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# Art as a Medium for Bilingualism and Biculturalism: Suggestions from the Research Literature<sup>1</sup>

El Arte como Medio para Facilitar el Bilingüismo y Biculturalismo: Sugerencias desde una Revisión de la Literatura

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## Abstract

This review of the literature critically explores the avenues to learning that visual art offers teachers and especially those with second language learners in their classrooms. The article is divided into seven sections in which the authors present research findings supporting the premise that learners' cognitive processes are facilitated by images. Research cited strongly suggests visual art in instructional design helps students learn about world cultures, is an effective pre-writing activity, facilitates second language acquisition, and promotes biliteracy.

*Key words:* cultures, second language acquisition, bilingual learners, multi-modal instruction.

## Resumen

Esta revisión de la literatura explora críticamente los caminos al aprendizaje que el arte visual provee a los maestros, especialmente a los que tienen estudiantes que están aprendiendo un segundo idioma en sus aulas. El artículo está dividido en siete secciones, en las cuales el autor presenta resultados de investigaciones previas que apoyan la premisa de que las imágenes visuales facilitan los procesos cognitivos de los estudiantes. Las investigaciones citadas

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*Palabras clave:* culturas, adquisición de un segundo idioma, estudiantes bilingües, instrucción multi-modal.

### Resumo

Esta revisão da literatura explora criticamente os caminhos à aprendizagem que a arte visual provê aos professores, especialmente aos que têm estudantes que estão aprendendo um segundo idioma nas suas aulas. O artigo está dividido em sete seções, nas quais o autor apresenta resultados de pesquisas prévias que apoiam a premissa de que as imagens visuais facilitam os processos cognitivos dos estudantes. As pesquisas citadas indicam claramente que aos estudantes lhes beneficia desenhar e envolver-se em atividades visuais antes de redigir, o qual facilita a aquisição de um segundo idioma e promove a alfabetização na primeira e segunda língua.

*Palavras chave:* culturas, aquisição de um segundo idioma, estudantes bilíngues, instrução multi-modal.

### Introduction

Learners today are growing up in worlds replete with visual culture. The images presented in advertising are no longer the gist of the visuals that surround us. In the current technological age, interactive visual experiences with I-Pad applications and the electronic exchange of photos are commonplace activities even for young children. Digital literacies and the visual art within them contribute exciting modes of communication in and out of schools. Students create and share meanings through images, colors, videos, sounds and words.

Art education in elementary schools in the United States focuses on the study of artists, art media techniques, visual culture, and conceptual exchange through visual media. Exposure to art from cultures around the world can help a student remember something tangible about a country as well as navigate through today's highly visual culture. It can provide a cognitive introduction to complex content and reinforce ideas that are difficult to express in words. Second language learners benefit from the increased avenues that art provides to understanding.

Through art, learners have access to the description of a place or a person or even an idea with little or no words being necessary. Infusing

the visual arts into elementary school curricula offers a safe place for second language learners to express, formulate ideas, and become interested in a topic without depending as heavily on their language level (Goldberg, 2012). Moreover, studying and creating art can be a gateway to observe history, traditions, and schema in world cultures, as well as promote authentic learning of a second language.

### **Raising the Bar for Language Learning Using Visual Stimuli**

Students need instruction in school that will prepare them for the multilingual and multicultural society in which they reside. Visual images offer learners an effective path to making meaning (National Art Education Association, 2009; Unsworth, 2006; Zeigler & Johns, 2005). A multi-modal multiliteracies approach that joins teachers of different disciplines to design instruction collaboratively supports the challenge of improving 21st century literacy instruction (Castek, Leu, Coiro, Gort, Henry & Lima, 2007; Cazden, Cope, Fairclough & Gee, 1996; Herrera, Perez & Escamilla, 2010; Kalantzis, Cope & Harvey, 2003). Learners in the process of acquiring a second language benefit from processing language using all modalities as well as their unique intelligences (Gardner, 2010). The reinforcement and exposure that occurs when students have numerous opportunities to use new language increases when their world provides them links between what they hear, read, see, and write. This literature review considers how exposure to the visual arts in the elementary grades can enrich students' learning about the world and help them acquire academic language in bilingual classrooms (The New York State Education Association, 2010; Carger, 2004).

### **Language Learners Encounter World Cultures through Art Education**

Research suggests that visual examples enhance the understanding of content, culture, and ideas (Jarvis, 2011; Siegel & Panofsky, 2009). Visual representations also help students connect to a topic through all modalities as they use their second language in a meaning-making manner. One way to encounter another culture is to observe and discuss the artwork from that culture and a student's own culture. This opportunity can create a personal connection to another part of the world for a student while helping the learner explore his or her own culture (Turkcan & Yasar, 2011). Since learning is an individual human condition, it is most important to tap into a student's funds of knowledge (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005) to examine who they are as a person as a basis for learning.

Culture and language acquisition are complementary parts for learning and should be considered simultaneously by teachers when preparing lessons (TESOL, 2010). In order to accomplish this, knowledge about the students' culture and language background needs to be considered, as well as second language teaching and learning strategies in regards to culture and language (Heath & Wolf, 2005). The teacher's ability to respect individuality and provide a safe place for cultural differences is necessary for students to open up to the idea of learning in the classroom (de Jong & Harper, 2005). For example, a student may not know his or her own cultural history or traditions. A student may also not recognize artwork from his or her own geographical area or country of origin. Teachers can tap into students' visual culture to help the students discover their identity (Cummins, 2011). One of the goals of learning through visual art is to help students explore and validate their culture by observing and making artwork (Jarvis, 2011).

### **Students' Responses to Visual Art**

Learners' cognitive processes are facilitated by images (John-Steiner, 1995; Rufo, 2011). Visuals capture students because they add another dimension to the inputs they are receiving (Dunn & Finley, 2011). A student who has not mastered a second language often struggles to find the words to express ideas in the target language (de Jong & Harper, 2005). Visual art fills a need for this student because expression does not have to be linked to printed words to effectively convey the learner's thinking.

Rose (2012) describes a project where students ask family members for an heirloom that has historical significance in the family. The students then make visual expressions of artwork based on the heirloom from their own family's story. This type of research and expression based on one's own family can create a real connection to the idea of history and tradition through visual context (Olshansky, 2009). In a similar way, Castro's research (2009) shows that artists who use digital social media to display their artwork can easily interact with other artists, learning about their culture through critique and criticism discussions. Teaching students about sharing their identity and culture through art can help them to value themselves as individuals. Castro suggests that the type of self-reflection that happens during a creative project may help students comprehend the idea of identity as a reflection of a person's own culture, and therefore helps them relate to other cultures.

An art experience in elementary school can trigger an emotional connection as students realize that the people who lived in the past had ideas, experiences and skills, which they expressed through art. The Carver Community Center in Evansville, Indiana leads student projects in the elementary grades as a means to teach African-American students about African culture through traditions and folk art (Stiler & Allen, 2006). Through the Center's art projects, students became more connected with their history, which strengthened their sense of identity and culture.

In another study by Leong (2005), students explored the traditions of the Nanyin people of China, including musical instruments, clothing, food, and other ways of living associated with this group. The class looked at examples of percussion instruments and traditional clothing while listening to the music and looking at art from the Nanyin culture. The artifacts opened the door for discussions among students about the origin of the instruments, what they were called, and how to play them. Unknowingly, the students were practicing vocabulary skills for questioning while discussing art content and using the academic vocabulary in the lesson. Opportunities to learn about another culture while making comparisons and contrasts with one's own can spark student interest in the learning. Visual art serves as a vehicle that helps students make personal connections and create lasting impressions of a new culture and worldview.

Christopoulou (2010) used telenovelas, soap operas in Spanish to introduce a place and culture. Watching a clip from a television show instantly engages today's generation of students because they are used to responding to visual stimuli. After a visual introduction of a new country and an experience creating art from that culture, there is a greater chance for memory retention about the culture (Christopoulou, 2010). Movies or videos can also be used to help students explore their perceptions and ideas about a culture. A study by Turkan and Yasar (2011) investigated third grade students' responses to visual cultural studies. The researchers concluded that inclusion of video in the visual arts course increased students' focus on the learning, and also helped them make connections and formulate questions. The work demonstrated that visual stimuli enriches a student's way of thinking and can provide another perspective on the world. Visual references can be a powerful starting point for discussions with students of key terms like setting, clothing, mannerisms, and cultural nuances compared to their own daily life. A conversation after watching a video about another cultural group can encourage critical thinking and questioning about other ways of being.

Teachers can provide opportunities for introspection that allows students to discover truths about history and tradition from their participation in a cultural project. Rufo (2011) describes a hands-on project with his elementary students where he allowed them to build a fort shelter in groups with little instruction or direction. The amount of interest and engagement during that experience was enough to set the stage for teaching about any type of habitat or artistic architecture that he had planned because the students were tuned in and interested. Likewise, an open-ended experience inviting students to bring in food from their own or another culture will persuade self-directed discovery of artistic culinary culture through the contribution of researching and making food to share (Smolen, & Oswald, 2011). When a teacher encourages creativity in learning through visual examples and memorable experiences, students become active participants who guide their own learning about cultures.

### **Visual Art Promotes Language Acquisition**

When it comes to learning a second language, even the most motivated student experiences frustration (de Jong & Harper, 2005; Stiller & Allen, 2006). Malloy, Marinak & Gambrell (2010) suggest that students make a choice about whether to participate during a class activity depending on whether they feel the activity merits the effort. A student experiencing frustration may be quick to give up if the task is confusing or if they do not understand the goals. It may be a challenge to motivate a frustrated student to participate in reading and writing projects without tapping into the human desire to be interested and engaged (Cowan & Albers, 2006).

Visually creative tasks can provide activities that adjust themselves naturally to students' language level so that a classroom of students with varied levels can all access the curriculum and express knowledge or ideas without dependence on language. Teachers can use such activities to either scaffold language instruction or to facilitate content learning, especially if enhanced understanding results in greater intrinsic motivation. If learning the language is a collaborative endeavor rather than an arduous task, the students will be more motivated, interested, and ultimately engaged (Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). Gardner (2010) suggests that motivation is responsible for achievement in a second language and a positive attitude toward the learning situation helps the student. It seems reasonable to believe that the best way to motivate a student is to make the assigned task a challenging and enjoyable experience. Visual art can provide the extra bit of comprehension that lowers the affective filter (Krashen, 1981)

and keeps the student from being overly conscious about his or her struggles with the second language.

The act of creating visual artwork can open the mind and assist students to use their intelligences creatively in mundane classroom tasks (Gardner, 2010). Students offered opportunities to use their imagination through art find the process serves as a gateway that encourages them to focus on their writing skills (Daniel, 2007; Olshansky, 1994). In a study of an elementary classroom, students were given the option to read books, draw ideas, or shape characters from clay, before writing their own story (Dunn & Finley, 2010). The act of drawing or sculpting ideas for the story can be described as “compact and efficient storage units in the pre-writing phase and they can be linked to text later in the process” (Dunn & Finley, 2010, p. 34). The concept of starting the writing process with an art project helps the students to invent characters that they can see and touch and use to develop a story. It is a way of organizing that can be less frustrating for the students than writing and erasing and starting again. Furthermore, allowing students to draw out a whole story page by page with only captions for the characters to speak can be a way to organize chronological events and identify cause and effect before adding the complexity of writing. Ultimately, the opportunity to create artwork during class can aid in the writing process and help students practice their writing using a broader range of words (Cowan & Albers, 2006; Efland, 2002; Gnezda, 2009).

During their study, Dunn & Finley (2010) asked students to illustrate a scene from a story they had written. The illustrations helped learners bring more depth and detail into his story and express their ideas. Adding artwork to a writing sample has proven to enhance a student’s creative capabilities and provide opportunities to practice concepts such as adjectives and action verbs (Gnezda, 2009). Daniel (2007) linked the reading and writing processes to art as a way of increasing students’ understanding of text and improving the quality of the writing. The students were given colorful visual prompts in the form of a bookmark to guide them during the steps of the reading and writing processes and they were asked to draw before writing as an idea generation measure. Results documented an increase in the mean sentence length of students’ writing. Cowan and Albers (2006) found the visual arts promoted student thinking across sign systems. They discussed that culturally appropriate semiotic systems facilitate student writing.

For a second language learner who is not yet verbal in the second language, the multimodal addition of a drawing can be a fair way to assess prior knowledge about a topic. For example, a teacher could write a simple test with few words and organized spaces for the

student to draw a topic such as the water cycle. The student might be asked to draw the steps with as much detail as they have previously learned so that the teacher can assess content knowledge apart from language. The student will appreciate the accommodation to show his or her knowledge (de Jong & Harper, 2005). Offering colored pencils or crayons to use while drawing can provide students a tool to show their individuality. The students' demonstration of knowledge through visual representation offers them the opportunity to advance to new topics instead of being stagnant with topics they have already mastered (Carger, 2004).

Occasionally, a teacher finds that students are reluctant to use visual art to support their language acquisition because lack of experience drawing may intimidate them as much as writing. In this instance, it is important to set students up for success as much as possible by modeling and providing choices for mediums of creativity. Modeling is an important strategy to use with second language learners to help them feel comfortable with art projects and show them realistic expectations. A teacher could show examples of his or her own illustrated story as well as student examples from successful projects. Teachers could also read a book to introduce a lesson or project as a visually interesting way to engage students. Giving students a choice and modeling a visual example will encourage the strategy of linking art and writing to produce higher level processing (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004).

In a study on motivation to read and write in the elementary grades by Malloy, Marinak and Gambrell (2010), the idea of giving students a choice in techniques and expression was found to be an effective incentive for student participation. When students are allowed to choose a book, topic, or medium for creating illustrations, they become more excited about the overall project. Brisk and Harrington (2007) suggest letting students take photos and use them for digital storytelling if students are reluctant to draw. Multi-modal instruction that uses available modes beyond written words is critical to support language and literacy development (Snow & Brinton, 1988; Nunan, 1999) and to also address students' multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2010). Another option might be to have the students read a children's book and use ideas from the pictures to add adjectives and actions to their story.

### **Visual Art and Multi-modal Instruction**

Guzetti (2012) discusses three points that highlight the interdisciplinary nature of the visual arts. First, they contribute to "... research in perception, cognition, learning, spatial intelligence, and



human development” (p. 666). Secondly, they facilitate the examination of representations that give concreteness to “...cultural norms and power relations” (p. 666). Lastly, through the visual arts educators can design valuable “...educational applications and practical classroom applications” (p. 666).

Research in neuroscience and cognitive science has shown that arts integration has an effect on long-term retention of content (Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskaya, & Hardiman, 2011). Providing art examples and creating artwork during content area instruction such as social studies or science can boost student motivation and trigger the long-term memory so that students retain the text information better that they are studying. A study by Gellejiv, Van Der Meij, de Jong and Pieters (2010) regarding multi-modal versus uni-modal instruction describes an instance of the effects on pictures and memory retention during a teaching situation. During this study, forty-four students were given either a manual with text and visual examples (multi-modal instruction) or a manual with text only (uni-modal instruction) to learn a complex computer software program. The purpose of the study was to determine the effect visual examples have on successful learning of new content. Results suggest greater retention of content by the students who learned the manual with the multi-modal approach than the students learning with the uni-modal approach. The data indicate a powerful link between visual examples accompanying text and memory retention in a learning situation.

Likewise, a study by Kress, Charalampos, Jewitt and Ogborn (2001) suggests that during science lessons, teachers should purposefully pair together different learning modalities to better address the diverse needs of students’ learning styles. This is particularly important for learners who arrive at school with linguistically and culturally influenced learning styles. For example, in a science textbook, it is imperative to have pictures accompany text to show ideas such as species of animals or the water cycle. A picture of a historical person described in the text can offer a powerful tool to enhance memory retention as students connect new ideas with a real person. The study also shows that textual language should be paired with visual gestures and actions in order to fully represent a new term in a learning environment. The teacher can offer a visual display by demonstrating with students observing or students could become active participants. The act of students planting, dissecting, and building is a way to offer a real life visual when new information is being presented. Students are likely to retain content when participating in a visual display instead of only reading about the topic. The Gellejiv et al. (2010) study and the Kress et al. (2001)

study demonstrate the many ways that visual aids can support textual comprehension.

Visual examples of organized text can help a student to feel comfortable with the goal of learning new vocabulary. For example, the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model encourages teachers to post content and language objectives on the board for students to reference what they are intended to learn during the lesson (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2008). Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to have the students say the objectives aloud and repeat the new vocabulary words as an introduction to the lesson. The act of saying a new vocabulary aloud can help the learner process the way the word sounds in context and link it to a tangible reference. Students also benefit from pictures that accompany language objectives as many of the new words they encounter are often unfamiliar.

The use of visual art in the classroom builds on learners' emergent literacy. Goldberg (2012) recommends the use of picto-spelling in elementary school to teach vocabulary. This approach asks learners to create a drawing that illustrates the picture or the meaning of a word. In picto-spelling the students can also use the letters that make up the word as part of the picture. This approach builds on students' natural use of language.

Visual strategies, such as lists, charts, and graphic organizers can direct students to proper sentence structure as they develop their writing skills. As students are acquiring two languages simultaneously in elementary school, they are also learning how to put sentences together in ways that make sense. Though their sentences naturally fill out and become more complex as they learn and practice new terms, certain ideas such as cause and effect can be a complex sentence structure to navigate for students still acquiring vital words. A chart can help with organizing words into cause and effect to help the students use them correctly in a sentence.

One type of visual cue that often aids in memory retention while learning English is a repetitive routine list created by the teacher for the students to use throughout the day, and/or a graphic organizer. Teachers can use predictable daily routines and consistent classroom management strategies in the form of schedules, diagrams, and charts to help students infer a procedure (Goldenberg, 2008). The visual cues, when frequently referred to by the teacher, will help students to observe the plan for the day and organize their thoughts before starting the lesson. Teachers can adopt the routine of writing the schedule of events for the day in a bullet point list. These lists give a visual reference of the plan for the day organized into a predictable and consistent list. The

students will recognize the lists each day and see familiar words. This will help them to try to decipher the words on their own and make sense of new words. The consistent visual display in the classroom encourages self-guided study and provides opportunities to read independently in a non-threatening way.

Likewise, graphic organizers can bring a familiar visual cue for students to infer about words and put them in a category before learning their meaning (Daniel, 2008). However, a busy and overcrowded graphic organizer can delay the learning process. Some graphic organizers are confusing and the directions need to be read to the student or explained to be certain the student understands what to do. A graphic organizer should be simple and clear so that all students can understand the relationship among concepts (Goldenberg, 2008). An example of a successful organizer might be one that contains a map or photograph above a chart, which connect the students with the new vocabulary as well as set up sentence structure (Gottlieb, 2006). A learner will connect new words to his or her funds of knowledge when visual examples are available that help make the connection. Visual representations such as hand gestures may even be necessary to help language learners retain the content knowledge of a new academic term. Repetition and consistency of visual aids increase the chance for retention of new vocabulary.

### **Collaborative Frameworks at School**

Linguistically and culturally diverse students are more engaged at school when classroom instruction focuses on meaningful issues that affect their communities and their particular circumstances (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Thomas and Collier (2002) concluded that second language learners' academic achievement increases when teachers "provide a socio-culturally supportive school environment ... that allows natural language, academic, and cognitive development to flourish" (p. 324).

Teachers can use multimedia resources to provide students multiple means for representation and expression of ideas. Learners in the process of developing a second language have ideas to share long before they are able to expand these into words and sentences using the highly contextualized academic language of mathematics, science, or social studies. For these learners having avenues to express thoughts through visual literacy is the opportunity to gain full access to the academic program and demonstrate mastery. Teachers can join forces with colleagues to provide students interdisciplinary avenues that promote 21st century skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011).

Baker and Prys Jones (1998) highlight that English language learners in the U.S. who continue to develop proficiency in the home language can outscore native English speakers on tests of academic achievement. Interdisciplinary approaches to art and literacy instruction can incorporate technology in projects that showcase the multilingual and multicultural identities of students for parents, other school personnel, and communities. In these non-coercive educational settings, students see themselves reflected in the languages they hear at school and in curricular materials (Cummins, 2001). To support multilingual learners' academic, linguistic, and cognitive development, teachers replace coercive power structures with learning environments that affirm students' identities and design instruction that incorporates students' cultural capital (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). When teachers believe that all students bring knowledge to school, regardless of their parents' socioeconomic level or education, they make certain second language learners are able to demonstrate what they know in non-traditional ways. It is important to remember that cultural and social capital encompasses far more than economic position (Collins & Blot, 2003). Providing avenues to students to show what they know through visual art applauds students' funds of knowledge.

Multi-modal pedagogy is an avenue to assure that literacy frameworks foster multilingualism from an additive and not a deficit stance (Skuttnab-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010). With this methodology, students are helped to become proficient writers and artists who appreciate and share their knowledge, talent and skills as they co-create multilingual, multi-media projects (Jin & Erben, 2007). As well, visual art helps students see and feel the links across cultural boundaries and identities that are neither confined by nor delimited by ethnic origin, language, religion, or socioeconomic status.

Educators of the future want to create opportunities that convey to learners that there are cognitive advantages to being bilingual (Bialystok, 2001). In multilingual classrooms the arts offer learners a common language for communication (Goldberg, 2012). Visual art gives students the key to make choices. When students guide their own learning they have opportunities for oral discussions that provide scaffolds for cross-linguistic transfer (Beeman & Urow, 2012). A multiliteracies perspective transforms the schoolhouse into an environment that embraces questioning and learning through critical pedagogy. One application of the multiliteracies framework focuses on developing multilingual identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2011). Identity texts can vary in their format. Preschool teachers can solicit the participation of their students' families to develop dual language concept

books about shapes, colors, animals, numbers, and many other topics. Young learners who share a home language can collaborate to write a story in both of their languages about a cultural practice that reflects their home culture or community. They can record podcasts of their books and post these on the school website. All students, regardless of their age, can read their books to their siblings and guardians. Identity texts are an option for learners of all ages.

### Conclusion

This review of the literature supports the premise that educators who design culturally responsive instruction will use art as a medium to promote not only bilingualism, but plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. Most definitely, there is little doubt that second language learners often speak more than one language at home and certainly navigate various cultural environments in their daily life.

We conclude that visual art helps second language learners through the process of language acquisition. Indeed, visual art provides an effective multi-modal vehicle for students and their teachers to observe and investigate the histories and traditions of all the culture groups represented by the students in a school. Visual art can be a motivating tool to get students interested in a topic or to lead them to brainstorm before undertaking a writing assignment. Art can certainly "...drive rather than simply adorn the writing process" (Olshansky, 2008, p. xiii). When increasing the academic success of students is the goal, infusing multi-modal education into every subject area and lesson plans certainly appears to be a pragmatic way to make learning enrolling, manageable, accessible, and appropriate for today's learners.

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