MakeBeliefsComix.com

Imagine a computer lab full of adult ESOL students where not a word is heard, where every head is bent in concentration, where smiles erupt spontaneously, and where fingers are clicking away on the keyboards. This is precisely what occurs when my students work with journalist and author Bill Zimmerman's Web site, *MakeBeliefsComix.com.*

The Web site allows students to create their own comics, and it is easy to navigate for language students who want to express their ideas in a novel way. From the moment they open the Web site and discover the tools, the students begin to explore. Minimal instruction is needed because the tools are self-explanatory (with language or visuals), and students feel comfortable experimenting with them. Students readily learn to choose among different characters, select facial expressions to reflect emotions, move the characters in the panels, scale their size, write text in talk and thought balloons, and even add background colors.

The power of this Web site lies in its ease of use and in the way the writing can be integrated into the study of language. Clearly, when students create a comic strip of their own, they are using their reading and writing skills as well

as tapping into their creativity. The comic strip work readily supports classroom work. In one instance, my students had worked on a panel presentation in the classroom, and their task for the comic strip was to reflect on that work. The end results were fascinating

and, quite likely, cathartic. They created comic strips that revealed their self-assessments of the panel presentations, their successes and anxieties, and their ideas about the challenges and joys of working with a team.

Those of us who have worked in the field of ESOL for many years realize the importance of the affective component of learning a language. Students need to be able to express their feelings about the learning that occurs, and *MakeBeliefsComix.com* offers them

an unthreatening and playful arena in which to do so.

Adding playfulness to language learning is a significant attraction of this site. One of my students, an attorney from a culture in which comics are a rarity, found herself drawn into the Web site. After experimenting with it, she created a marvelous fantasy exchange between her mother and herself about dressing up on Halloween. She wrote humorously about a cultural element that was new to her, Halloween, using another new cultural element, the comic strip! She later explained, "I learned how to concentrate and focus better, practice my grammar, be more creative, and have more fun by challenging myself and my legal mind!"

When using *MakeBeliefsComix.com* to teach English, teachers can ask students to engage in all sorts of classroom activities, including writing about their classroom themes, assessing a class project, reflecting on a field trip, focusing on a specific grammar point, and incorporating new vocabulary. Bill Zimmerman has created a magical *makebeliefs* world of language learning and welcomes students to enter and explore!

Tamara Kirson is ESOL lead instructor at City College of New York, in the United States.