

Using Art Postcards in ESL/EFL Communication Classes

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Introduction

In keeping with the theory that authentic materials have an important role in the language classroom, I bring postcards of paintings by well-known artists to class to provide raw material for the students to carry out a variety of tasks. The aim is to allow the students opportunities to develop speaking skills while listening and drawing or taking notes, with the overall aim of having them produce their own original compositions on the themes they encounter. The works of art provide cultural content, but need not be culture-specific, an advantage when students are reluctant to accept what they perceive to be "foreign". These art-based activities not only foster motivation but support a creative approach to teaching. Furthermore, it is easy for teachers to adjust them to the students' level in the target language, and ensure that their classes are successful, enjoyable and satisfying to the needs of the learners by giving them a real sense of purpose and achievement.

Background

For any language learner, drawing on the learner's own imaginative capability to use the structures and vocabulary that they already know to create original utterances in a communicative setting is a desirable outcome. Postcards of famous paintings provide a wealth of opportunity for language learning in the communicative language classroom, particularly those of portraits, social scenes, and the works of the surrealists. It is a good idea to organize them into themes if you have a lot. The art postcard can serve as a useful aid in motivating students to communicate something meaningful in a practical context. The cultural content expands the imagination and the learner's perspective on the world, leading to the desire to offer comment and opinion and ask questions. If the teacher brings a personal collection of art postcards to class, the students' curiosity is piqued and they become eager to communicate with him or her, and with each other about something concrete. Teachers may prefer to use pictures easily available on the internet to make their own postcards. Having possession of the card allows the student to feel in control of the language exchange process, and in the information exchange setting, getting their message across becomes not a test of language skill but a creative challenge. Students are thinking in and speaking in L2, even with only a basic knowledge of the language.

Set Up and Procedure for the Lesson

The activity is used in large classes where the students have six years of academic English with varying levels of competency.

Step One: Pre-teaching

At the beginning of this class, it is advisable to pre-teach or review the following:

- there is /there are
- the present progressive form of some common verbs. For example, is sitting, are holding, is looking at, is wearing and are dancing.
- Put a list of spatial prepositions and phrases up on the board and give clear examples of them in a drawing for the students to copy, practice and be familiar with. For example, in the centre, next to, beside, near, opposite, to the left of, above, below, under, between, on the right, behind, in front of, on the top right, on the bottom left, and in the

background.

- Emphasize the fact that the quality of the actual drawings does not matter. This is about communicating the facts.

Step Two: Describe and Draw

- Divide the students into pairs.
- Provide at least twice as many cards as there are students so they can have a choice.
- Have students prepare pencils, erasers, dictionaries and provide paper for drawing.
- Each student selects a card (which they cannot show to their partner), observes it and makes notes for 3 minutes.
- Partner A describes the picture to Partner B, without using a dictionary.
- Partner B attempts to draw the picture by listening carefully, while Partner A observes and gives directions. This usually involves much speaking and laughter, as well as questions about shape, form, content, line, space and other details.
- Limit the time to about 10 minutes per picture.
- When partner A has finished describing a painting for B to draw, partner B will describe his/her painting for A to draw.
- Allow some time for comparing the originals with the drawings and for the partners to admire and exchange positive comments about the drawings. This can be done in writing.

Step Three: Deepening the Discussion and Writing

- Using dictionaries, students work alone and look up 15 to 20 descriptive words about the picture and note them in a list. Allow 5 minutes.
- Students write a detailed description of the scene in the painting. Allow about 15 minutes.
- Students present the compositions to groups of classmates.
- Allow time for discussion.
- Students then submit written work to the teacher, who may comment, correct and if need be, require them to be rewritten.

Other Activities for a Follow-up Assignment

- Write questions about the meaning of the painting and compare answers with classmates.
- Write a comment or opinion on the painting.
- Carry out research on the history of the painting and write a 5 paragraph essay based on that research.
- Choose a person from a painting, imagine the person's life and write about it from that person's point of view,
- Write a conversation relating to the painting.
- Use the theme to compare cultures or point out similarities and differences in values.

In Conclusion

- This activity can be adapted as a speaking only activity if the class is of a higher level.
- Even for higher level classes, the "describe and draw" stage should not be omitted, as it creates a light and relaxed atmosphere to begin with.
- Students in the composition classes generate and recycle language. Many quickly make progress in writing paragraphs and essays of the descriptive, narrative and expository type.
- In the end, the students benefit from the exposure to the rich cultural content of the art work in addition to improving their language skills.