

The Ligne Claire to Literacy: Integrating Hergé's Tintin as a Multimodal Pedagogical Tool into the Indian School English Literature Curriculum

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines the pedagogical limitations of the classical English literature curriculum as implemented in Indian schools. The dense linguistic and emotional complexity of Elizabethan and Victorian texts frequently alienates young learners, encouraging rote memorisation ("mugging up") rather than genuine literary engagement. As a constructive response, this article advances a theoretical proposal for the strategic integration of Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin*, supplemented by its animated series, as a multimodal scaffolding tool within existing curricula. Special emphasis is placed on albums in which Hergé engages with South Asian geography, culture, and characters, thereby enhancing cultural proximity for Indian learners. Drawing on Dual Coding Theory, the Affective Filter Hypothesis, and multimodal literacy scholarship, the paper argues that the visual and narrative sophistication of the Tintin series can meaningfully enhance cognitive development, emotional intelligence, and communicative competence in the Indian classroom without displacing the classical canon. The paper concludes with a concrete framework for implementation and a transparent discussion of both the opportunities and the limitations of this approach..

Keywords: Multimodal Literacy, Indian English Education, Hergé's Tintin, Curriculum Scaffolding, Post-Colonial Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

The English literature curriculum in Indian medium schools remains substantially anchored in the classical canonical works of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and their contemporaries. While these authors represent enduring achievements in the history of English letters, their texts present formidable cognitive and linguistic barriers to learners at the primary and middle-school levels. The consequence of this mismatch between textual complexity and learner readiness is well documented: students resort to rote memorisation, or "mugging up", sacrificing genuine literary understanding for examination performance.

The uncritical acceptance of the Elizabethan and Victorian canon in Indian school curricula is, in part, a persistent legacy of colonial pedagogy [1]. Without sustained regional adaptation or multimodal scaffolding, a text-only approach systematically fails to engage the multilayered realities of South Asian learners [2, 3]. Research conducted in comparable Anglophone educational contexts, though not uniformly transferable to the Indian setting, confirms that archaic syntax and unfamiliar cultural referents create immediate cognitive barriers [4, 5], contributing to student disengagement and reduced comprehension in classical literary units [6]. At the cognitive level, this disengagement is partly explained by the overloading of a student's working memory with complex, unfamiliar language rules before the learner has had the opportunity to grasp a narrative's fundamental plot, setting, or emotional core [7].

It must be noted that the studies cited above offer relevant theoretical insights into the cognitive challenges of classical text instruction, direct application to Indian classrooms requires caution. The Indian educational context presents its own distinct variables, including a vast diversity of regional languages, socioeconomic heterogeneity, uneven infrastructure, and a deeply entrenched examination culture. Any pedagogical proposal for India must be sensitive to these realities.

Against this background, the contemporary English classroom in India faces a dual challenge: maintaining the analytical rigour of text-based literary study while fostering genuine engagement among students navigating an increasingly visual and digital world. Integrating multimodal texts, specifically sequential art, presents a promising opportunity to bridge this gap. This paper proposes *The Adventures of Tintin* by Hergé as a carefully curated multimodal scaffold, with particular attention to albums in which South Asian geography, culture, and characters feature prominently. It does so not as a wholesale replacement of the classical canon, but as a deliberate preparatory ladder toward it.

2. Theoretical Framework: Scaffolding Literacy Through Sequential Art

2.1 Reducing Cognitive Load Through Visual Narrative

A foundational challenge in teaching classical literature to young learners is the simultaneous demand placed on working memory. Students must decode unfamiliar vocabulary, parse complex syntax, and construct mental representations of character, setting, and theme, often all at once. Cognitive Load Theory [8] suggests that when the inherent difficulty of the material is high, instructional design must work to reduce the unnecessary complexity introduced by the medium of instruction in order to free cognitive capacity for genuine learning.

Sequential art, and the *Tintin* series in particular, addresses this challenge structurally. Hergé's signature *ligne claire* (clear line) artistic style is characterised by strong, uniform outlines, flat colours, minimal hatching, and simplified characters set against richly detailed, realistic backgrounds. This visual approach reduces the perceptual decoding burden on the reader. The brain's executive function is consequently freed to engage with sequential logic, which is the cognitive capacity to follow a coherent narrative chronologically across panels [9]. This sequential reading practice is, in turn, a vital preparatory skill for the sustained, left-to-right linear attention required to parse dense classical prose. As McCloud [10] has argued, the spaces between comic panels are sites of active cognitive participation, requiring the reader to infer causality, time, and emotional continuity. These are precisely the inferential skills demanded by literary analysis.

2.2 The Affective Filter and Multimodal Dual-Input

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis [11] holds that elevated anxiety, low motivation, or a sense of intellectual threat raises a psychological barrier that prevents comprehensible linguistic input from reaching a learner's cognitive core. When students perceive a text as inaccessible or irrelevant, learning effectively ceases regardless of the quality of instruction. Because comic books are intuitively perceived by children as accessible and enjoyable, the *Tintin* series substantially lowers this affective filter, enabling sophisticated vocabulary and complex narrative structures to reach the learner without resistance.

To maximise literacy gains, this paper proposes a Dual-Input Model grounded in Paivio's Dual Coding Theory [12], which holds that learning is deepened when verbal and visual information channels are activated simultaneously. By pairing physical *Tintin* comic albums with their faithful animated adaptations, educators can engage two reinforcing modalities as described below.

The Comic Album (Linguistic and Visual Input): This modality encourages slow, deliberate reading, builds vocabulary retention, and trains textual decoding of syntax and panel-to-panel sequential logic [13].

The Animated Adaptation (Affective and Auditory Input): This modality enables students to decode emotional subtext, conversational pragmatics, and interpersonal dynamics through voice prosody, intonation, and musical cues, which are dimensions inaccessible from the printed page alone [13].

This dual-channel model is further supported by Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning [12], which demonstrates that people learn more deeply from words and pictures in combination than from either channel in isolation. Kress and van Leeuwen's [14] framework of multimodal discourse additionally offers tools for analysing how image and text co-construct meaning, a competency of increasing relevance in contemporary communicative environments.

3. Visual Literacy and the Pedagogical Value of *Ligne Claire*

Hergé, the pen name of Georges Prosper Remi (1907 to 1983), was a meticulous researcher who spent considerable time studying the geography, history, and cultures he depicted, lending his narratives a degree of factual grounding unusual in popular comics of his era [15]. His *ligne claire* style possesses distinct

pedagogical properties beyond its cognitive load advantages, as outlined below.

Democratising Comprehension: Clean, unambiguous visual layouts allow struggling readers and language learners to decode the physical and emotional context of a scene immediately, building reading confidence before engaging with the textual layer.

Complex Contextualisation: While characters are rendered in a simplified, cartoon register, the backgrounds are richly detailed and historically researched. Students are thereby trained to read an image for subtext, cultural context, and atmosphere, and these skills transfer directly to the close reading of literary prose.

Inferential Thinking: The space between panels, as McCloud [10] theorises, demands active reader participation in constructing narrative continuity. This is a form of structured inference-making that is foundational to literary comprehension.

Eisner [16], whose foundational work on sequential art as a legitimate literary form remains a cornerstone of the field, argued that the comic form demands from its reader a distinct and sophisticated set of interpretive competencies. These competencies are not supplementary to traditional literacy but are constitutive of it.

4. Cultural Proximity: Selecting Albums for the Indian Classroom

As with any corpus spanning several decades, the *Tintin* series is not uniform in its cultural and historical sensitivities. This makes thoughtful, teacher-mediated album selection an essential component of the proposed framework, ensuring that the texts chosen are both pedagogically appropriate and culturally respectful for the Indian classroom.

This paper therefore advocates a curated, teacher-mediated selection strategy. For Indian classrooms specifically, albums in which Hergé engages substantively with South Asian geography, culture, and characters offer a critical additional advantage, namely cultural proximity. When students encounter familiar landscapes, recognisable cultural practices, or characters who reflect aspects of their own heritage within the narrative, the affective filter is lowered further and the sense of personal relevance, so often absent in the Victorian canon, is meaningfully enhanced.

Teacher mediation remains essential even within a curated selection. Educators should be equipped to contextualise the historical period in which each album was produced, to invite critical discussion of how South Asian characters and settings are represented, and to draw productive comparisons between Hergé's depictions and students' own cultural knowledge. Far from being a limitation, this critical engagement transforms the reading of *Tintin* into an exercise in post-colonial literacy, which is an increasingly valued competency in contemporary humanities education.

5. Conserving the Existing Syllabus: A Complementary Framework

A predictable concern among school boards and curriculum coordinators is that the introduction of sequential art signals a dilution of academic standards. This paper argues the contrary. *Tintin* is not proposed as a replacement for canonical literary texts but as an additive, complementary scaffold. It functions as a preparatory ladder that builds the competencies necessary to engage with classical literature meaningfully.

The core skills mandated by existing school curricula are entirely preserved and actively enhanced through engagement with the *Tintin* series across three primary dimensions.

Vocabulary and Idiomatic Expression: The dialogue throughout the *Tintin* series is lexically rich, exposing students to sophisticated vocabulary, varied idiomatic expression, and complex sentence structures within an accessible visual context.

Narrative Architecture: Hergé's storytelling relies on meticulous pacing, strategic cliffhangers, and tightly structured plot design. Analysing a *Tintin* album allows students to map exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution in a concrete, visually traceable format, which makes the mechanics of narrative structure far more accessible for replication in their own writing.

Critical Thinking and Cross-Curricular Awareness: Several *Tintin* albums are grounded in realistic global geography, historical contexts, and political dynamics, providing excellent material for cross-curricular discussion. Students can be invited to critically examine how places, peoples, and historical events are depicted, thereby developing the analytical habits required for sophisticated literary and cultural study.

6. A Framework for Classroom Implementation

For this proposal to move beyond theoretical advocacy, it requires a concrete implementation

framework. The following is offered as a starting point for curriculum designers and classroom practitioners, with the explicit acknowledgement that adaptation will be necessary across India's diverse educational landscape.

6.1 Target Grade Levels

The *Tintin* integration is proposed primarily for Classes VI through VIII, covering students of approximately eleven to fourteen years of age. At this stage, students possess sufficient reading maturity to engage with the textual layer of the comics while still benefiting from the visual scaffold. The transition to more demanding classical texts typically begins at this level, making the scaffolding intervention most timely.

6.2 Suggested Instructional Sequence

Phase 1 (Visual Literacy Introduction, two to three weeks): Students are introduced to the grammar of sequential art, including reading panels, interpreting gutters, analysing character expression, and decoding visual subtext. McCloud's concept of closure, which is the reader's cognitive act of completing the action between panels, is introduced as an organising framework.

Phase 2 (Album Reading and Discussion, four to six weeks): A curated album is read collaboratively in class. Activities include vocabulary journals, panel-to-chapter narrative mapping, character motivation analysis, and written response tasks that mirror the question formats of standard literary examinations.

Phase 3 (Animated Adaptation, two to three weeks): The corresponding animated episode is screened. Students compare the two modalities and discuss how the animation conveys emotion differently from the printed page and what is gained or lost in the translation between media.

Phase 4 (Bridge to Classical Text, ongoing): The narrative and analytical skills developed through *Tintin* are explicitly connected to the classical texts in the existing syllabus. Teachers draw direct parallels between Hergé's plot structures and those of the prescribed novel and between the vocabulary of *Tintin* and the idiom of the canonical poem.

6.3 Assessment

Given that the *Tintin* integration is conceived as a scaffolding tool rather than a standalone examinable unit, assessment within this framework is best approached formatively. Teachers may employ informal observation of student participation during panel discussions, short reflective journal entries, vocabulary logs, and peer-led storytelling exercises. These activities allow educators to monitor comprehension and engagement without the pressure of summative evaluation, keeping the affective filter low and preserving the sense of enjoyment that makes the intervention effective in the first place.

6.4 Addressing Resource Constraints

The cost of integrating the *Tintin* series need not fall on individual students or their families. A practical and sustainable model is the circulation of albums through the school library, following the same arrangement already in place for textbooks and supplementary readers in many Indian schools. Under this model, albums are issued to students at the beginning of the relevant instructional phase and returned to the library upon completion of Class VIII. This one-time institutional investment ensures equitable access across all students, eliminates recurring expenditure, and reinforces the culture of library use and book handling that is itself a valuable dimension of literacy education.

7. Limitations

This paper is a theoretical and pedagogical proposal. It does not present empirical data from Indian classrooms, and its arguments, while grounded in established educational theory, await rigorous empirical validation in the specific Indian context. The authors acknowledge this as a primary limitation.

The *Tintin* series is proposed here as one well-evidenced option within a broader multimodal pedagogical approach and not as a uniquely indispensable text. Diverse graphic traditions carry their own educational and cultural resonance and deserve parallel scholarly attention.

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued for the strategic, curated, and critically mediated integration of Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin* as a multimodal scaffolding tool within the Indian school English literature curriculum. It does not advocate for the displacement of the Victorian or Elizabethan canon. Rather, it proposes a pedagogical ladder grounded in Dual Coding Theory, the Affective Filter Hypothesis, Cognitive Load Theory, and multimodal literacy scholarship, one that equips young learners with the visual, inferential, and

narrative competencies required to approach classical texts with genuine comprehension and engagement.

By prioritising albums that engage with South Asian geography and culture and by insisting on teacher-mediated critical engagement with questions of representation, this proposal is sensitive to the post-colonial realities of the Indian classroom. The goal is not to replace one canonical text with another, but to build a bridge, carefully constructed and responsibly guided, between the world the student already inhabits and the world of literary mastery toward which education aspires.

Empirical validation of this proposal remains a priority for future research. The authors invite educators, curriculum designers, and researchers to engage critically with the framework offered here, to test it against the rich diversity of India's educational landscape, and to refine it accordingly.

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