

Introduction

This series consists of five articles containing lesson plans, teaching tips and suggestions on using art in the classroom. All the articles are designed to allow you to develop the ideas further and to adapt any suggestions to your students' needs and interests. The series consists of:

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| Part 1: Using art at face value | Part 4: Concepts, themes and issues |
| Part 2: Art stories | Part 5: Personal perspectives |
| Part 3: Focus on the artist | |

“Oscar Wilde quite rightly said, ‘All art is useless’. And that may sound as if that means it’s something not worth supporting. But if you actually think about it, the things that matter in life are useless. Love is useless. Wine is useless. Art is the love and wine of life. It is the extra, without which life is not worth living.”

Stephen Fry

We are all appreciators of art. At its most general definition, art is nothing more than that which pleases the senses and who can honestly say that they don't like having their senses pleased?

Of course, there are some sense-pleasers which can't be brought into the classroom – wine, for example – but there are many which can. Most teachers will realize that by incorporating artwork, photography, music, film, storytelling, drama, comedy or literature into the learning environment, the classroom may become a more pleasurable place for everyone involved.

In this series on using art in the classroom, we will be focusing on principles of using art images for language teaching. This could include, for example, pictures or digitally displayed images of any of the following:

- paintings
- sketches
- sculptures
- designs
- art photography
- installations
- public art
- internet art

Seven reasons for using art in the classroom

1. Art uplifts

It doesn't matter what a teacher wants to achieve. It doesn't matter which subject he or she teaches. It's all the same: Students learn better when they are uplifted and one way to uplift is by aesthetically enhancing the learning environment. This may involve nothing more than decorating the classroom walls with images from an expired art calendar.

2. Art is an accessible resource

Whether we are considering illustrations in children's books, the graffiti that we pass on the way to work, or that new piece of architecture that is getting everyone talking (or complaining!), art is all around us and it affects us all.



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3. Art offers variety

It always pays to vary the materials and techniques that we use with our learners. Variety is the spice of life and art can be regarded as an additional resource which can be used at any time to change the pace of the class.

4. Art is a springboard to learning

Art arouses curiosity and can open the door to virtually any subject or issue. It can take us on journeys, lead us to discovery and help us to develop critical thinking skills.

5. Art seeds creativity

Art sparks imagination and emotion and may act as a key for unlocking creative thought.

6. Art is authentic

Perhaps the opposite of art is artifice, and the language classroom is no stranger to that. By using art in the language classroom, we take a step towards creating a learning environment that comes to resemble the real world.

7. Art is communication

This does not necessarily mean that every artist has an explicitly intended message or agenda to convey through his or her work. By communication, we could be considering the personal responses – good or bad – that art evokes in us. Perhaps a piece of art will remind us of dreams or personal experiences we have had. Perhaps it will reveal information about its creator. Or perhaps it is laden with symbolism and requires to be ‘read’. Sometimes the best way to ‘read’ art is to take a good look at it and then share thoughts. This is why the subject may be such a great one for the communicative language classroom.

Anticipated problems

In a culture of ‘correct’ answers and multiple choice grammar tests, the subjective nature of art can pose a problem in the classroom. I remember a situation in which a teacher of mine asked me what I thought of a sculpture during a school trip to an art gallery. My first reaction was to consider what I was expected to think of it. In other words, I considered what my teacher wanted to hear from me. When I realized that this was too dangerous, I considered what the artist was trying to say. But still nothing came to me. Eventually I settled for a non-committal, “hmm, interesting”. At no time did I consider giving an answer from my heart.

There are many people who don’t feel comfortable talking about art in their own language, never mind a new one. Any teacher who wishes to use art should be aware of this and can take the following steps to ease students in gently:

- Decorate your classroom with art pictures without drawing any attention to the work on display. It is possible that this will elicit a reaction from your students. A single question, for example, may be enough for a starting point for discovery.
- Take the time to find out what type of art your learners engage with the most. Perhaps you could use art that is relevant to their environment or lives (local artists, local public art, art that has been made famous in pop culture, etc.).
- Set tasks which will require students to interact with the art but which will avoid any feelings of ‘art uneasiness’.

Please also be aware that art can touch emotive and controversial topics that not all your students will feel comfortable to discuss. The article on *Concepts, themes and issues*, for example, contains an image of 600 volunteers posing naked on a Swiss glacier. By using artists and artwork that you feel your students would be comfortable discussing in the classroom, you can easily avoid topics that might cause offence or embarrassment.

How to use art in the language classroom

Perhaps there are two questions to consider here. Firstly, what texts can be used in conjunction with art for the

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purpose of reading, listening and language study activities? Here are some possibilities:

- **Picture descriptions**
Teachers can prepare these themselves. For example, write ten sentences that relate to the content of a painting, some of which are true and some of which are false. These can be used for the basis of an observation test.
- **Artist biographies**
These can be obtained from online galleries or encyclopaedias (Wikipedia, for example).
- **Artist interviews**
Type the name of an artist followed by the word 'interview' into a search engine and see what comes up.
- **Stories, anecdotes or newsworthy events**
Keep an eye out for any interesting stories behind artistic works that you hear or read about in the press. This one, for example, on Damien Hirst's £111m auction record:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/sep/16/damienhirst.art1>
- **Texts that discuss the issues that an artist's work raises**
This could be anything from the background and history of Picasso's *Guernica* to the controversy that surrounded Theodore Gericault's *Raft of Medusa*. Radio discussions (often available as podcasts) or online encyclopedias may be good resources for such texts.
- **Reviews**
A newspaper review of a local exhibition, for example.
- **Interpretations**
Art books are a particularly good resource for finding common theories and interpretations of an artist's work. Children's art books are particularly accessible and may be especially good for language learners.
- **The technical / cultural perspectives**
Teachers may also make use of texts that address the techniques (lithography, impasto, etc.) that artists employ as well as the schools that they belong to (cubism, impressionism, etc.). Again, art books and encyclopedias may be good resources here.
- **Titles**
A title can be necessary if the artwork that it complements is to be appreciated in full. Titles can also contain interesting language.

The second question to consider is: How can we generate language from art? In other words, how can we use art to get our students speaking and writing? Again, there are a number of possibilities:

- **Picture descriptions**
Students can write their own picture descriptions. For example, they can be shown a painting and then asked to write everything they remember about it.
- **The *What do you know about ...?* question**
This is a simple way to start a lesson: Show your students a picture of an artist that they are familiar with and find out what they can tell you about him or her. Problematic or praiseworthy language can be written up on the board.
- **Artist speculation**
Students can be shown a piece of art and asked to guess what type of person the artist was.
- **Interpretation**
Students can be asked to interpret or express their personal feelings about an artist's work (but see anticipated problems – above).
- **Creative writing**
Art can be used as a starting point for creative writing activities.

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• Homework

Art can be used to arouse students' curiosity and introduce investigative homework in which they find out about the artists and issues for themselves. Findings can then be presented and shared during class.

• Titles and captions

Students can create their own titles or captions for pieces of art.

Sources of art images

What follows is a list of possible art resources that can be used in the classroom:

- art wall calendars: A great resource; they contain 12 good-sized, good quality images based around a theme and can be used to convert your classroom into an art gallery.
- art postcards: can be obtained from galleries
- art books
- art posters
- photographs of local public art, architecture or graffiti

Art online:

- National galleries often have websites where images of exhibited pieces as well as information about them can be obtained (see www.tate.org.uk for example).
- Some newspapers have online art sections with art slideshows (see www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign for example).
- For photo manipulation art, go to www.worth1000.com.
- Image search engines (<http://images.google.com/> for example) can be used to find pictures of virtually any artist's work.

Reference

Stephen Fry in America (a six-part BBC series). The quotation is an excerpt from a speech that Stephen gives to the Society for Performing Arts in Houston.