

Art in Foreign Language Education

Ivana Žemberová, Constantine the Philosopher University, Slovakia
izemberova@ukf.sk

Abstract

Art has accompanied the lives of people since ancient times. Every day, consciously or not, we get into contact with art, whether it is a book, music or some painting. For various reasons, mentioned in the paper, it is important that from early childhood, we get acquainted with art, learn how to understand and appreciate it. Nowadays, art, being an inseparable part of culture, belongs to one of the education areas in the Slovak State educational programme. In the paper we deal with the importance of using art in education in general, later focusing on the possibilities of using art in teaching English as a foreign language.

Key words

art, TEFL, culture, education

"The purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls."

Pablo Picasso

Introduction

The arts play an important role in everyday life of people. We do not have to be talented artists or to study art in university to be able to appreciate art in any of its manifold forms. The arts enrich our lives, expand our sense of aesthetics, and in the context of the foreign language learning, which is actually the main objective of this paper, they can serve as an invaluable tool for language teachers to give instructions, demonstrate and explain; and for language learners to learn vocabulary and practice language in various contexts. Last but not least, art being an inseparable part of culture, can be a starting point for various activities for development of cultural awareness of learners.

1. Using Art in Education

1.1 Art in Cross-Curricular Education

In relation to Slovak schools, art and culture education is included in the State educational programme. Already in primary level, the learners should develop their personal, cognitive and communicative competences via various art related activities. In learning through visual art, music, drama, written and spoken word, they express their thoughts, experiences and emotions; connect them with their imagination, fantasy and rational thinking. The art subjects offer various

possibilities for cross-curricular teaching and thus art and language teaching can effectively be integrated using the principles of CLIL methodology.

Below is a topic web illustrating the cross-curricular approach in education in primary level. The topic all the subjects in the web revolve around is Seasons of the year and the central or starting point is the text of the picture book *Round and Round the Seasons Go* by Rozanne Lanczak Williams, which is a piece of verbal and visual art in itself. Apart from the art activities suggested in the web, other art activities may include assembling the book from individual pictures, matching the pictures with the corresponding text, colouring the pictures and describing them, as well as activities related to individual seasons, thus connecting arts with language practice.

1.2 Art and Mass Media

One of the objectives of the art education, as stated in the State educational programme, is to form independent and responsible attitudes to the present cultural offer, to the fashion and subcultures. It should develop the learner's critical thinking in relation to the offer of the mass media. When we take into consideration what is presented to people, including small children, in television, on internet etc., often dominated by too many reality shows of very poor quality and commercials persuading the consumers of all ages that they simply need to buy the product, pursuing the above mentioned objective of the art education definitely deserves appropriate attention in schools. Children need to learn to think independently and to critically judge the value of things and validity of information. We surely do not want to live in a society in which *"Life doesn't imitate art, it imitates bad television"* (Woody Allen).

1.3 Art and the Right Brain Learning

In the framework of the education area – Art and Culture in the State educational programme, authentic and creative task solutions are expected from the learner. However, in non-art subjects, the language education not excluded, the learning is often based on using predominantly the left brain hemisphere, which is rational and analytical, in contrast to the right one, which is intuitive and synthetic.

"The left hemisphere is oriented on the language, communication and processing information step by step. The right hemisphere is the hemisphere of creativity, emotions, imagination and desire; it perceives space and processes information in a complex manner. The right hemisphere can see an image as a whole, its view is holistic, it is a carrier of artistic abilities, it perceives only space, not time, and works with images, colours, symbols and is capable of unlimited perception" (Koničková, 2014; transl. by Ivana Žemberová).

In *Why to Use Also the Right Brain Hemisphere*, Koníčková stresses the importance of the development of the right brain learning through various art related activities. Citing the professionals in the brain research area, she states that the less music, fine arts and physical education is in schools, the more discontented young people the school will raise. Some of the art related activities she recommends for the enhancement of the right brain hemisphere, important for learning and creativity development, are intuitive drawing, music, dance, games, activities, or reading books affecting our emotions.

1.4 Art and Intelligence

The importance of art education, namely drawing has been tested by psychologists in the King's College in London who studied and confirmed the connection between an aptitude to drawing and intelligence. (*Children's drawings indicate later intelligence*) According to their findings, those children who could draw were much more successful in intelligence tests than the children who did not or could not draw. Although this might raise a concern with parents of the children that are not artistically gifted, Arden concludes, that the ability to draw or paint is not directly proportional to the IQ level. They are only interconnected.

"The correlation is moderate, so our findings are interesting, but it does not mean that parents should worry if their child draws badly. Drawing ability does not determine intelligence, there are countless factors, both genetic and environmental, which affect intelligence in later life." (Arden in *Children's drawings indicate later intelligence*)

Psychologists however recommend to create possibilities and to encourage children to draw even if they usually do not do it. In the future they may benefit from it. Because *"To practice any art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow. So do it."* – Kurt Vonnegut

1.5 Art and Culture

The art education should contribute to the overall development of the learner in many different areas. In the contemporary society, one of the important roles of education is to teach children from the early age to distinguish various parts of culture, understand its role in the life of individuals and society and develop their tolerance and understanding of other cultures. This is exactly the point where art, culture, and language teaching meet together. Art, as already mentioned before, is a part of culture; if it is verbal art it is absolutely inseparable from the culture it comes from, the same as is the language itself.

In this context it is important to mention the role of the verbal art – literature. Literature brings the learners information about the culture and offers

a view upon the society and the way of life of people, the language of which they study. Working with literary texts either in the original or Slovak translation, the reader learns to understand and tolerate the other culture. Fennes and Hapgood (in Sharpe & Driscoll, 2000, p. 81) compare the cultural and intercultural awareness to an iceberg. Over the surface, there are aspects of culture, such as eating habits, traditions, music, or lifestyle, while under the surface we can find notions about good manners, social conventions, interpersonal relations, gestures, etc. This is all included in literary texts because they are written for people and by people of the given culture. By getting acquainted with another culture, the reader learns how important it is in the lives of the people of that culture and at the same time he/she becomes aware of his/her own identity. In this way, literature, the verbal art, contributes to the personal and emotional development of the reader.

2. Using Art in the Foreign Language Education

2.1 Pros and Cons of Using Art in the Language Classroom

Integrating the arts and language learning in the classroom can not only increase the students' understanding of art but through looking at, listening to, talking about, sharing or creating art. It can also enhance and develop their foreign language vocabulary and language skills.

Responding to art can be very stimulating for learners and can lead to various language activities. It is not only describing what learners see in the picture or hear in the song; there are many ways how to use a piece of art for vocabulary and grammar presentation and practice in an interesting and motivating way. In responding to art, the teacher can make learners actively engaged in the learning process, encourage them to draw on their personal experiences when talking about what the picture reminds them of, e.g. familiar objects, animals or landscapes. In responding to or creating art, more senses are involved in the learning process. Art naturally lends itself to working with learners with various learning styles, gradually leading to the development of multiple intelligences. A big advantage of using art in the foreign language classroom is the fact that it can be conveyed and dealt with in a non-verbal way, which is especially suitable in situations when the learners can understand more than they can produce themselves or when the progress in the language development is hindered by a fear of making mistakes. Integrating art and language has the potential to develop learners' creative and critical thinking skills, it stimulates imagination and gives them the opportunity to become involved in new approaches and gain a positive attitude to learning, understanding others and expressing their own thoughts (The New York State Educational Department, 2014, p. 2).

Practicing the arts in the foreign language classroom contributes to the development and enhancement of the learners' literacy and language skills. According to the finding in the Guttenheim program *Learning Through Art*, the participating students *"performed better in six categories of literacy and critical thinking skills – including thorough description, hypothesizing and reasoning – than did students who were not in the program* (The New York State Educational Department, 2014, p. 5). According to the further findings in the above mentioned programme, learning about art contributes to the development of reading and oral communication skills and has a positive effect on a child's capability to learn in other academic areas, especially in reading, writing and speaking, which, no doubt, are areas of interest in the foreign language education.

In general, the reasons why language teachers should integrate art into their classroom are as follows:

By placing art within the context of the lives of ELLs and enabling them to express their ideas visually as well as by speaking and writing, teachers can:

- *Build on prior knowledge.*
- *Scaffold instruction.*
- *Create a bridge between written and spoken language.*
- *Make learning relevant and meaningful.*
- *Help students develop self-esteem.*
- *Foster creativity.*
- *Develop an appreciation of the past.*
- *Highlight similarities and differences.*
- *Foster higher order thinking skills.*
- *Promote high levels of analysis, reasoning, and questioning.*
- *Support creative thinking.*
- *Model problem solving.*
- *Emphasize interpreting and communication of ideas.*
- *Enhance students' ways of observing, responding to, and representing the world* (The New York State Education Department, 2010, p. 3).

Of course, it is not solely advantages we find in using art in language learning; teachers may also encounter various potential problems in their effort to deal with a piece of art with their students, such as the subjectivism of art, unfamiliar subject matter, lack of connection with language learning, etc. Therefore it is important to select carefully, possibly after the previous discussion with the students, so that the art they are supposed to deal with has some relevance to them, either from its subject matter or the background of the artist, or their own personal experience. In regard to the language work, the arts

can be a very good starting point or subject of various language based activities, however, it is essential to make clear what the outcome and learning point of them is, e.g. using a piece of art to practice various language functions, such as giving opinions, or agreeing and disagreeing. Further on, by responding to visual art students can, for example, learn and practice colours, possessive adjectives, job-related vocabulary, feelings, action verbs, prepositions of locations, clothing, weather, scene, etc. This should, however, be made clear and systematically pursued in order to achieve not only the aesthetic but also the language objective.

2.2 Strategies for Integrating Art into the Language Teaching

One of the strategies recommended at the beginning of working with a piece of art in the language classroom is to use open-ended questions to draw students' attention to the artwork. It is important, especially in the initial phase, to make the learners motivated and interested in the work by asking them to describe what they see in the picture and later on to encourage them to express their personal responses to the artwork by connecting it to their personal experiences and prior knowledge (see The New York State Educational Department, 2010, p. 14). By asking about the people, objects or the actions presented in the artwork, about the emotions and feelings that the painting evokes in the learners, the teacher can create a narrative and thematic understanding of the work and connect it to the cultural, historical or ideological content.

2.3 Tasks/Techniques

There are limitless possibilities of integrating the arts and language learning. We, at the Department of Language Pedagogy and Intercultural Studies engage our students in art and language integrated activities by giving them assignments related to their study of the language, culture, history and literature of anglo-phone countries. Further on, they actively participate in the organisation of various cultural events, create posters, decorations, etc., which gives them a great opportunity to learn about the culture and remember the facts longer than as if they were just told about them in the class.

During several years of teaching subjects Methodology of work with children's book and Methodology of literature, subjects that offer an excellent basis for using art in language teaching, together with my students, we have practiced various art related activities that are suitable for the use in the foreign language classroom in various school and language proficiency levels. Some of the tasks are as follows:

- use a range of simple art materials to create drawings, illustrations, posters, and so on in relationship to what is being studied;

- read/listen to a poem, song or short text and synthesise meaning by creating drawings;
- make a project/poster about land, culture or a particular historical period;
- research, write and discuss the art of the place, people and time;
- discuss how a piece of art can be represented in various other art forms (see La Belle Dame Sans Merci in Examples);
- view and discuss artwork related to various topics, such as nature, animals, seasons, landscape, family, etc. using the topic related vocabulary;
- make a journal;
- match the text with individual pictures, colour them and assemble a mini-book;
- make a handout to a story (see Rosie's Walk in the Examples);
- make illustrations to the text fragments or individual objects, actions in the text and putting them into the correct order recreate the whole story;
- write a poem (haiku, limerick, acrostics);
- make puppets or paper figures (using templates) to be used in the dramatisation of a story.

2.3.1 Examples

2.3.1.1 *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*

The Very Hungry Caterpillar is an excellent example how a children's picture book, a piece of visual and verbal art, can be used in TEFL for various language and art related activities. Individual pre-, while- and after-reading activities can be designed to increase children's understanding of art, chiefly its connection to the language and literature and through the art develop the knowledge of the English language vocabulary. This particular picture book is especially suitable for **language work**, like teaching colours, numbers, days of the week and food, also for teaching **science** through explaining the life cycle of a butterfly, as well as for a number of **art activities**. Apart from being a piece of art in itself, the book offers possibilities for drawing, colouring, singing or dramatising.

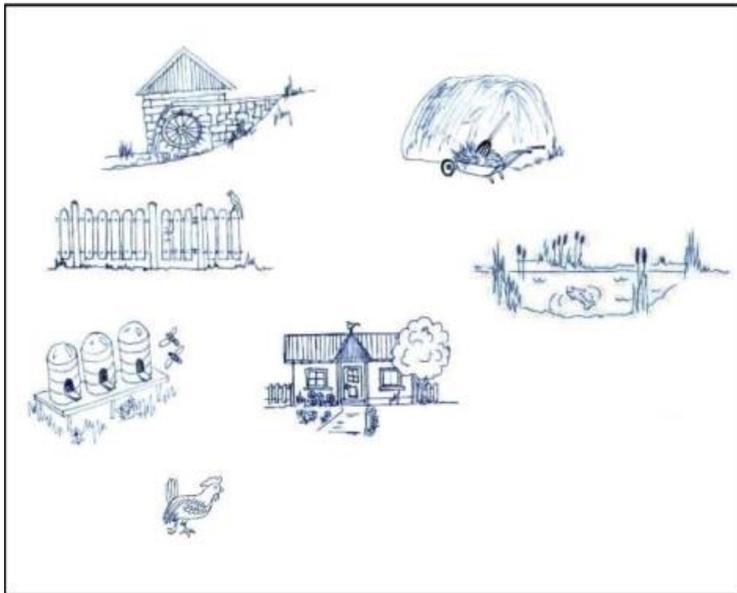
2.3.1.2 *Rosie's Walk*

The picture book *Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins also presents an excellent teaching material for the English language classroom and offers possibilities for integrating art and language learning. The whole text of the book consists of only one sentence:

Rosie the hen went for a walk across the yard, around the pond, over the haystack, past the mill, through the fence, under the beehives and got back in time for dinner.

From the text it is evident that it is very suitable for teaching and practicing prepositions of place. For that purpose I prepared (but the handout can be drawn by the students themselves) the handout below, which can be used in a printed form or it can be projected on an interactive white board. The purpose of the activity is to follow the instructions and draw the way that Rosie went.

Fig. 1: Rosie's Walk handout



2.3.1.3 *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*

La Belle Dame Sans Merci is a romantic ballad by an English poet John Keats. The poem is a piece of art itself, and it was a popular subject for Pre-Raphaelite painters in the 19th century. The paintings depicting individual scenes or lines from the poem can create the link between verbal and visual art and become a basis for both language practice and a literary history lesson. Activities emphasise depiction of the people and scenery portrayed in the paintings, using adjectives and verbs to describe their appearance, mood, landscape and actions.

Fig. 2: The painting of La Belle Dame Sans Merci by Frank Cadogan Cowper



Fig. 3: The painting of La Belle Dame Sans Merci by Sir Frank Bernard Dicksee



Fig. 4: The painting of La Belle Dame Sans Merci by John William Waterhouse



2.3.1.4 St. Patrick's Day Poster

Below is the poster created by the students of the Department of Language Pedagogy and intercultural Studies as a part of their St. Patrick's Day project. While creating this poster, the students had to collect all the relevant information about this important and popular holiday. Apart from practicing language while learning and writing about the origins, traditions, costumes and symbols of the holiday, in this activity, they learned new facts from the history and culture.

Fig. 5: St. Patrick's Day poster



2.3.1.5 The Portrait of Lady Jane Grey

Although students of English language should have some knowledge about the kings and queens of England, the name of Lady Jane Grey may sound unfamiliar. Partly because she was Queen of England for just 9 days until she was driven from the throne and sent to the Tower of London to be executed. The painting below depicts how she is guided towards the execution block by Sir John Brydges, Lieutenant of the Tower. To the right we can see the executioner and in the background two of Jane's ladies grieving. Responding to the painting, the students learn a piece of English history; but the activities also teach them about some of the elements of art (colour, line, texture, light), and last but not least they provide a good basis for language practice. Using adjectives, students describe the people, the clothing they are wearing, feelings of the people in the portrait, as well as the feeling the portrait evokes in the viewer. (The painting is exhibited in the National Gallery, London, UK).

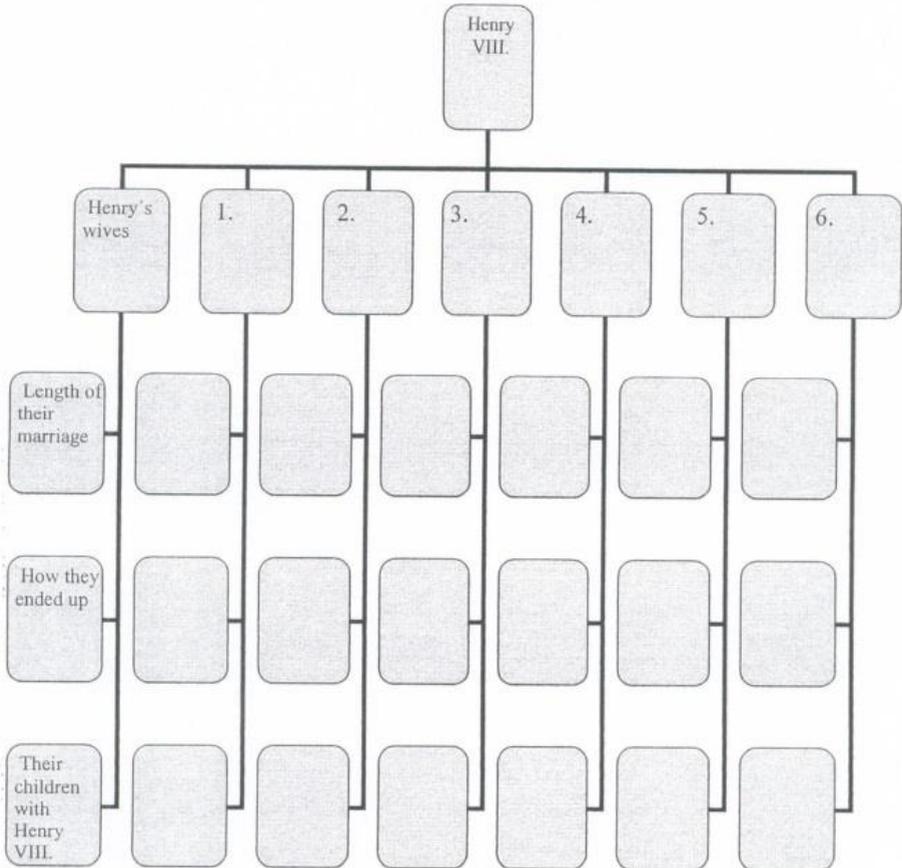
Fig. 6: The Execution of Lady Jane Grey (by Paul Delaroche, 1833)



2.3.2.6 Catherine Howard's Fate

The song *Catherine Howard's Fate* performed by Blackmore's Night provides another lesson in English **history** given in a more interesting way than if students were just given plain facts about who was Catherine and how she was related to Henry VIII. Songs are in general considered to be a motivating and effective way of learning **new vocabulary**; in this case students also learn about the fate of Henry's fifth wife. It is a well known fact that altogether he had six wives. As a follow-up activity, students can search for information necessary to complete the graph below, thus pursuing the language objectives and learning some historical facts.

Fig. 7: Worksheet: Henry VIII's six wives



2.3.1.6 Some Examples of Artistic Creations in the Language Classroom

Fig. 8: The book cover to *The Little Mermaid* by H. Ch. Andersen



Fig. 9: The book cover to *Three Little Pigs*

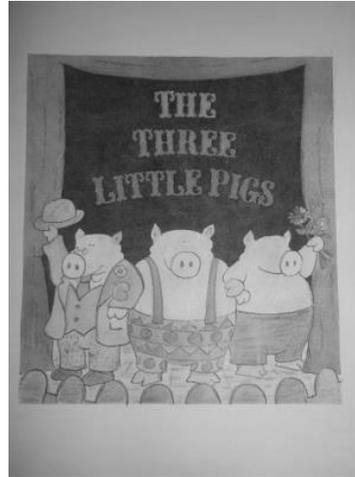


Fig. 10: The modern version of *Three Little Pigs*



Fig. 11: Seasons related decorations



Conclusion

From all that has been mentioned above, it is evident how important the role is that the arts play in the everyday life of people. It is not only the family or friends, but also the school that has its share in the development of children's and young people's attitude to art. Pablo Picasso said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up." Teachers should therefore

be aware of this fact and try to keep the “artist” that resides in every child alive because “*The Earth without Art is just Eh.*” (unknown)

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Contact address

Mgr. Ivana Žemberová, PhD.
Katedra lingvodidaktiky a interkultúrnych štúdií
PF UKF v Nitre
Dražovská cesta 4
949 74 Nitra
izemberova@ukf.sk