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Communication, Culture, and Curiosity: Using Target-Culture and Student-Generated Art in the Second Language Classroom

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Abstract: Studying art from the target culture and student creation of original artwork in the second language (L2) classroom have many benefits. Both provide a springboard for discussion of the culture(s) under study as well as one's own. These activities also positively change the classroom atmosphere, generating student curiosity and lowering the affective filter to language learning. Surprising as it may seem, little has been published about the visual arts and second language acquisition (SLA). This article surveys this limited research, briefly describes how brain research and language learning theories interact with art, and presents the authors' observations of student response to art and art projects in college-level Spanish and French classes. Finally, it provides practical steps for the classroom, showing how works of art from the target culture as well as student-created pieces can be used to develop the four skills at all levels.

Key words: art, communicative activities, content-based approach, culture, SLA (second language acquisition)

Languages: French, Spanish

Introduction

In recent years, instructors have been admonished to reach out to students with diverse learning styles. For the second language (L2) instructor, it has been a challenge to rethink activities and move beyond assignments catering to the development of linguistic and logical patterning skills. Additionally, L2 instruction has been criticized for including very little cultural content. Teachers know this is important, but find themselves providing anecdotal cultural information as time permits, while struggling to meet proficiency standards. Using art in the L2 classroom presents opportunities for students to become acquainted with the target culture and appeals to different learning strengths not tapped by traditional grammar activities. The following article details the use of both target-culture and student-created art with proficiency-oriented, student-centered communicative activities.

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Literature Survey

Art and Learning Theories

Researchers in many fields recognize the value of both creating art and evaluating others' artwork as part of the learning process. Gardner's (1985) theory of multiple intelligences recognizes that an individual may have strengths in areas other than linguistic ability. Thus, the physical act of producing artwork can help students who are bodily-kinesthetic learners. González-Jensen and Gara-Weiner (2000) cited brain research by Edwards (1979), stating that when art is being created "the whole brain is involved in making a linguistic connection. The left side of the brain which commands language, verbal, and logical processes and the right side which commands artistic and creative processes work together to learn the new language" (p. 56). Both creating and studying artwork have a strong link with emotions. Egan (1997) asserted, "We remember things best when we can locate them emotionally and associate them with some vivid image" (p. 343). The movement and feelings associated with learning about and producing art involve more than linguistic processes and therefore contribute to learning at a more profound level.

Wright (1997) asserted that the arts perform "as additional 'languages' for young children who may not be very competent in conventional symbol systems (e.g., oral language, writing, and reading)" (p. 363). Like small children, some adult L2 learners may find they are unable to say, read, or write what they really want, and art may provide a welcome venue for communication, both as receptor and producer.

As Omaggio Hadley (2000) pointed out, culture is claimed to be an integral part of language learning, but in reality it is often overlooked. Using artwork and studying the lives of artists allows students to examine not only values and themes of the target cultures but their own cultural biases and beliefs as well. If well developed, art activities in the foreign language classroom can meet all of the 5 Cs: communicating in a language other than English, gaining knowledge and understanding of other cultures, connecting with other disciplines and acquiring information, developing insight into the nature of language and culture, and participating in multilingual communities at home and around the world (National Standards, 1996).

Krashen's (1982) "affective filter" theory states that students' feelings and attitudes toward the subject dramatically impact their abilities to learn. Struggling language learners may find a new status in the language classroom or a new interest in language study through an assignment to create artwork, in which their artistic abilities shine. Further, students may have studied a style of art, such as portraiture or impressionism, or an artist, in another context. Their expertise in this area can give them new confidence in the foreign language setting. In fact, all of the articles surveyed reported a positive emotional response from L2 learners who studied or created artwork. The most significant component of its use may be serving to lower the

"affective filter," as has been confirmed by the authors' experiences.

Literature on Art in the Language Classroom

The links between art and culture are most obvious to L2 teachers. Thus, one would think that much would be published on the use of art in the foreign language classroom. College textbooks have traditionally included artists' biographies and featured some of their works. Recently, more college textbooks are including units with art as the content focus, including vocabulary and activities for art critique and creation. However, very little literature is available on the use of art in second language acquisition (SLA). Nearly all of it focuses on the production of student artwork rather than the use of works of art from the target culture as a vehicle for communicative activities.

Brovero (1995) discussed craft projects and their use as a basis for oral and written language activities in a second grade first language (L1) classroom, citing the enthusiasm the projects created and how they were adapted to the content studied. English-as-a-second-language (ESL) literature contains a few references to the use of art in language classrooms. Ching (1993) described how one child gained confidence and importance in the ESL classroom through picture creation activities. Diffily (1996) explained how a rock exhibit created by ESL students generated enthusiasm and greater language learning. Coloma (1996) provided a very simple survey of three articles on the topic. Carlson and Crowther (2004) noted, "For the visual spatial intelligence, students can be encouraged to . . . create craft and art projects, and make comparisons of artifacts from various cultures" (p. 8). All of these articles concluded that such projects excite student interest, positively change the classroom atmosphere, and promote language learning.

Instead of focusing on student-created art, Rucinski-Hatch (1995–1996) described the use of art by well-known American artists with ESL students of varying ages, including adults. She notes that this artwork can teach about the target culture, bridge between left-brain and right-brain activities, and form the basis for varied levels of oral and written expression in the target languages. The article gives several practical examples of how to use well-known art in the language classroom.

Classroom Observations

Experiences in the Spanish and French classes at George Fox University over a period of 3 years support the affective filter hypothesis. Spanish classes during the art unit develop a less formal atmosphere wherein students can relax, enjoy, and focus on learning about one another and Latin-American or Spanish culture through the pieces presented. Invariably, one or two students who are either very shy or at a lower proficiency level than the rest of the class find a new status or "voice" (Ching, 1993). For example, two very quiet girls became standouts in the Spanish classroom as their classmates discovered their giftedness as

painter and photographer. A student who had struggled all year long with limited fluency and vocabulary and had hesitated to participate orally because of his self-consciousness spoke enthusiastically in front of the class about his painting, its symbols, and meaning. Another student was normally reticent to participate, aware of her deficiencies in grammar. She spoke at length about the possibilities of meaning she saw in José Gamarra's painting *Cinq siècles après*, presenting ideas that the rest of the class had not even considered.

French professor Sylvette Norré prefers to use art in various activities throughout the school year, rather than as a unit. She notes that an assignment to create a self-portrait collage with 10 items, done at the beginning of the school year (from the text *Panorama de la langue française 2*, Girader & Cridlig, 1996) sets a tone of mutual respect and understanding. Students may not know one another yet, and so are allowed to share what is important to them. Each gains a sense of the other as a person, not just a language learner. Additionally, students have learned a new set of vocabulary about items of personal importance, as they know they must come to class and talk about what appears in their collage. They are motivated to talk about themselves, a standard intermediate-level task.

Practical Applications

Given all the positive benefits of exposing students to culturally appropriate works of art and creating their own art in the L2 classroom, instructors may be ready to explore the possibilities. Following are specific, practical ideas for an art unit for Spanish and French classes, beginning with using art from the target culture, followed by activities in which students create their own artwork. These ideas were used with college students, most of whom were somewhere in that very wide intermediate range, but ideas for making activities appropriate for novices and spiraling them up to advanced levels are included. Neither author considers herself particularly artistic or informed about art, but each has seen how these activities make the classroom more enjoyable and how student interest surges. The authors encourage readers to use any of these ideas as may be appropriate and adapt them to their own situations.

Several college-level Spanish texts now contain expanded units based on art and artists, with vocabulary and activities for critique and evaluation. Appendix A contains texts the authors have used. Many of the ideas in this article spring from activities in these texts, others have been adapted, and some are entirely original.

Art from the Target Culture Vocabulary Development

After observing students for several years, the authors have found that students usually have a limited art vocabulary in an L2 (and often, the L1). Therefore, vocabulary acquisi-

tion is a critical first step. Professor Norré encourages students to use a pictorial dictionary in the target language. Specific terms, such as *claroscuro* or *cubismo*, can be assigned as homework for research in a target language dictionary or encyclopedia. This activity also helps students become familiar with reference materials and can improve dictionary skills necessary for good writing.

Some texts also provide art vocabulary. *Atando cabos* and *De paseo* give the vocabulary in context in articles written about art or the artists. The instructor can, if necessary, provide a handout supplementing what the text offers. A basic list of words could include: *artist, watercolors, brush, canvas, foreground, background, monochromatic, colorful, bright, light, shadow, contrast, work of art, masterpiece*.

An art unit is not limited to discussing a work and its style or technique alone. Other vocabulary clusters that can be included have words relating to biography, history, politics, furnishings, clothing, emotions, terms of comparison and contrast, exclamations, and opinions or likes and dislikes. Episode 10 of the widely available *Destinos* video series (Annenberg, 1992) teaches basic descriptive vocabulary, such as *short, tall, blond*, etc. using works by El Greco and Velázquez in the Prado.

Activating Background Knowledge

On the first day of an art unit, the instructor can provide warm-up questions to activate background knowledge on the subject. These may be done orally in pairs, or as a class. The questions may be posed after the students have studied vocabulary at home or with a vocabulary sheet in front of them. Questions can include: "What types of art are you familiar with?" "What kind of art do you like? Why?" "Who is your favorite artist? Why?" "Are you familiar with [famous artist]?" "What is a common theme of this artist's work?"

Reading Activities

After this introductory activity, the following ideas can be used in any order. A reading assignment can be given, appropriate to the students' abilities. Many college-level L2 texts now include biographies of significant artists. These are mostly several paragraphs long, with a clear underlying structure, appropriate for intermediate level. Some graphic or visual aid is often quite naturally paired with the reading. Intermediate-high and advanced students may need more of a reading challenge. Articles about artists are readily available on the Internet as well, and foreign language magazines (such as *Américas* and *México desconocido* for Spanish) regularly feature craftspeople and artists. Artist biographies provide students input of past narration, something they will work on throughout the intermediate level, and master at the advanced level of proficiency. Instructors can structure the assignment for the appropriate level. Assignments can range from asking students to look for

specific, concrete information, to summarizing and expressing their opinions about the artist's life or work.

The *Fuentes: Lectura y redacción* text (Tuten, Caycedo, Garner, & Esterrich, 2000) includes the short story "Garabatos," by Puerto Rican author Pedro Juan Soto. It uses Puerto Rican vernacular, a challenge in itself for the students to read. It deals with the topic of nudity versus obscenity in art—a springboard for further class discussion or an essay. This activity and topic are best suited to those few students pushing high into the advanced range, as the ability to state and support one's opinion in a structured argument and discuss such abstract topics is at the superior level.

Professor Norré requires her intermediate students to visit Web sites from museums in French-speaking countries. For beginning students, a museum Web site visit could be a first exposure to artists and artwork, but it needs to be carefully structured so as not to overwhelm them with incomprehensible input. Students can be instructed to search for discrete information such as museum hours, entrance fees, and so on.

Cultural and Historical Learning

While artwork from the target cultures provides a rich basis for language development, it also creates another opportunity to study the history and culture of the target language and examine one's own cultural beliefs. A basic familiarity with well-known artists from the target culture is part of cultural competency. The following examples are for teaching Spanish and French, but the principles can be applied to other languages and cultures.

One classic work of art of Spain is Diego Velázquez's *Las meninas*. It provides a window into Spanish history, allowing students and teacher to discuss the various figures represented (including Velázquez himself), court life, the role of a royal artist and royal sponsorship of the arts, and the wealth of Spain at this time. It also provides an opportunity to apply basic art vocabulary such as foreground, self-portrait, the use of light and shading, and so forth. Students can do a fascinating comparison of this work with that of *La familia presidencial* by Fernando Botero.

Goya's *2 de mayo* and *5 de mayo* allow for similar discussion of the Napoleonic invasion and the impending feeling of doom among the Spanish populace, while using vocabulary about techniques, background, and the use of color. His *grabados* provide opportunity to discuss Spanish culture through bullfights, the conflict between church and state, and opulence enjoyed by the nobility at the expense of the lower classes.

Picasso (like many other artists) can be claimed by more than one European country, so his works can be used by teachers of both Spanish and French. *Guernica* can graphically expand the students' understanding of the

Spanish Civil War, as well as allow discussion of abstract art, cubism, and the use of symbols, for example.

The inflated figures of Colombian artist Fernando Botero delight many. He has reworked various classic Spanish paintings, including those of Goya and Velázquez. Especially rich in cultural and historical content is *La familia presidencial*. The mountain backdrop represents the Andes, the South American setting, yet the elegance of the figures suggests that they might be found in a royal European court. Students can then discuss the dominance and imitation of European models in Latin America. The significance of each figure to Colombian (and indeed, Latin American) history and politics is very clear with representatives of the military and the church in this "royal" portrait.

Diego Rivera and other Mexican muralists' works may pique student interest in the history and politics of Mexico from pre-Colombian times through the 20th century. *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda*, for example, portrays individuals from a broad period of time, including specific historical figures such as Hernán Cortés, la Malinche, Benito Juárez, Emiliano Zapata, as well as representatives of social classes including peasants, workers, and the wealthy.

There are many additional fine representative works of art and artists. This list is just a starting place for teachers who want to explore using artwork as a means to augment discussion of culture and history in the language classroom.

Listening Activities

Cassettes, sound files, video clips, or slides with audio narrations are other useful tools for enhancing the students' listening skills. A brief list of available video resources is included in Appendix B. These can be used in many ways. Intermediate students can practice listening for specific information, such as dates, names, and places, or stating the general idea of what they hear. Many types of cloze activities can be developed. Professor Berhó has used the narration script for the Goya slides, removed all preterit and imperfect verbs, written in the infinitive, and asked the students to predict which form will be used. Students self-correct as they listen to the narration cassette. These segments can also be used with advanced students to practice indirect speech, with questions like, "What did the museum guide say to Raquel about *El Conde Lucanor*?" Advanced students can also be asked to summarize discrete portions of audio-video material or make inferences about the life of the artist based on the narration.

Written and Oral Production

Works of art from the target culture can also be used to elicit both written and oral language. Rich source images include the collages of Picasso, Braque, Arman, as well as many portraits, murals and still-lives. Novices can simply identify items in the picture, as listing is a classic novice

skill. Other vocabulary clusters can be developed for the targeted skill level. Murals are wonderful for helping students practice the skill of description

Intermediate students can also create with language by talking or writing about what they see in the piece. Rucinski-Hatch (1995–96) suggested asking and answering questions, or focusing on the present progressive, skills appropriate to the intermediate level. In Georges de La Tour's *Le Tricheur*, for example, students can describe what is happening in the card game and postulate as to who is cheating, who knows what, and how the players are feeling. Further, students can talk about what feelings a piece of art evokes in them. Frida Kahlo's works are especially provocative for this type of assignment.

Description, either written or oral, can be made even more advanced, by posing questions that elicit a specific tense: "What just happened in this scene?" "What have the people in this painting done today before this scene?" "What do you think will happen next?"

Comparing and contrasting through detailed description are central advanced-level skills, although they can be done on a simpler level by intermediate students. Many modern artists, such as Botero, have redone classic works. Instructors can place the original work and the "update" side by side to elicit comparisons and contrast, either orally or in writing. Suggestions for works that might be used include Goya's *La familia de Carlos IV* and Velázquez's *Las meninas* paired with Botero's *La familia presidencial*. Girardet and Cridlig's French text *Panorama de la langue française 2* juxtaposes H. Sorgh's *Le Joueur de luth* with Miró's *Intérieur hollandais*, although neither artist is "properly" French. Students can practice comparison and contrast skills by discussing their varying feelings about each representation.

Murals can provide more advanced students the basis for political or historical discussions requiring past narration, abstract language, and hypothesizing. Rucinski-Hatch (1995–96) noted that "if" clauses can be elicited. For example, instructors can pose questions such as: "If you were a person in this painting, who would you like to be, and why?" "How would this scene change if it were painted in the year 2003? In the United States?"

Many types of oral presentations can be based on art or artists. Small groups can present the life and significant works of an artist, so the whole class is exposed to a broader group of artists. This type of activity allows practice of past narration and transitions. Another oral assignment that has proven very entertaining has been student presentations based on the following prompt: "You are the host or hostess: With two or three classmates, interview a famous artist on your talk show/news magazine program. Each group member must speak a minimum of three minutes, use a least one visual, and use the chapter vocabulary."

An additional intermediate-level writing assignment (with an added oral component) asks students to research a Latin-American or Spanish artist that the class has not studied, then write a brief biography of the artist and analyze one of his/her works using the questions above. Students are then asked to report to a classmate (or small group). This activity can be assigned to student pairs or individual students. They research and report their findings to the class, using at least one visual.

More advanced students have been given the option of writing a one- to two-page essay comparing and contrasting the lives and works of two artists, or expressing opinions about when art crosses the line to obscenity. The latter option is much more difficult, requiring students to express and support their opinions about a very abstract topic. These are superior-level skills. However, in most advanced university classes there are often several students who need this type of challenge, even if the final product is not at the superior level.

Student-Created Artwork

Another possibility for using art in the language classroom is the creation of student artwork. Beyond the collage self-portrait already mentioned, possibilities abound. The authors currently use the following guidelines when asking students to create an original piece of art: 8 ½" x 11" size; original; any medium/style (although sometimes a style under study is specified); communicate a message; sign on back; will share with class.

Students have been very creative, bringing in pencil, pen and ink, colored pencil, and crayon drawings; original photographs; collages; watercolor and oil paintings; and even some original computer-generated graphics that included digital photography. Several have had 3-D elements.

Speaking Activities

Students can describe their work orally in pairs, or volunteer to speak to the entire class. One of the most entertaining activities has been the creation of an exhibit. A "gallery" is created in the classroom, moving the chairs/tables to the center of the room and posting the works all around on the walls. During the class period, students circulate in groups of two or three around the gallery. Background music from the target culture adds to the atmosphere. Students can be instructed to respond to the pieces in several ways: practicing expressions of emotion, such as "This is fabulous!" or "That certainly is a work of art!"—discussing techniques and use of light/dark/color, or describing what each sees as the artist's message. They use the vocabulary they have been studying, express preferences and emotions, compare and contrast, and do it all in a natural and high-interest setting. Professor Defferding gives second-year students a list of questions, expressions,

and exclamations to use during this activity. This process may take an entire class period.

Writing Activities

During the art exhibit activity, students are also required to choose a piece other than their own and write a guided art critique. This may be structured to elicit writing at many levels. A sample assignment follows:

Imagine that you are art critics and that you are at an Art Show of [featured artist]. Describe the work. Include comments on the details, light, shading, color, and lines. Also consider the themes represented, emotions reflected and the message the artist wants to convey. Conclude by expressing your opinion of the work.

Students as Art Critics

Another pleasurable activity has been judging the art show. On the same class day or a subsequent one, the pieces are numbered with a nonstick note. Students receive ballots in the target language and vote on such categories as: best use of color, most creative, best abstract work, best collage, best cubist work (or other technique/style), strongest message/theme, best of show, and best use of humor. Instructors may add more categories, according to student interest or the styles and techniques studied. The instructor tallies the votes and, at the end of the unit, awards prizes. Awards can range from ribbons to candy to white elephant prizes. The authors, for instance, have given outdated Spanish videos and textbooks as prizes.

Conclusion

Presenting great art from the target culture and asking students to create original art both provide a fertile teaching opportunity. The creation of original art, as well as the considered analysis of artwork representative of target cultures provide multiple opportunities for communicative activities in the four skill areas. L2 students are exposed to important cultural and historical information in a much richer way than merely reading or listening to a lecture. Student enthusiasm and curiosity are heightened and some are empowered to contribute to the language class in a new and unique way. Not only is the use of art in the foreign language classroom sound pedagogically; it is a very enjoyable experience for students and teachers.

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