, an approach to using comics that benefits their students and their own professional development. The use of comics during lessons also produced other notable effects among the students. For instance, it boosted their desire to not only read comics at home but also to read non-comic works that they had previously found difficult (e.g. Nur). Furthermore, the students developed a greater interest in reading in both Russian and their first languages (e.g. Matteo), suggesting that the use of comics in the foreign language classroom may bring wider literacy-related benefits that spill over to the other languages the students know. The study's findings support those from other studies where the use of comics led to greater reading engagement (e.g. Ro 2013), although, here, unlike in other studies, the use of comics led to increased reading enjoyment in multiple languages. This cross-pollination effect can be explained using the interdependence hypothesis (Cummins 1989), where academic skills can transfer between languages in multilingual students. In this study, such transfer may have occurred from Russian, the participants' third or fourth language, to their first languages, thereby boosting their overall reading engagement.

## 6. Conclusion and implications for future research

Given the study's exploratory nature and its small number of participants, the findings lack generalisability. Still, they illustrate how using comics as a multimodal resource in the language classroom in a sustained and systematic manner can positively affect learner WTC and even teachers' professional development and engagement with students. In this study, such systematisation was achieved through close contact and steady correspondence between the researchers and the teacher. This would have been difficult to achieve with larger groups of teachers and students. For policymakers and educational institutions, the findings serve as an impetus to review teacher education programmes to ascertain the extent to which these programmes help language teachers work with multimodal resources like comics systematically, especially in countries like Russia where comics are making strong inroads among younger generations. It is also hoped that this exploratory study will encourage a deeper investigation of how the teaching and learning of LOTE can be enhanced via comics, ideally through additional observation-based studies on how the use of comics as a pedagogical resource can contribute to *sustaining* and developing learner WTC and achievement, how the multimodal nature of comics interacts with teacher cognition, teaching ability, and engagement, as well as how the use of comics to learn a foreign language affects students' language skills in the other languages they know. We believe that such

research would contribute to a better understanding of how multimodal resources can be used to effectively develop students' language ability and teachers' pedagogical competence in support of multimodal interactions in the twenty-first century.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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