Now, New, Next:  
A Look at YAL from the South through the Eyes and Words of Our Younger Teachers

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We welcome once again our readers to this column, which highlights issues in young adult literature (YAL) from a global, international perspective. We intend to continue the trend we started in our previous column (Aziz, Wilder, & Mora, 2019) of refocusing our attention to the Global South and the insights on YAL that are coming from this region. As always, a great deal of gratitude to the Editors for believing in this proposal and to the two authors who lead this column. These two columns share the common thread of opening spaces for dialogue to voices we may not usually hear in order to bring light to the new directions that YAL needs to embark upon, especially as a new decade is just around the corner.

For this column, we took a different approach. Whereas the first column sought the voices of experienced teacher educators engaged in work in the Global South, this article features the voices of younger teachers. It is critical to listen to younger teachers and the pressing needs they see in the field of YAL relative to teaching and learning around the world. Their insights are incredibly valuable as we redesign how we think about YAL in the years to come.

Specifically, this column features the voices of two brilliant, young English teachers. One is already a familiar voice for some TAR readers, as Tatiana Chiquito has shared some of her ideas about YAL in a recent article on booktubing (Semingson, Mora, & Chiquito, 2017). After her initial inquiries, Tatiana has not stopped exploring issues of YAL in her own work as a teacher—issues she will soon continue to explore as a graduate student. The second author, Alejandro, is a new voice in our field. Tatiana and Alejandro work at the same school, and some of the ideas that they share in this article are the result of their collective teaching experiences.

What’s Now in YAL: What We Have Learned about the Colombian YAL Landscape

Following up on the first column, “YAL provides diverse opportunities for cross-cultural consciousness and encourages readers to learn to appreciate other English varieties and literary expressions as worthy” (Aziz et al., 2019, p. 74). In the case of our nation (Colombia), we need to look at the emergence of YAL as part of the massive cultural and educational shifts resulting from the multiple sociopolitical movements that have taken place, especially over this past decade. In this time, Colombia has experienced a broadening of its cultural interests. The effects of globalization, free-trade agreements, and rising interest in international entertainment options, such as TV shows, movies, gaming, and YAL itself, have created the conditions for readers and teachers to explore alternative genres. These changes have also appeared in a language shift through which our society, if not at a fully multilingual stage (Mora, Pulgarín, Ramírez, &
When we look at graphic artists and their work, we see that they create different narratives about myths, book characters, or legends.
ing easy to understand narratives to which most YAL readers can relate. For example, Yehuda and Maya Devir, a real-life couple from Israel, draw comics about common aspects of their life together. Some of these comics take what would seemingly look like an inside joke and create narratives that most couples anywhere in the world would find highly relatable. Raquel Riba’s online stories introduce her alter ego, Lola Vendetta, a fictional character who enacts real-life situations that have happened to Riba or to women she knows. Alejandra Gámiz, a graphic novelist from Mexico, has taken a different approach. She has chosen to reinterpret some myths and legends (such as mermaids, Medusa, and ghosts, to name a few), adding her personal imprint to the already existing story.

Another rising phenomenon is that of graphic artists, comic writers, and game designers choosing to complete the narrative gaps that readers might find in other written narratives. An example of this phenomenon appears in Italian fantasy writer Licia Troisi’s (http://liciatroisi.it) saga about elves and dragons, *Chronicles of the Emerged World* (Troisi, 2016). Troisi’s novels have inspired different graphic artists and filmmakers to revise the source material and build from the gaps they have found to create their own fanfiction, both as graphic novels and short films.

**Adapting Comics and YAL to the English Language Classroom**

The powerful interactions that people have with comics (Goldstein & Phelan, 2009) and graphic novels (García, 2013; Sousanis, 2012, 2018; Yang, 2008) demonstrate the great potential that exists for YAL in the language classroom (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2013; Eckert, 2010). YAL, when introduced in these formats, may support critical literacy and reading comprehension. Students like to interact with forms that reflect their particular interests, such as gaming, television and Internet shows, pop culture, and music. Teachers must be aware of the need to adapt such forms in their classrooms, and thus must remain current with the trends of entertainment among children and young people.

In the case of reading in a second language classroom, for example, we must always take into account the inherent difficulties that language learners encounter when facing literature, specifically long passages, and therefore we must consider alternative genres and texts for our classrooms. In this sense, we are advocating for the extended use of comics and visual novels to promote student reading (Bucher & Manning, 2004). The combination of text and images (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2006) that are present in comics and graphic novels and their interplay with the text help language learners develop wider and deeper interpretations of reading materials that are more appealing and contextualized within their realities.

Comics are often bound to pop culture (Bongco, 2015, and young learners are aware of this type of YAL from an early age. Since comics may often mix real-life issues with fictional elements, which makes them quite appealing for young readers, second language teachers can introduce them as resources for developing reading comprehension skills and critical thinking (Williams, 2008). Graphic novels and comics have been used for decades to express disagreement and to raise people’s consciousness about diverse societal matters. Paré and Soto-Pallarés (2017) stated that comics are a good choice for young learners’ education; they can improve reading comprehension and provide opportunities for creative expression while still promoting reading.

There are already plenty of websites from which teachers can choose appropriate texts for classroom use, such as *Comics English* (https://www.comicsenglish.com/), *Kids Comics* (https://www.kidscomics.com/Home/1/1/60/1046), and *Comixology* (https://www.comixology.com/free-comics). In addition, teachers can choose comics and graphic novels tailored to different audiences. Beginning-level students may benefit from stories such as *Sketch Monsters* (Williamson & Navarrete, 2011), which introduces them to vocabulary and expressions related to feelings, or *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2008) and related discussions around school and growing
up. Another comic with plenty of potential for critical conversations in the language classroom is Calvin and Hobbes (Watterson, 1992). This classic comic, featuring the conversations between Calvin and his pet tiger Hobbes, provides plenty of social commentary about the world, growing up, childhood, and the meaning of life itself.

More advanced learners may gravitate toward graphic novels with deeper content, some referencing historical events. Two salient examples that teachers can use in their classrooms are the celebrated graphic novels Maus (Spiegelman, 1997) and Watchmen (Moore & Gibbons, 2013). These two novels provide advanced learners with a launchpad for in-depth critical discussions about history (in the case of Watchmen, an alternative version of history), society, and language use, thus expanding on Greene’s (1995) idea of “social imagination” as “the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, and in our schools” (p. 5).

Creative Writing as a Form of YAL

Some recent texts related to creative writing have been aimed at bilingual writers. Books such as Finish This Book (Smith, 2011) or Wreck This Journal (Smith, 2012) (http://www.kerismith.com/), Este Libro lo Ecribes Tú (You Write This Book; García Miranda, 2015), or Cosas que Piensas Cuando te Muieres las Uñas (Things You Think about When You Bite Your Nails; Andrade, 2017) and You Always Change the Love of Your Life (for Another Love or Another Life) (Andrade, 2018) by bilingual/Spanglish writer Amalia Andrade (https://amaliaandrade.com/), are interactive and invite young writers to participate in different activities about life, character creation, landscapes, or stories. Second language teachers are using these kinds of creative writing exercises to help their language learners improve their own writing in English. Some examples of those exercises include writing about an imaginary class (What would it be about? What kind of school?), imagining who lives in mountains, writing about what they think life after death looks like, or drawing their own fears.

Comics, creative writing books, and graphic novels in the classroom provide alternatives to traditional writing lesson plans, whether as warm-up writing exercises or as full-fledged activities where students may engage more actively with their own writing processes. This, in turn, enables teachers and students to explore multiple disciplines and important social issues because students can generate empathy with what they read and be intrigued enough to continue inquiring further about certain topics. For instance, the topic of war can be examined through three graphic novels: Footnotes from Gaza (Sacco, 2010), Journalism (Sacco, 2013), and Palestine (Sacco, 2014) (http://www.fantagraphics.com/artists/joe-sacco).

What’s Next in YAL: A Call for Action in and from the Global South

As Tatiana and Alejandro shared, YAL is a global affair. Authors all over the world are exploring new frontiers in YAL, with comics and graphic novels as two salient examples. As writers around the world continue to explore writing in both their native languages and English, this becomes an invitation to rethink how we even conceive of what we mean by “English” and what new texts will work best in our classrooms. The YAL community is now at a crossroads, where those students we once taught using YAL are now growing up. Some of them are returning to our classrooms as teachers. They wish to explore further the same genres and forms they read themselves and want to bring them to their classrooms. Teachers like Tatiana and Alejandro have spent a good portion of their lives exposed to comics and graphic novels. As a result, they and other younger teachers today tend to be aware of these forms, so it makes sense that this is a focal point for their class designs.

In this article, we have considered English language learners in particular because that is our target audience. However, this is also a call for the YAL community at large to consider that we need...
to expand our views of YAL as a multilingual issue where English may play the role of mediator. Second language YAL writers, such as the Devirs, Licia Troisi, and Angela Andrade, are already doing this by using English in YA texts to mediate issues of language and culture. Andrade goes even further, using Spanglish as a regular form to express her thoughts. How we conceive of YAL in the incoming decade will be less about traditional views of English texts and more about how English can really help break the traditional boundaries of what we validate as a readable text. Even in the case of English language arts, these boundaries continue to expand as more English language learners are included in those classes. As a result, teachers need to interrogate what forms of English beyond the traditional standard forms (see Aziz et al., 2019, for an illustration) need to appear in their curricula and their selection of YA texts.

Finally, this article (and the preceding column) are an invitation for readers to expand their inquiries in relation to what happens in the Global South. The traditional relationships usually operate from the perspective of the South as a consumer and recipient of second language texts stemming from the North. The examples we shared in this article, however, should provide a paradigm shift: The South is increasingly becoming a creator of its own texts in multiple languages, English being one of them. More narratives keep emerging, and teachers, scholars, and students in the South are appropriating English and YAL by extension as conduits. This is a good time to broaden our horizons and listen to alternative voices that are writing in English, with their own contributions to the genres, the forms, and the language itself. This is an invitation, through the emerging styles in YAL, to really embrace that global potential of the English language YAL writers, such as the Devirs, Licia Troisi, and Angela Andrade, are already doing this by using English in YA texts to mediate issues of language and culture. Andrade goes even further, using Spanglish as a regular form to express her thoughts. How we conceive of YAL in the incoming decade will be less about traditional views of English texts and more about how English can really help break the traditional boundaries of what we validate as a readable text. Even in the case of English language arts, these boundaries continue to expand as more English language learners are included in those classes. As a result, teachers need to interrogate what forms of English beyond the traditional standard forms (see Aziz et al., 2019, for an illustration) need to appear in their curricula and their selection of YA texts.

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References


