

Comics in Language Education to Foster Citizenship and Integration

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Abstract

This article examines how the creation of comics by newly arrived migrant and refugee youth can foster language learning, identity construction, and critical citizenship education. Based on the Comixx mit Klasse project, implemented in Hamburg schools since 2019, this qualitative-exploratory study analyses 26 comics produced by students between 2019 and 2024. The results show that these multimodal texts portray migration trajectories, school experiences, aspirations, and emotional expressions, enabling learners to explore their expressive autonomy within a new sociocultural context. Through visual narratives, students articulate belonging, diversity, and social justice, challenging monolingual educational models and valuing plural linguistic repertoires. The study advocates for the use of comics as a transformative pedagogical resource, promoting more inclusive, participatory, and learner-centred learning environments, with strong potential to foster active citizenship and intercultural competence.

Banda desenhada na educação linguística para promover a cidadania e a integração

Resumo: Este artigo analisa como a criação de bandas desenhadas por jovens migrantes e refugiados recém-chegados pode promover a aprendizagem linguística, a construção de identidade e a educação para a cidadania crítica. Com base no projeto *Comixx mit Klasse*, implementado em escolas de Hamburgo desde 2019, o estudo qualitativo-exploratório analisa 26 bandas desenhadas produzidas por alunos entre 2019 e 2024. Os resultados revelam que estes textos multimodais representam trajetórias migratórias, experiências escolares, aspirações e expressões emocionais, permitindo aos aprendentes explorar a sua autonomia expressiva num novo contexto sociocultural. Através de narrativas visuais, os alunos articulam pertença, diversidade e justiça social, desafiando modelos educativos monolingues e valorizando repertórios linguísticos plurais. O estudo defende o uso da banda desenhada como recurso pedagógico transformador, promovendo ambientes de aprendizagem mais inclusivos, participativos e centrados nos alunos, com forte potencial para desenvolver competências de cidadania ativa e interculturalidade.

La bande dessinée dans l'enseignement des langues pour favoriser la citoyenneté et l'intégration

Résumé: Cet article examine comment la création de bandes dessinées par de jeunes migrants et réfugiés nouvellement arrivés peut favoriser l'apprentissage des langues, la construction identitaire et l'éducation à la citoyenneté critique. S'appuyant sur le projet *Comixx mit Klasse*, mis en œuvre dans des écoles de Hambourg depuis 2019, cette étude qualitative et exploratoire analyse 26 bandes dessinées produites par des élèves entre 2019 et 2024. Les résultats montrent que ces textes multimodaux représentent des trajectoires migratoires, des expériences scolaires, des aspirations et des expressions émotionnelles, permettant aux apprenants d'explorer leur autonomie expressive dans un nouveau contexte socioculturel. À travers des récits visuels, les élèves expriment leur sentiment d'appartenance, leur rapport à la diversité et à la justice sociale, remettant en question les modèles éducatifs monolingues et valorisant des répertoires linguistiques pluriels. L'étude défend l'utilisation de la bande dessinée comme un outil pédagogique transformateur, capable de promouvoir des environnements d'apprentissage plus inclusifs, participatifs et centrés sur les apprenants, avec un fort potentiel pour développer des compétences en citoyenneté active et en interculturalité.

Cómics en la educación lingüística para fomentar la ciudadanía y la integración

Resumen: Este artículo analiza cómo la creación de cómics por parte de jóvenes migrantes y refugiados recién llegados puede favorecer el aprendizaje lingüístico, la construcción de la identidad y la educación para la ciudadanía crítica. Basado en el proyecto *Comixx mit Klasse*, implementado en escuelas de Hamburgo desde 2019, este estudio cualitativo-exploratorio analiza 26 cómics producidos por estudiantes entre 2019 y 2024. Los resultados muestran que estos textos multimodales representan trayectorias migratorias, experiencias escolares, aspiraciones y expresiones emocionales, permitiendo a los aprendientes explorar su autonomía expresiva en un nuevo contexto sociocultural. A través de narrativas visuales, los alumnos articulan pertenencia, diversidad y justicia social, desafiando modelos educativos monolingües y valorando repertorios lingüísticos plurales. El estudio defiende el uso del cómic como recurso pedagógico transformador, promoviendo entornos de aprendizaje más inclusivos, participativos y centrados en los alumnos, con un alto potencial para desarrollar competencias de ciudadanía activa e interculturalidad.

Palavras-chave: Banda desenhada na educação em Línguas; Educação para a cidadania; Integração de jovens migrantes;

Introduction

In recent years, citizenship education has gained prominence as a key element of inclusive and democratic schooling (Osler & Starkey, 2018). In Europe, where migratory flows and tensions around social cohesion have intensified, education systems are increasingly called to address the needs of young people arriving under vulnerable conditions (Pastoor, 2022). Many migrant and refugee students face linguistic, cultural, and emotional challenges that hinder educational success and integration (Pinson & Arnot, 2017).

Schools, as central spaces of linguistic and civic socialisation, play a pivotal role in fostering participation, belonging and inclusive practices, where the intersection of language and citizenship education becomes crucial, since valuing students' life stories, languages and cultural identities supports inclusive pedagogies and civic agency, reframes diversity as a resource, and enables plural and dynamic identity development (Cummins, 2021; Little & Kirwan, 2021; Sierens et al., 2019). One promising approach is the use of comics as a multimodal medium bridging language learning, self-expression, and intercultural awareness. Research highlights their potential to support linguistic development and stimulate creativity and critical thinking (Chun, 2009; Nugraheni & Purwanti, 2016). Comics foster vocabulary and grammar, especially for learners with emerging school language skills, while also providing space for social engagement and emotional expression (Ranker, 2007).

In this article, we present and analyse the project *Comixx mit Klasse*¹, developed by *Junges Literaturhaus Hamburg* and vocational schools in Hamburg since 2019/2020. It supports newly arrived migrant and refugee students through the co-creation of comics, guided by artists and educators, embracing multilingual and multimodal communication as valid modes of participation.

The present study, of a qualitative and exploratory nature, analyses a corpus of student comics to investigate: (1) What types of stories are represented in the students' comics, and what central challenges do they portray? (2) Which languages and cultural references are present? (3) How do students express their perceptions of identity, integration, and belonging? (4) In what ways are themes of citizenship, inclusion, and diversity addressed through the narratives?

By examining these questions, this article contributes to research at the intersection of language education and citizenship, with a focus on pedagogical strategies that enhance the inclusion, voice, and agency of migrant and refugee youth in educational settings.

Critical Citizenship Education in Contexts of Migration

Citizenship education is increasingly seen as a dynamic and transformative process that equips learners to engage critically with society, rather than as a static transmission of civic knowledge (Osler & Starkey, 2018; Banks, 2008). In migration contexts, it must move beyond normative discourses and monocultural ideals to recognise plural identities and structural inequalities. Migrant and refugee students often face educational and emotional vulnerability, shaped by trauma, unfamiliar school systems and limited support networks (Pastoor, 2022; Pinson & Arnot, 2017). To counter this, Sainz and Jacott (2020) call for a pedagogy of recognition that embraces narratives of migration and resilience, fostering belonging and voice in the present. For newly arrived adolescents, whose identities are still forming in new sociocultural environments, schools must therefore act as spaces of democratic participation that validate diverse ways of being and knowing.

Lourenço (2021) reinforces the potential of language classrooms for intercultural and global citizenship education. She highlights how critical pedagogies, grounded in real-world issues and students' lived experiences, can promote both linguistic and civic competences. Language education, inherently dialogic and intercultural, becomes a fertile ground for developing global citizenship values, when tied to inclusive pedagogies that affirm agency and social justice (Estellés & Fischman, 2020). Moreover, Porto and Byram's (2015) concept of intercultural citizenship offers a compelling framework that connects language education with civic participation. Building on Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, they emphasise the role of criticality – the ability to evaluate and act on ethical values – drawing on Barnett's (1997) dimensions of knowledge, self, and the world. Their work shows that even learners with limited proficiency can engage meaningfully with global issues, co-create multimodal texts, and participate in transformative learning. The concept of *savoir s'engager*, or socially situated critical awareness, becomes central. These approaches reframe language classrooms as spaces of democratic action and belonging, particularly for migrant students.

Similarly, Rapanta, Vrikki and Evagorou (2020) reconceptualise citizenship education as a dialogic and culturally situated practice. Their curriculum links cultural literacy with civic learning through discussion and multimodal texts. At its core is the idea that citizenship is enacted through empathy, collaboration, and critical dialogue, not merely taught as content. Using wordless books and animations, learners explore civic dilemmas, express viewpoints, and co-construct meaning. This positions cultural literacy as a key competence for civic participation and reinforces the need for inclusive, dialogically rich learning environments. In this framework, multimodal artefacts such as comics emerge as pedagogical tools for engagement, identity negotiation, and democratic expression.

In the empirical analysis, we will examine how students' graphic narratives reflect dimensions of *savoir s'engager*, revealing critical awareness and a desire for active participation in the host society.

Language Education in Multilingual and Multicultural Classrooms

Language is both a tool for communication and a carrier of identity and culture (Norton, 2013). In migration-affected classrooms, inclusive approaches that value home languages and translanguaging practices are essential, challenging deficit-oriented models (García & Wei, 2014; Cummins, 2021). Block's (2014) Beyond-Lingualism further highlights multimodal and multilingual communication as empowering, linking language education with social justice, identity and agency. Multimodal practices such as comics, theatre or digital storytelling provide equitable entry points into learning, especially for students still developing academic literacy (Little & Kirwan, 2021; Melo-Pfeifer & Das Neves, 2019). Lourenço and Melo-Pfeifer (2022) show how tools like linguistic landscapes foster awareness of linguistic diversity, critical reflection and linguistic activism, encouraging students to critique and reimagine their environments. By connecting personal language biographies with situated visual texts, learners cultivate voice, participation and civic engagement, making multimodality a powerful resource for inclusive and transformative pedagogy.

Comics as Multimodal, Narrative and Critical Educational Resources

Comics, as hybrid multimodal texts combining image, language and spatial sequencing, offer rich opportunities for narrative construction and creative expression (Kress, 2010; Serafini, 2014). Their multimodality scaffolds comprehension through visual cues and emotional engagement, particularly useful for learners with emerging proficiency (Nugraheni & Purwanti, 2016; Sabeti, 2020). Beyond linguistic tools, comics foster critical literacy by enabling students to examine how verbal and visual codes interact, disrupt stereotypes and open space for alternative viewpoints (Chun, 2009; Janks, 2010). When learners produce their own comics, they shift from consumers to authors of meaning, mobilising symbolic and linguistic resources to narrate experiences, explore identity and reflect on social realities (Ranker, 2007; Kalaja & Melo-Pfeifer, 2019). For migrant and refugee youth, this medium provides space for emotional expression, identity negotiation and the processing of trauma, often more effectively than conventional writing (Masson, 2021). Drawing on the notion of "multimodal voice" (Melo-Pfeifer & Das Neves, 2019), visual production bypasses linguistic barriers, affirms agency and positions students as co-constructors of meaning.

Comics thus emerge as democratic spaces for narrative identity, intercultural reflection and civic participation.

In the analysis, we will highlight how the production of comics becomes a space for voice, identity, and critical agency, validating the relevance of this pedagogical resource for intercultural citizenship.

Methodology and Project Description

The Pedagogical Project: Objectives and Structure

Comixx mit Klasse is a project developed by the *Junges Literaturhaus Hamburg* in partnership with vocational schools in Hamburg, running since the academic year 2019/2020. It targets newly arrived adolescent migrants, including many refugees and asylum seekers, and aims to support their integration through the creation of comics in German. Although the use of German was encouraged, students could also write/draw in their home languages; multilingual production was welcomed as part of an inclusive pedagogy. The project addresses the challenges faced by students with different linguistic backgrounds, particularly those with limited schooling or traumatic experiences (Pinson & Arnot, 2017).

Drawing on the expressive power of multimodality, the project combines visual and verbal storytelling to foster linguistic development, creativity, and self-confidence. Guided by professional comic artists and supported by language teachers, students create their own comics, developing narrative and visual competencies. The pedagogical sequence includes: (1) access to a class comic collection for exploration and discussion; (2) an introductory workshop at the *Literaturhaus*, featuring encounters with comic authors; (3) excursions to cultural institutions in Hamburg (e.g., Central Library, Strips & Stories); (4) creative workshops across five school days to develop story ideas and draft pages; (5) follow-up sessions for revisions and final artwork; (6) public presentation and publication of the comics during the *Graphic Novel Days*, with each student receiving a printed copy.

Beyond fostering language acquisition, the project aims to create spaces of belonging, narrative identity building, and civic engagement through the medium of comics. It is particularly noteworthy for its focus on emotional expression, intercultural dialogue, and student authorship.

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative-exploratory case study approach (Yin, 2018), appropriate for investigating meaning-making and identity processes in complex educational contexts. Such an approach allows for in-depth analysis of multimodal

artefacts and their pedagogical functions, moving beyond surface-level linguistic outcomes to capture affective, intercultural, and civic dimensions.

From a total of 128 comics produced between 2019 and 2024, 26 were purposefully selected for analysis, based on their relevance to research questions, thematic diversity, and variation in visual and narrative techniques. In the ambit of this article, six of these were analysed in greater depth, as they provided particularly illustrative examples of the four analytical dimensions and represented distinct genres and styles within the corpus.

Academic year	Edition	Total number of stories	Selected for analysis	Selected for this article
2019/2020	1 & 2	27	5	2
2020/2021	3 & 4	25	4	1
2021/2022	5 & 6	30	6	1
2022/2023	7 & 8	20	5	1
2023/2024	9 & 10	26	6	1
Total		128	26	6

Figure 1
Overview of produced and selected comics for analysis

The comics were examined as narrative artefacts using interpretive criteria from narrative analysis and multimodal literacy (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), focusing on: (a) narrative structure (e.g., conflict, resolution, temporal flow); (b) character and self-representation; (c) use of languages and cultural references; (d) visual metaphors and semiotic choices; (e) values related to inclusion, justice, and belonging. The analysis combined predefined theoretical categories with emerging codes identified during iterative readings, supported by a flexible coding grid.

The researchers participated as observer-participants during workshops, taking field notes and engaging in informal discussions with students and artists. While they did not intervene in the creative process, their presence allowed them to contextualise the production dynamics and the social interactions surrounding the comics. The analysis also considered the pedagogical context of production, including the influence of workshops, peer interaction, and feedback moments with authors, as integral to shaping the final narratives.

Participants

The study involved newly arrived adolescents enrolled in 10 vocational schools in Hamburg between 2019 and 2024, with each edition produced by two classes from

two different schools. The participants were aged 15 to 20, originating from diverse countries including Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, and Ukraine. The group included both boys and girls with varied legal statuses (migrants, refugees and asylum seekers). For ethical reasons, precise numbers per country or gender are not disclosed, and all personal identifiers were removed.

Students were given thematic freedom in their creative work. While some workshops suggested prompts (e.g. “a day in my life” etc.), participants were not required to follow them. This openness was central to the projects’ inclusive and student-centred methodology, allowing learners to express personal stories, fictional narratives, or hybrid texts.

Ethical Considerations

The project followed strict ethical guidelines to protect participants’ rights and wellbeing. Informed consent was obtained from all students and, where applicable, their parents or legal guardians. Participation was voluntary, and students could withdraw at any stage without consequences for their schooling.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, names were changed and identifying details omitted. Although the comics were later publicly exhibited, this was done with students’ consent, and authorship was acknowledged only where explicitly authorised.

Given the potential emotional impact of narrating migration experiences, facilitators monitored well-being and, when needed, referred students to school counselling services.

Results

The dataset includes 26 student-created comics from the *Comixx mit Klasse* project (2019–2024), analysed as multimodal artefacts that integrate narrative, visual design, and personal meaning-making. The analysis revealed four major thematic axes: (i) Migration Trajectories and Life Transitions; (ii) Language Learning and School Experiences; (iii) Identity, Belonging and Aspirations; (iv) Multimodal Agency and Emotional Expression. These categories, while analytically distinct, often overlap in the narratives.

Migration Trajectories and Life Transitions

Several comics depict personal or collective migration journeys, frequently structured through a “before–now–after” timeline. Stories begin in the country of origin, illustrating violence, fear, or rupture, followed by movement and arrival in Germany.

Transitions are marked spatially (maps, borders) and emotionally, revealing trauma and aspirations for stability.

The following example contrasts past and present: the upper row depicts the protagonist's life in Afghanistan, a happy family scene disrupted by Taliban force arriving, a visual shorthand for fear and disruption. Below, the same student walks freely in Germany, carrying a school bag and lifting weights joyfully at a gym, signalling safety and normalcy. The visual symmetry reinforces the strong contrast between trauma and recovery, with school and leisure as symbols of integration.

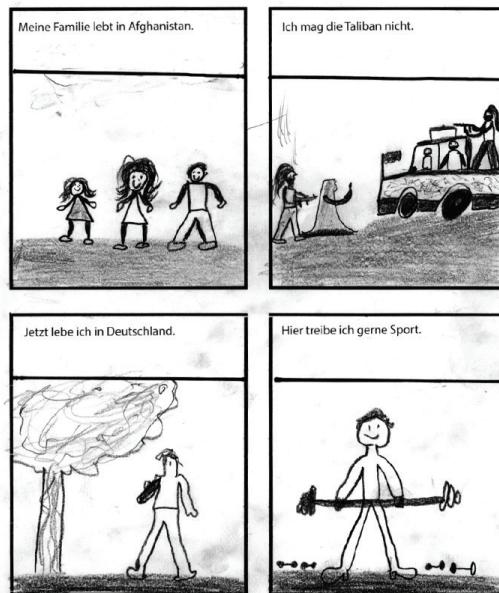


Image 1
Then and now (Ramin, 18, Afghanistan, edition 2024)

Another compelling example, *Die Reise des Todes* [The Journey of Death], traces a perilous route from Syria to Germany. It opens with a weapon and the Arabic phrase “تُوْمَلَا قَلْحَر” [Journey of Death], then progresses through dialogue about fleeing Syria, a crowded boat to Greece, and an overland journey through Serbia, Hungary, and Austria. Labels like “Angst” and “Hoffnung” convey emotional ambivalence. A final panel shows two figures (one in Syria, one in Germany) exchanging messages, underscoring how displacement reshapes but does not sever emotional bonds.



Image 2
The Journey of Death (Mohammad B., 20, Syria, edition 2020)

Unlike comics ending with school enrolment or integration, this narrative retains ambiguity: arrival and connection coexist with fragmentation. Still, the act of narrating offers students a medium to process transitions, reclaim agency, and articulate belonging.

Language Learning and School Experiences

Language emerges as both a practical and symbolic theme. Many protagonists navigate classroom challenges, interpreting instructions, answering questions, or speaking publicly. Visual metaphors like broken pencils and locked books express initial frustration. One narrative tells the story of a student mocked for pronunciation,

then helped by a supportive teacher using visuals. The story ends with the protagonist assisting a newcomer, symbolising empowerment through learning and solidarity.

A particularly rich example is found in a comic structured in two thematic grids: *Die Zukunft* [The future] and *Guter Tag* [Good day]. This student envisions his entire educational and linguistic journey through a chronological and aspirational lens. The comic presents key German school qualifications (e.g. *ESA*, *MSA*, *Fachabitur*) and language levels (B1, C1), each accompanied by illustrations of perseverance, fatigue, and determination. In the “C1-panel”, the student is shown lying exhausted on the sofa, saying “I can't take it any more”, evoking the emotional toll of high-stakes linguistic and academic demands. Yet, this is followed by expressions of resilience and pride, culminating in a jubilant image of him celebrating his C1 certification in German.

In the second grid, the student thanks teachers and envisions signing a work contract, reflecting freedom, nostalgia, and ambition. This comic shows how language learning becomes a narrative of growth and belonging, a journey from uncertainty to fulfilment.

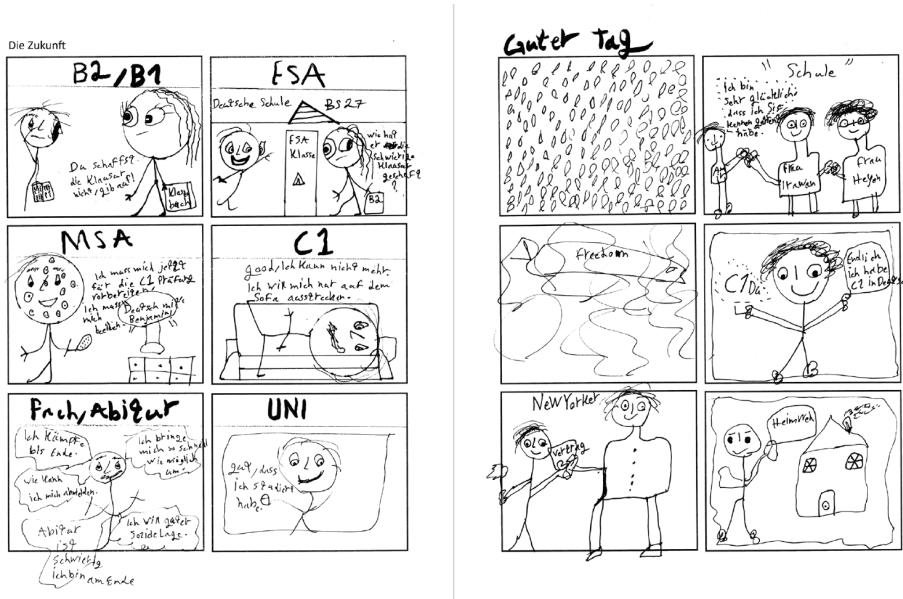


Image 3
The Future & Good Day (Amir, 18, Iran, edition 2023)

Identity, Belonging, and Aspirations

Identity construction and the search for belonging pervade the comics. Often autobiographical, characters resemble their authors and engage in self-narration, addressing the reader, expressing hopes, or reflecting on the past. Emotions like loneliness, pride, or love are depicted through gesture, facial expression, and symbolic motifs (e.g. hearts, flags), sometimes enhanced by shading or background detail.

The next powerful illustration stands out for its emotional intensity and symbolic condensation: the protagonist's face is left blank, overwritten by dense scribbles and the words "anders" and "ta'lib", meaning "different" and "student" respectively, blending languages and suggesting a fragmented or contested identity. The scribbled background creates a visual claustrophobia, while the lack of facial features alludes to invisibility or loss of self. However, this erasure is not passive, it appears deliberate, as an artistic decision that asserts agency through refusal (to be fully seen, fully labelled, or reduced to stereotype). This piece exemplifies how students use visual language to explore complex questions of belonging, alienation, and identity negotiation, without the need for conventional narrative sequence.

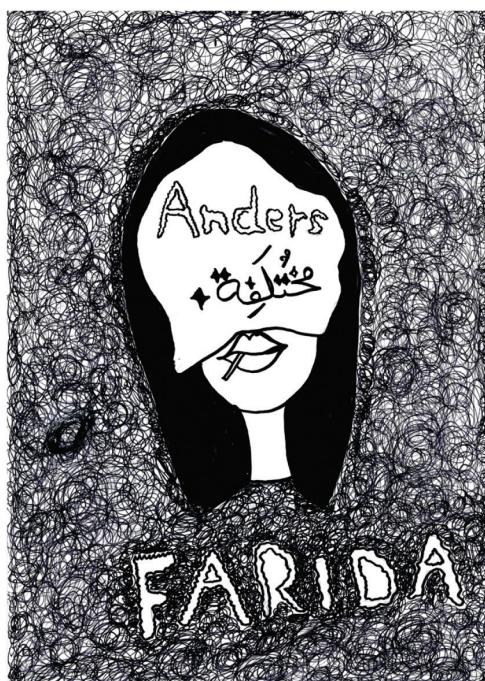


Image 4
Number 8 (*Farida*, 19, Syria, edition 2020)

Another comic opens with a figure falling from a cliff, a metaphor for instability. A hand reaches out, symbolising support and connection. The protagonist gradually finds grounding through language learning and community engagement. In the final scene, she smiles while holding a corrected exam. The arc charts a movement from disorientation to empowerment, where belonging is forged through persistence and recognition.

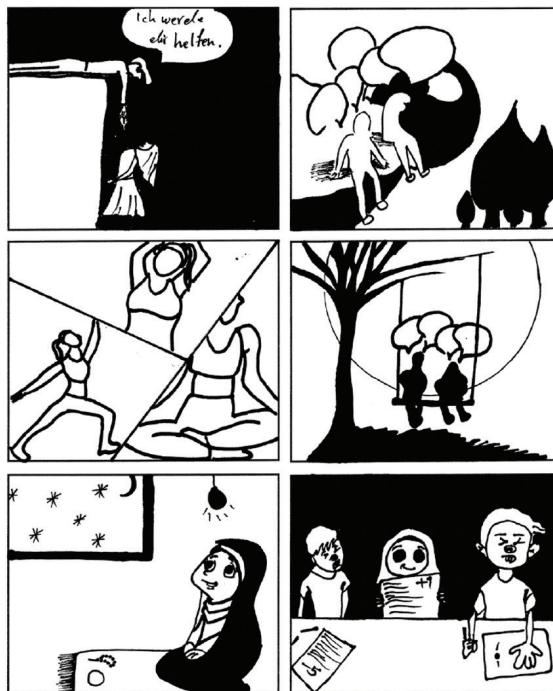


Image 5
First Year in Germany (Hanieh, 19, Iran, edition 2022)

In another deeply personal narrative, the protagonist draws strength from faith. The story begins with Qur'anic verses and a veiled figure in solitude. In a later scene, she clutches the Qur'an near her heart. The lower panels show classmates reacting to her hijab with prejudice: "OMG, what is that?" / "Why are you wearing that?". She calmly replies: "Allah tells me I'm beautiful." The comic centres not on transformation, but on dignified resistance. Religion is not an obstacle, but a source of identity and strength. This comic differs from the others by placing religion and dress at the centre

of the narration, but treating them not as obstacles, but as empowering elements. There is no 'happy ending', no 'transformation of the others' or 'own attitudes', but instead centres the protagonist's quiet strength. It portrays a form of belonging rooted in self-respect and spiritual confidence and not in external validation.



Image 6
Don't be sad (Marina, 19, Afghanistan, edition 2021)

Multimodal Agency and Emotional Expression

Emotional intensity and narrative agency are visible across the corpus. Students rely on multimodal strategies, shading, panel design, symbols, to communicate affect and identity, often without extensive verbal narration. Visual metaphors include falling figures (instability), faceless characters (erasure), staircases (language progression), and outstretched hands (support). Joyful moments – smiling, certificates, friendships - are framed with light, space, and clarity, reinforcing affirmation and change. These visual elements are more than aesthetic: they are narrative tools through which

students reclaim voice, negotiate identity, and express their stories. Comics offer accessible platforms for learners facing linguistic and psychosocial barriers, especially when verbal articulation is difficult.

These visual and narrative artefacts articulate themes of displacement, resilience, aspiration and belonging, with stylistic diversity reflecting heterogeneous trajectories. The analytical axes intersect to show comic creation as both expression and pedagogical act, making visible stories often marginalised in education.

Discussion

The comics created by the migrants and refugees offer an extraordinary 'window' into how young people navigate complex social, linguistic, and emotional transitions. In response to the first research question – What types of stories are represented in the students' comics, and what central challenges do they portray? – the narratives reflect both traumatic rupture and resilient reconstruction, confirming Pastoor's (2022) observation that migration biographies combine vulnerability and resilience. While the initial frames often depict loss, danger, and instability, the visual storytelling typically evolves towards moments of stability, aspiration, or relational repair. Whether through symbolic representations of borders and boats or through intimate portraits of fear and belonging, students articulate the realities of forced migration and their capacity to reframe these experiences through drawing. This performative act reflects the concept of multimodal voice (Melo-Pfeifer & Das Neves, 2019), where artistic production provides a space to process trauma and reclaim agency.

Regarding the second research question – Which languages and cultural references are present? – the comics are marked by a rich interplay of languages, visual registers, and cultural symbols. Arabic, Dari, Kurdish, and other heritage languages are embedded alongside German, not as translations, but as coexisting modes of expression. This validates translanguaging approaches (García & Wei, 2014) and illustrates Block's (2014) critique of monolingual ideologies. The linguistic layering mirrors students' lived realities and affirms translanguaging as both a cognitive strategy and a claim to visibility. Cultural references, including religious symbols to school routines, serve to anchor students' identities within hybrid spaces that defy binary distinctions between origin and host contexts. This resonates with Porto & Byram's (2015) notion of intercultural citizenship, where diverse semiotic resources foster belonging and civic participation.

As far as the third research question is concerned, focusing on how students express identity, integration, and belonging, finds its most compelling answers in the visual and emotional texture of the comics. Identity is represented as a negotiation between the past and the present and/or future, between imposed labels and self-definition. Students often draw themselves in flux, echoing Byram's (1997) idea of

intercultural speakers who constantly mediate between multiple identities. Belonging emerges through connection, care, and creative autonomy. Visual devices such as mirrors, pathways, and relational positioning within panels capture the interior processes of adaptation in ways that words alone could not. Here, the capacity to resist stereotypes or assert dignity (e.g. Marinas hijab narrative) embodies the *savoir s'engager* dimension of intercultural competence, i.e., socially situated critical awareness (Byram, 1997; Porto & Byram, 2015).

Finally, regarding the fourth research question – In what ways are themes of citizenship, inclusion, and diversity addressed? – the comics embody them through everyday acts of solidarity, resistance, and participation. These micro-narratives exemplify what Osler & Starkey (2018) call ‘everyday citizenship’, lived practices that reflect empathy, justice, and dialogue. Whether by depicting a character defending their religious practice, mentoring a newcomer, or imagining their future profession, students present themselves as agents within a social framework. These moments reflect what has been called ‘everyday citizenship’ lived practices that reflect values of empathy, justice, and dialogue’ (Osler & Starkey, 2018; Rapanta et al., 2020). Moreover, the public exhibition of these works extends the act of comic creation into a political gesture, amplifying voices often marginalised in policy debates and classroom dynamics. In this sense, the project aligns with Rapanta et al.’s (2020) view of citizenship as a dialogic and culturally situated practice, where multimodal artefacts enable critical engagement.

Taken together, these findings advance the field in three ways: (1) they show how comics can serve not only as linguistic scaffolds but as pedagogical tools for intercultural citizenship; (2) they demonstrate how multimodal artefacts allow students with limited proficiency to engage critically, thereby expanding the scope of language education research beyond cognitive gains to include affective and civic dimensions; and (3) they foreground the agency of migrant and refugee youth, challenging deficit discourses by positioning them as authors and civic participants.

For educators, this means recognising student-produced comics as valuable resources for inclusive pedagogy, where learners’ linguistic repertoires and lived experiences are validated and valued. Teachers can integrate multimodal storytelling into language curricula to foster empathy, collaboration, and intercultural reflection. For policymakers, the study underscores the importance of supporting projects that combine arts, languages, and citizenship education, as they create safe spaces for youth to express themselves and to engage with diversity as a resource for democratic participation.

Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that the act of drawing is not merely illustrative but performative: students construct meaning, claim space, and engage critically with their realities. The comics become sites of multimodal authorship where literacy, emotion, and agency converge.

Conclusions

This study examined how student-produced comics within the *Comixx mit Klasse* project can foster language learning, personal expression, and civic imagination among newly arrived migrants and refugees. The comics articulate diverse themes with nuance and creativity, portraying students as multilingual and reflective individuals who navigate trauma, identity and belonging while envisioning inclusive futures. As such, they emerge as powerful tools for language learning, critical literacy, empathy and recognition.

Pedagogically, this work underlines the value of integrating multimodal and student-centred practices into language education. Visual storytelling allows students to draw on their full semiotic repertoires, bridge linguistic gaps, and express complex inner worlds. For (language) educators, this means creating spaces where learners' voice is central and difference is a resource and not a barrier.

This study also contributes to ongoing debates on education for critical citizenship, particularly in contexts shaped by migration and diversity. The comics analysed exemplify how young people engage in acts of civic meaning-making that go beyond conventional curricula. Through their narratives, students interrogate exclusion, assert cultural and linguistic identities, and envision more just and inclusive futures. In this sense, comic creation becomes both a pedagogical tool and a political practice, aligning with intercultural and critical citizenship education frameworks (Porto & Byram, 2015; Estellés & Fischman, 2020). By validating learners' perspectives and promoting reflection on identity, agency, and participation, schools can move from being spaces of mere integration to becoming sites of democratic co-construction and transformative belonging.

This study has limitations: the corpus was purposively sampled (26 comics overall, six analysed in depth), and the interpretation relies on visual and narrative analysis. Future research could triangulate these findings with interviews and classroom observations, examine larger and more diverse cohorts, and explores longitudinal impacts on language development, wellbeing, and civic engagement.

In short, these comics remind us that language education is never just about grammar or vocabulary. It is also about making meaning, telling stories, and claiming one's place in the world – visually, verbally, and collectively.

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Notas

¹ To access the complete information about this project, see <https://comixxmitklasse.literaturhaus-hamburg.de/>

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