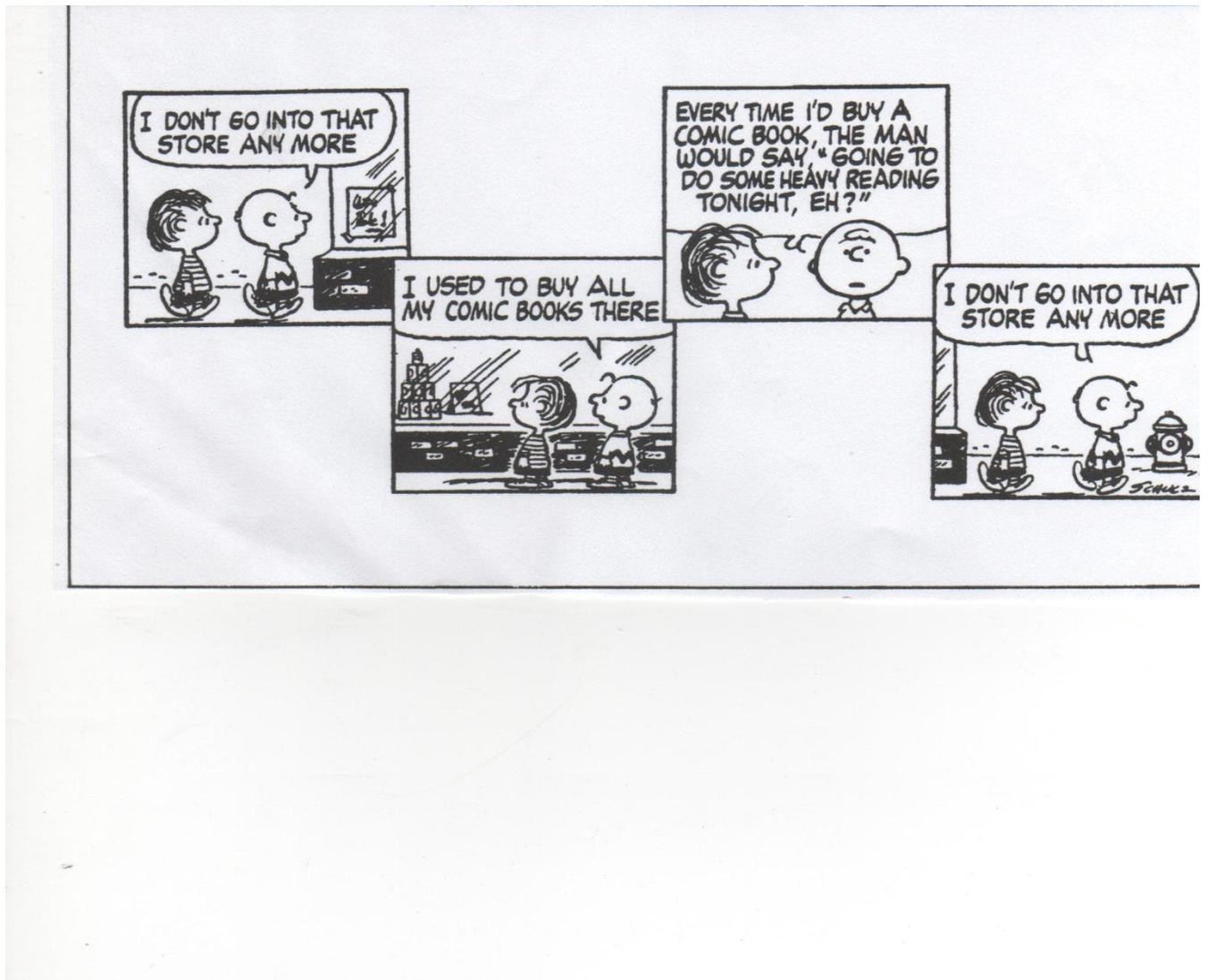


Exploiting comic strips in class

« What is the use of a book thought Alice, without pictures or conversations? »

Lewis Carrol, *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*



Stage one

There are different ways to use a comic strip in class and each teacher can play it by ear according to his/her class or to his/her mood. With a strip like this one may start by asking a few questions, for example:

Teacher: *Where's the scene taking place?*

Student: *In a street outside a store/shop.*

T: *What does Charlie Brown tell Linus in the first picture?*

S: *He tells him that he doesn't go into that store anymore.*

T: *What kind of store/shop is it?*

S: *It's a bookstore/bookshop.*

T: *What kind of books did Charlie Brown use to buy there?*

S: *He used to buy comic books.*

T: *What happened last time when he asked for a comic book?*

S: *The book keeper would call it "heavy reading".*

T: *Did the book keeper mean it when he spoke of "heavy reading"?*

S: *No, he was joking.*

T: *What did he actually mean?*

S: *He meant that a comic book is not serious reading.*

T: *How did Charlie Brown feel about this remark?*

S: *He felt insulted/He did not appreciate it.*

Stage two

As teaching of the fundamentals of the language must always be our main concern, here are some activities dealing with basic structures of the strip. They could be introduced at an earlier stage if you feel it necessary.

The strip offers an interesting example of the uses of the structure *used to/would*: *I used to buy* (a past habit that has been discontinued); *I'd buy/The man would say* (past routines) . It should be noted that *used to* could replace *would* in the two sentences: *I'd buy and he would say* , but *would* cannot replace *used to* when it is used as a discontinued habit : *I would go into that shop* is incorrect.

Ask your students to think of examples of routines they had when they were children: *When I was eleven I would cycle to school* (*used to* could also be used here but *would* is more commonly used when reminiscing about the past at length). In fact you could ask your pupils in pairs to pretend they're very old reminiscing about their younger days.

As for vocabulary expansion (an important step to get the most out of the study of comics), this strip offers several interesting elements.

First you can go through the various meanings of the word *heavy*:

- Hard to lift because of weight;
- To an unusual extent- a heavy drinker;
- Hard to digest –a heavy meal;
- Hard to do;
- Needing lots of energy –heavy work;
- Serious but possibly uninteresting – a heavy film.

Ask your pupils which is the most appropriate meaning of the word *heavy* for the strip. Mention this meaning of *heavy* can also imply the material is *intellectual* thereby contrasting with the usual contents of a comic book. (elicit this contrast from your pupils.)

It would also be relevant to point out the differences between *newspaper comics* and *comic books*. (comic strip series printed daily in newspapers and magazines containing stories of super heroes told in pictures).

You can also focus your pupils' attention on the vocabulary of seriousness and jokes which can be introduced through questions about the third picture/frame/panel:

- *Was* the shopkeeper *in earnest* when he said "going to do some heavy reading tonight? Or: Was he *pulling Charlie Brown's leg/Making fun of him/teasing him/poking fun at him*, etc. Perhaps Charlie Brown *can't take a joke, doesn't know*

- *how to take a joke/ is touchy/over-sensitive*_on this issue, *fed up with* the shopkeeper's hints and so on.

Stage three

At the third stage, more particularly aimed at advanced students it is interesting to broaden the scope of the discussion by focusing the commentary on the psychology of the characters and the atmosphere of the strip. For example: *Does Charlie Brown take himself too seriously? Is he too over-sensitive? Or is it the shopkeeper who is insensitive?*

With older pupils this should lead into a deeper discussion of the implications of the man's remark and show how a child/teenager is sensitive to a grown-up's judgment and can be easily hurt by any form of sarcasm. Your pupils can probably relate the situation mentioned in the strip to something similar they have experienced themselves.

You could then follow up with practice of *fed up with*: *I'm fed up with adults saying young people are lazy, I'm fed up with my mother saying my clothes are scruffy*, etc.

You could also ask the class to comment on the relationship between the two characters, Charlie Brown and Linus. *Are they equals?* It can be interesting to point out that Charlie Brown does all the talking, whereas Linus just listens to him. Ask your pupils why is that so; (Linus is younger than Charlie Brown, so he lacks Charlie's experience and Charlie Brown acts as a kind of mentor warning him about the trials and tribulations of life.)

You can also ask them what other tricks the cartoonist uses to make us feel Linus' dependence on Charlie Brown. (Linus walks behind him and is always represented in profile, whereas Charlie Brown faces the reader when delivering the main statement as if calling the whole world to witness.)

Remind them that in Western culture the eye is accustomed to going from left to right, therefore the character standing on the right is often the most important as the eye finally rests on him/her. This is particularly true with newspaper comics which are meant to be read at a glance.

A more ambitious approach would be to compare various *Peanuts* strips featuring Charlie Brown in order to analyse with your students the extent to which he is un-American (he is a born loser) and draw a parallel between Schulz's hero and Willie Loman in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a salesman*. You will find a fascinating study on this topic in *The parables of Peanuts* by the American theologian Robert L. Short. (available at Amazon in a paperback edition).

