



Educational Graphic Novels, Children's Favorite in Korea Now

Yeo-Joo Lim

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

(yeojoolim@gmail.com)

Abstract: Educational Graphic Novels have been the most popular reading materials for Korean children since 2000. They comprise a nice combination of entertainment and educational elements in comics format. Interesting storylines that follow a typical RPG (Role Playing Game) format, attractive illustrations that are indistinguishable from general comic books, and topics that are relevant to children's school curriculum are some distinctive features of Educational Graphic Novels.

Keywords: Graphic Novels, Comics, Educational, Informational, Korea.

Educational Graphic Novel (EGN) is a genre that is uniquely Korean. Even though in other countries there are some cases of using comics for educational purposes, Korea is the only country that acknowledges the Educational Graphic Novels as an independent genre in terms of both marketing and from a literary perspective (Kim, 2006: 55). EGNs are created in a popular format to appeal to the masses, to support acquiring useful information in an easier way, and to stimulate learning motivation in diverse topics. EGNs aim at both pleasure reading and information reading. Therefore, from the perspective of Louis Rosenblatt's transactional theory, EGNs are located at the middle of the "efferent/aesthetic continuum" (Rosenblatt, 1986: 125)¹. The main audience for EGNs is elementary school children.

The term "Educational Graphic Novel" was coined in 1970s. Although Educational Graphic Novels have been existed in the history of Korean children's literature for several decades, it has not been long since they came into the spotlight. In 2000, with the unexpected huge success of one EGN series, *Greek and Roman Mythology Reading in Graphic Novels*, the EGN market instantly soared. In a recent survey that identified 50 bestselling children's books at Kyobo Bookstore – the biggest bookstore in Korea – during the years 2003 to 2008, 5 books in the top 10 list were EGNs and 17 books in the top 50 list were EGNs (Lee, 2009).

¹ According to Rosenblatt, reading is "a transactional process that goes on between a particular reader and a particular text at a particular time, and under particular circumstances; the reader can make meaning of the text through this transactional process (1986: 12). Depending on the stance a reader adopts between the very efferent and the very aesthetic, his/her focus of attention is differentiated. While the reader focuses on "the residue *after* the reading – the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out" in efferent reading, he/she pays attention to "what happens *during* the actual reading event – the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas" that rise from the text in aesthetic reading [emphasis by the author] (1986: 23-25).



History, science, and school curriculum are the most popular EGN topics with Korean, foreign language, math, and cultural literacy becoming more popular. While general comic books are story-oriented and focus on making a story impact on the readers in most cases, EGNs explain facts and provide information through the conversations or narrations of the characters, in fulfillment of its educational function. Many bestselling EGNs follow a typical RPG (Role Playing Game) format: usually there is a main character and two to four sub-characters who go through the adventure together. Because new adventures continually appear, these EGNs are published as series. Attractive illustrations that are indistinguishable from general comic books also contribute to the popularity of EGNs. While previous EGNs published in 1990s and before used simple line drawings and cartoonish characters as a way to more easily approach to young readers, today's EGNs apply the major comics' illustration style – recognized as “manga” style in many countries – with delicate drawings and beautiful colors. The other distinctive feature of EGNs is their format. Many recent EGNs have very similar shapes: 6.9 x 9.8 inches (B5 size) although the thickness varies. This is not a strict rule, but a convention.

Educational Graphic Novels have received much attention from educators, librarians, and parents as “the issue” of children's reading since 2000 in Korea. Some children's literature and comics experts say that the popularity of Educational Graphic Novels is declining. Others say the popularity is still going on and will last for a couple more years. Still others say that it is up to the publishers' efforts to create better quality EGNs. Whether or not the popularity of Educational Graphic Novels continues, it is undeniable that EGN is a unique medium worth looking at – especially these days when new media is regarded as important parts of young people's everyday lives.

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