

Using Modern Art to Teach Language and Culture to ESL Students

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Introduction

This unit on looking at modern art can be used with intermediate to advanced adolescent and adult ESL learners. Many consider contemporary art simplistic, perplexing, and just plain weird, which makes it a perfect topic for generating discussion and language learning in the ESL classroom. As learners become engaged in the topic they will be developing their language abilities. The unit employs an integrated, four-skills approach embedded in a cultural theme, and teachers can pick and choose activities according to student needs and available time.

Unit Objectives

Language and Skills

- Vocabulary (New words can be recycled throughout the unit)
- Speaking and conversation practice
- Writing
- Reading
- Listening

Culture

- Students will learn about some famous Western artists and their works.
- As students learn about the ideas behind the art they learn something about Western thought and culture.
- This unit can also be used in an intercultural approach to language learning. Students are likely to become more aware of their own culture when they come face-to-face with aspects of other cultures. Understanding one's self as a cultural being is the first step towards attaining intercultural competence (See Byram, 1997).

Day One: Setting the Stage (1 ½ hours)

Materials

- Modern art prints (at least one per student)
- Student dictionaries
- Chart paper
- Markers

Advance Preparation

- Before class, put up the modern art prints all around the classroom. In large letters on the blackboard write, *What's this?*

The Lesson

- As students arrive they soon notice the art on the walls and will be intrigued. It is best to say as little as possible at this point.
- To begin the class, ask everyone to get up and have a more careful look at all of the prints.
- Then have students sit down and write down their thoughts about the art they have just seen. Once they have done this, go around the class and ask each student to make a brief statement about their impressions of the art prints. You can be certain that everyone will have an opinion! (E.g., *I could paint that! A child could do that. What is it? What does it mean? It's so simple. That's not art!*).

Class Discussion Centered Around Student Responses

Some ideas for discussion include:

- The price of these works and why they are so expensive.
- Is it art? Why or why not? What is art? What's the point?
- Is it worthwhile?
- How do these paintings compare to art in the students' own cultures?
- Which ones do students like? Dislike? Which are the strangest?

Vocabulary Activity

Divide the class into groups of three or four. Each group collectively generates a list of 10 words to describe the paintings in general, consulting a dictionary when needed. Challenge learners to find the most descriptive words they can. The word lists are written on chart paper. Each group then chooses what they consider to be their two most original words and explains them to the class. The word lists are posted around the room for the duration of the unit for easy reference.

Day Two: Creating a Classroom Art Gallery (1 ½ hours)

Materials

- Modern art prints.

Advance Preparation

- Put up art prints in the classroom before the students arrive.

The Lesson

- Ask students to imagine that they are going to open their own class art gallery. However, there is only enough money in the budget to purchase a limited number of paintings (one per group of four students).
- Students are then asked to choose one of the prints on the wall. It works best if they select one they actually like. One of the great things about using modern art in the ESL classroom is that it is open to personal interpretation. Learners pretend that they are the artist who created the work, and are invited to fabricate any information they wish about their painting (e.g., why they painted it, what the message of the painting is supposed to be, etc.). They have total freedom to think of something wacky or entirely serious. Students with a good sense of humor will have a lot of fun with this. Others will become completely engrossed in what an artist might actually have been trying to say through his/her work.
- Divide the class into groups of four. Each "artist" must try to convince the other members of the group of the virtues of his/her painting, giving reasons why it should be the one from their group chosen for the class gallery. The teacher might want to model the activity for the whole class first. After each group member has had a chance to present his/her argument, the group must reach a consensus on which painting to put into the gallery.
- There may be students who are unsure of what to do at first, so it is a good idea for the teacher to walk around and check that everyone is on track, providing help when needed. The teacher also helps students with language and vocabulary when needed.

- Once all groups have reached a consensus, one member presents the group's final choice to the entire class, giving reasons why it was selected. As eachwork is presented it is posted at the front of the room.

Day Three: Visit to the Art Gallery /or/ a Virtual Tour (2 hours)

Materials

- Worksheets (see below).
- Pens.

Advance Preparation

- Arrange a guided tour of the contemporary art exhibit at a local art gallery, or find appropriate web sites for a virtual tour.
- Prepare worksheets.

The Lesson

- Guided Tour:
 - Arrange a guided tour of the modern art exhibit of a local art gallery. These are generally 50 minutes long. Encourage students to ask the guide questions. Many students have never visited an art gallery, so the visit often makes a real impact on them. If an in-person visit is not possible, students may take a virtual tour of a gallery (see *Resources* below for suggestions).
- Post-tour Activity:
 - Students work with a partner. They are given 30 minutes to explore and discuss the contemporary art exhibit on their own. Students complete the worksheet below (this can also be used for a virtual tour). They list the titles and artists of 3 works that they looked at together, and write a brief description and response for each one.
- Worksheet:

Art Gallery Visit: Contemporary Art

With a partner, take 30 minutes to explore the contemporary exhibits. List the titles and artists of 3 works that you looked at together and discussed. Write a brief description of the work and a sentence describing your response to it.

Painting #1

Title:

Name of artist:

Description of the work:

Your response to the work:

Painting #2

Title:

Name of artist:

Description of the work:

Your response to the work:

Painting #3

Title:

Name of artist:

Description of the work:

Your response to the work:

Optional Lessons

Listening Activity

- There are numerous videos available in most local libraries introducing modern art, or teachers may wish to focus on a particular artist and his/her work. Pre-teach important vocabulary and have students complete comprehension questions after watching the video.

Oral Presentations

- Students choose an artist or work of art to research and prepare a short oral presentation. To work on fluency and accuracy, rather than have one student at a time present to the entire class, students can give presentations in small groups of three or four. They then switch groups until everyone has given their presentation three or four times.
- Alternatively, students could make a presentation on an artist or art from their own culture.

Writing Assignments

- Students research an artist or a work of art (from their host or home country) and write a short report.
- Students imagine that their national government is going to spend one million dollars on a new painting for its national gallery. They write a letter to the editor either supporting or opposing this purchase.

A Class Debate or Group Task

- The class debates a question such as: *The government should continue to spend money acquiring modern art.* Arguments against this statement might deal with how money might be better spent (e.g., on the poor and homeless).
- To encourage as much speaking as possible, conduct a mini-debate. Students are put into groups of four. Two in each group argue as a team in favor of the statement and the other two argue against it. Each group tries to reach a consensus, and at the end of the activity one member of the group provides a summary of their discussion for the entire class.

Focus on a Particular Painting

- Before going on the visit to the art gallery, introduce learners to one particular painting in more detail. Choose the most famous work in the gallery or perhaps the most expensive or most controversial. Provide some background information. When students come face-to-face with it in the gallery it will be more meaningful for them.

Reading Activity

- Find an article relating to contemporary art at the appropriate reading level. Create a jigsaw activity in which each member of a small group of two or three reads a section and explains it to the other member(s) of the group. Teach new vocabulary from the article. Follow up with comprehension questions and language activities.

Closing Activity

- At the end of the unit students respond to the following question, first as part of a class discussion and then more privately, in writing:
 - Have your attitudes towards modern/contemporary art changed in any way since the beginning of this unit? For example, do you like it more/less? Do you understand it better? Do you think it is worthwhile or not? Does it make you think?

Note to Teachers

Teachers need not be art experts to carry out this unit successfully. The idea is not to "teach" students about modern art, but to discover it with students, with an emphasis on personal response (and modern art certainly offers much to respond to). When looking at art students should be asked to think about what kind of society produces such works. What does it tell us about what is valued in Western culture (e.g., creativity, originality, independence of thought, etc.)? This is often very different than what is found in art from other cultures and international students often find this fascinating.

Some Ideas-in-brief About Contemporary Art

- It is a form of communication.
- It says something. It's not just pretty.
- It takes into account our senses.
- It reflects society.
- It gives meaning or new understanding to the world.
- It begins inward and moves outward.
- It is the spirit of the time.
- It's about making statements.
- We know it is art by the discussion it generates.
- If it transmits a point or message, it is art.
- We need to understand the context within which the art has emerged to understand it.
- It makes you think.
- It is open to interpretation.
- Understanding modern art is like learning a new language, except there is no Berlitz course.
- Contemporary art is the art of our times.

(From the video, *What's This: Understanding Contemporary Art*, 1998)

Resources for Virtual Tours and Background Information

- Centre Pompidou (Paris, France). www.cnac-gp.fr
- Guggenheim Museum. <http://www.guggenheim.org/>
- Mark Harden's Artchive. (Contains links to virtual museums). www.artchive.com
- Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York). www.metmuseum.org
- Museum of Modern Art (New York). <http://www.moma.org>
- National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa). www.national.gallery.ca

References

- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Toronto: Multilingual Matters.
- National Gallery of Canada (1998). *What's this? Understanding contemporary art*. Ottawa, Ontario. [Videocassette, 29 minutes].

