

THE JOY OF ART IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The need to motivate students in the EFL classroom has become an established area of research and discussion. Our work focuses on a more positive outlook on teaching and learning English, based on the assumption that we learn from information taken in through our basic natural senses. Based on Gardner's (1993) Multiple Intelligence Theory, we present the idea that the use of our senses may help create a livelier atmosphere and cater for different learning styles (Oxford 1990). Therefore, we propose different tasks by introducing a range of artistic expressions, such as music, paintings, literature and films.

In traditional learning environments (Nunan 1999), art and language learning seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum in the quest to motivate students. However, we believe that these two fields do not necessarily stand apart and that their reciprocal virtues can invoke and provoke high levels of motivation that result in increased participation, especially one that will lead to meaningful text production.

We will describe and carry out a selection of thoughtfully designed activities aiming at written and oral productions triggered by sensory stimuli. The input provided by a palette of artistic expressions will give students the pleasure of discovering how effectively they can express themselves both in written and oral language. As for teachers, they will be able to encourage their students to approach the language learning process in a mood of discovery and to exercise their imaginative powers freely.

Keywords: Art, senses, motivation

The Joy of Art in the EFL Classroom

The need to motivate students in the EFL classroom has become an established area of research and discussion (Gardner, 1985; Oxford and Shearin, 1994; Gardner and Tremblay, 1994; Tsui, 1996; Dornyei, 2001).

Many theorists of Second Language Acquisition have dealt with the importance of motivation. Krashen (1981) considers motivation as most influential in unconscious language acquisition; for Carroll (1981), language learning takes place when the learner feels motivated to communicate; in Bialystok's (1978) terms, learners will seek language exposure only if they feel motivated; Lambert (1974) puts forward the idea that learners achievement depends on motivational states; Schumann (1978) as well as Gardner (1985) view motivation as a factor which will determine the learner's outcome. From this review and following Dornyei, we can conclude that motivation is one of the main determinants of Second/Foreign language (L2) learning achievement (Dornyei, 2001).

Engaging students to successfully perform oral and written tasks is not always easy, regardless of teachers' efforts to make these activities more appealing. The purpose of our work, then is to focus on a more positive outlook on teaching and learning English, based on the assumption that we learn from information taken in through our basic natural senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. While learning, people tend to favour one of their

senses more than the others to facilitate information processing. Based on Gardner's (1993) Multiple Intelligences Theory, we put forward the idea that the use of our senses may both create a livelier atmosphere and cater for different learning styles (Oxford, 1990). Therefore, we propose different tasks by introducing a range of artistic expressions, such as music, paintings, literature and films.

Following J. Keddie (2010), there are seven reasons for using art in the classroom:

1. Art uplifts: students learn better when they are uplifted and one way of doing so is by aesthetically enhancing the learning environment by means of decoration.
2. Art is an accessible resource: it is all around us and it affects us all.
3. Art offers variety which is necessary in teaching to give a brisk pace to the class.
4. Art is a springboard to learning: it arouses curiosity, facilitates access to any subject or issue, leads to an unlimited new world and helps develop critical thinking skills.
5. Art seeds creativity: it sparks imagination and emotion and it may unlock creative thought.
6. Art is authentic: we can create a learning environment that comes to resemble the real world.
7. Art is communication: it considers personal responses that art evokes in us. Art may be loaded with symbolism which requires interpretation. Sometimes the best way to do this is to take a look at it and then share thoughts, which contributes greatly to developing communication in the classroom.

In traditional learning environments (Nunan, 1999) art and language would seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum in the quest to motivate students. However, we believe that these two fields do not necessarily stand apart and that their reciprocal virtues can invoke and provoke high levels of motivation that result in increased participation, especially one that will lead to meaningful text production. Artistic expressions not only stimulate our senses and emotions, they also engage our listening, speaking, writing and reading skills.

We will describe a selection of thoughtfully designed activities aiming at written and oral productions triggered by sensory stimuli. These tasks will be based on excerpts from films, different pieces of music, samples taken from literature and paintings, which will supposedly arouse in our students different feelings and emotions such as happiness, joy, peace, love, anger, fear.

Why music?

Research carried out provides enough evidence to support the idea that bringing music into the classroom may be very effective. These findings are based on the fact that songs may enhance imagination while providing inspiration and motivation for students at different ages and stages of learning (Spicher and Sweeney, 2007; Ting, 2002; Medina, 1993; Lozanov and Gateva, 1989; Rees, 1977 as in Ludke: 2009). Songs can quickly establish a positive learning attitude and at the same time contribute to achieving language teaching aims since they can be used as theme-oriented units. In other words, music facilitates a multi sensory learning experience, thus catering for different styles.

In Grühert's words (2009) music has been used for ESL / EFL classes for decades. This is mainly due to the fact that songs from English speaking countries are worldwide predominant cultural facts. He also considers that songs are most suitable, practical and applicable for the integration of literacy skills in the classroom.

Why literature?

Literature and the ensuing discussion permit students to read, think and become actively engaged with texts.

Coinciding with Ojeda Pinar and Torralbo Jover, through literature students are exposed to complete themes and fresh, unexpected uses of language.

A good novel or short story can take the students to foreign countries and fantastic worlds. A play or a poem can bring up certain dilemmas and powerful emotional responses.

Following the above mentioned authors literary texts offer vast levels of meaning; therefore, they demand a reader/learner actively involved in drawing the hidden meaning of the text. So, we can help our students to develop the capacity to infer meaning by “encouraging students to grapple with the multiple ambiguities of the literary text”, (Ojeda Pinar & Torralbo Jover). Literature helps students to stimulate imagination, to develop their critical abilities and to increase their emotional awareness. If we ask students to respond personally to the texts we give them, they will become increasingly confident about expressing their own ideas and emotions. Literature generates creativity in language and should feature in any education system that regards discovery and enjoyment as essential components of the learning process.

In our proposal we decided to work with poetry due to the fact that it is a manageable text and can be easily adapted to different levels. As regards vocabulary, reading poetry allows for word study in creative discourse, including exploration of synonyms, metaphors, similes and other figurative language. Students can be encouraged to make use of certain interpretative strategies while reading, such as speculating about the symbolic meaning of certain words. Exploring sensory imagery adds a concrete dimension of olfactory, auditory, visual, gustatory and kinetic involvement that enhances learning enjoyment.

In the particular case of poetry written by students, language is more flexible, it may not be rigidly governed by rules and the topic even more appealing. Summarising Puchta and Schrats (1993) poetry exploits the ability of young people to merge thought and emotion, to produce language of special clarity, frankness and expressive power. It increases students' willingness to be spontaneous and creative, and eagerness to express personal identity.

Why paintings?

Interpreting visual art, whether it is modern and minimalist or renaissance and elaborate, can be an excellent way to teach productive skills and build a lexicon.

The arts can be brought into our classrooms as a valuable teaching resource, enabling teachers and learners to engage in more meaningful and memorable learning experiences. Neither teachers nor students need to be art experts to be capable of discovering the cultural and historical context behind a work of art, of appreciating shapes, colours and moods, or of indulging in creating stories out of what they see.

Responding to a painting can be stimulating and can lead to a wide number of activities which are expected to fulfil a variety of teaching roles in the areas of lexical competence, learner autonomy, blended learning and communicative integration of skills.

Why Films?

Incorporating films into the EFL classroom means bringing language to life. In Jane King's view watching movies “is a refreshing learning experience” for students willing to move away from long lists of lexical items and the burden of drill practices.

Watching a film in the English class offers the opportunity of learning and listening to the authentic language used by speakers of English in English speaking countries worldwide. The realism of movies provides a wealth of contextualized linguistic, paralinguistic and authentic cross-cultural information, classroom listening comprehension and fluency practice (Braddock, 1996; Mejia, 1994; Stempleski, 2000, Wood, 1995 as in King 2002). Films become a valuable source of colloquial English because they present real life contexts, an opportunity to be exposed to different voices, degrees of formality, reduced speeches, stress, accents, and dialects.

Suggested Activities

Artistic Expression: Music

Level: Intermediate / Adaptable to other levels

Material: Recording of the song “Beneath a moonless sky” from *Love Never Dies* by Andrew Lloyd Webber

Procedure

Step 1

Ask students to listen to the first part of the song (aperture). Then ask the students what this music stirs in them.

Step 2

Ask students to listen to the complete song paying attention to the lyrics. Brainstorm the ideas provoked by the lyrics.

Group work: Based on what students have heard and understood ask them what they think the story may be about. Students report to the class.

Step 3

Distribute copies of the lyrics and ask the students to read them while listening to the song.

Step 4

Ask students to group images using their senses.

Vocabulary related to:

Visual images:

Feelings and emotions:

Ways related to the eyes:

Movement:

Sounds:

Light & darkness:

Step 5:

Speaking activity

Ask students to think about the reasons or the situations in which they may feel: “ashamed of what I was” and “afraid to see your eyes”.

Step 6

Role-play

Ask students to perform a dialogue representing any part of the story they have chosen.

Step 7

Writing (Adaptable)

Suggested activities:

Create a story / the first part of a story / change the ending based on the song / write a letter based on the song.

Artistic Expression: Literature

Level: Adaptable

Material: Poem “*Myself*” from Puchta & Schratz, 1984. *Teaching Teenagers*. Longman

Procedure:

Step 1

Ask the class to read the poem written by a student.

Step 2

Ask questions to elicit responses about the feelings provoked by the poem.

Step 3

Video “*Déjeuner du Matin*”: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnZCm3cOJ_s (Silent watching)

Work only with the images. Ask students to concentrate on feelings and emotions expressed by the actors and the setting.

Step 4

Vocabulary

Tell the students to think about possible collocations with the words *lonely* and *loneliness*. Make students work with words and expressions related to the feeling of loneliness.

Step 5

Contrasting

Ask students to provide as many opposites as they can from the vocabulary list drawn from the poem and the video.

Step 6

Free speaking activity

Ask students to express themselves on the causes of loneliness, how to overcome it, their own personal experience if they have ever felt lonely and why.

Step 7

Letter writing

Make the students write a letter to the poem's author telling him/her all what they think about the text, what they felt when they read it and what criticism they would include.

Artistic Expression: Painting

Level:

Adaptable

Material: Picture of a street scene. We suggest Paris Flower Market - Sam Park (by Schmidt) in: <http://www.babylonpuzzles.com/en/8656-1000-pcs---paris-flower-market---sam-park-by-schmidt.html>

Procedure

Step 1: Ask students to look at the picture to give a general impression of it. Ask questions to elicit a description of the scene and the setting depicted in it.

Step 2: See the painting

Ask more specific questions to go into details as regards likes and dislikes about the picture.

Step 3: Smell the painting

Guide students to use their imagination as regards smells that can be perceived in the scene.

Step 4: Hear the picture

Guide students to describe the auditory perceptions of sounds or silences.

Step 5: Touch the picture

Lead the students to express the tactile feelings they can experience by touching the objects displayed in the picture.

Step 6: Speaking

Ask students to form small groups to exchange their personal feelings provoked by the scene.

Step 7: Optional activities

- Build on vocabulary related to names of different flowers and trees.
- Create a title for the painting.
- Write the description of the painting.

Artistic Expression: Films

Level:

Intermediate + adaptable to other levels

Material: A DVD with different wedding ceremonies taken from films or video clips. Suggested films: *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *The Father of the Bride*, *Fiddler on the Roof*.

A recording of Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* and Elton John's *I never knew her name* (optional).

Procedure:

Step 1: Anticipation of the topic

Play the CD with Mendelssohn's *Wedding March*. Ask questions that lead your students to the topic of *Weddings*.

Step 2. Speaking about Weddings.

Tell the students to share with their classmates what they know about different customs and traditions as regards weddings around the world.

Step 3

Show the students the compilation of different wedding scenes from films and video clips. While watching the different weddings, students make comments on the differences and / or similarities between the traditional weddings they are familiar with and the ones presented in the class.

Step 4 (Optional)

Teachers can enlarge this activity by making the students listen to the song *I never knew her name*, by Elton John, by working with vocabulary related to weddings, by expressing the feelings provoked by the scene described, by painting the picture of the song.

Step 5:

Writing

Work with your students on a brainstorming activity to come up with an interesting topic sentence / thesis statement and to make a draft for a paragraph / essay.

Conclusion

The input provided by this palette of artistic expressions will give students the pleasure of discovering how effectively they can express themselves both in written and oral language. As for teachers, they will be able to encourage their students to approach the language learning process in a mood of discovery and to exercise their imaginative powers freely.

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