

Enhancing EFL Vocabulary through Arts

Ana María Rojas Noreña

Cindy Tatiana Hernández Quintero

Helen Milena Acevedo Muñoz

Universidad Católica Luis Amigó

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Claudia Marcela Suescún Giraldo

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Abstract

There are numerous connections between art and literacy; the combining of art and literacy uses of multiple intelligences. Children who have difficulty with linguistic intelligence may have strong artistic abilities that can compensate for language weaknesses. The ability to read a work of art can help develop the ability to read and comprehend text (Rowell, 1983). Art has the potential to be an integral part of the writing process at many stages, for all developmental levels, enabling students to organize thoughts graphically, visualize characters and settings for more detailed descriptions, sequence ideas and check for overall layout.

Regarding the methodology part, this research project is a qualitative approach that has a more holistic sight, rather than an analytical and technical one, and which was focused on action-research. We also developed some categories (EFL teaching, impact of arts, teaching through arts, and vocabulary context) during our investigation thanks to the three data collection tools (observation, journal, and interview) used along the research.

In the results, we made the connections between the four categories we found and we also highlighted the fact that the principal one is EFL teaching, because this is the base category of the other three. Finally, in the discussion part, we came to conclude that arts are a good idea in terms of developing skills such as reading, listening, and speaking; instead of writing (as we

thought at the beginning), because our population was not able to produce a lot in the writing part yet.

Introduction

Throughout history, art has provided an opportunity for learning and the exchange of ideas between different cultures and people. It challenges people to interpret and analyze complex ideas as well as demand the communication of these interpretations. As such, art catalyzes an authentic, integrative learning experience that involves social, creative, emotional, intellectual, and physical elements.

It has been evidenced that learning a second language using only text-books, emphasizing in grammar rules, and repeating the same words or sentences at the same time tend to be boring for children, especially from an early age; that is the reason why it is fundamental to carry out a study research for this current problem, because what a good teacher should do is to take advantage of learners' interest on the usage of a second language by acquiring and exploring new and interesting ways of learning and writing to appreciate how all the materials can be useful as an artistic way for producing writing.

Taking into account the aforementioned and the focus of this research, arises the interest in knowing ‘what is the impact of teaching through arts to explore creative context writing in EFL students?’. Thus, in order to find out the answer to this question we proposed a pedagogical design supported by artistic activities such as painting, music and theater, for teaching English to students between 5 to 10 years old.

Art and writing are developed in similar stages (Smout,1990), it is believed that the creative process has a positive, transforming effect. It teaches hope and when people are engaged in creating, they learn that the dimensions of their lives are without limit. Prewriting for kindergarten and early first-grade students is often a picture they draw before they write (Poindexter and Oliver, 1999); there are many who propose that integration of the arts leads to increases in student achievement. Author Eric Jensen (2001), in his book, *Arts with the Brain in Mind*, proposes the arts to be the best vehicle for helping at-risk students stay in school and succeed. However, he warns that the arts are not a quick fix or something to be implemented simply to boost test scores. Jensen claims that the arts can do more than any other discipline in that they produce more thoughtful, reflective, and creative learners.

Literature is art by itself, but is also a form of expression that connects with other types of art. It can also be seen in music, photography, painting, programs-aids, movies, theater, and drawing. Along the years, teachers have instructed students to finish their writing paper without a meaningful process, and there are several ways to express arts to influence others.

On the other hand, art can assist a teacher with many aspects of English teaching when designing writing activities through arts; moreover, it increases students’ motivation through

applying different skills when learning a second language. Art can be viewed as its own visual language and can also be a good idea to inspire the act of writing because sometimes a student just needs a really good idea to craft a worthwhile to write about. These techniques encourage students to write less so they can draw; drawing is limited by the writing instead of enhancing it. (Andrzejczak, Tranin, and Poldberg, 2005).

Great writers are great observers. It is considered as a cosmovision, focusing on small details by making connections between them. If we give a carefully look at art, we can find that it helps us to develop these observation skills; art encourages us to slow down, to look closely, and to reflect on what we see. When we accept this invitation, we are rewarded with new thoughts and perspectives; these ideas and insights provide rich material for writing. Art has the potential to be an integral part of the writing process at many stages for all developmental levels, enabling students to organize thoughts graphically, visualize characters, and make settings for more detailed descriptions.

According to Ruppert (2006), learning experiences in the arts contribute the development of academic skills, including the areas of reading, language development, and mathematics. In one of Ruppert's studies of the benefits of art on student achievement, he found out that, "certain forms of art instruction enhance and complement basic reading skills, language development and writing skills". He explains how dance has been employed to develop reading skills in very young children, and the study of music has provided a context for teaching language skills.

To conclude, the most important value of teaching English through arts was that it allowed students to explore their own creativity as well as it promoted their creativity and imagination.

Being artistic is not a prerequisite for teachers who only want to introduce arts to students, it requires a creative approach to prepare a curriculum design.

Methodology

This project was qualitative because it was concerned with capturing the richness of describing the unique complexities of data. According to Jackson, Drummond & Camara, qualitative research is concerned as understanding the human beings' experiences in an interpretive and humanistic approach (2007). As researchers we stand that qualitative research is an approach that has a holistic sight, rather than an analytical and technical one.

This research methodology was focused on action-research; and we chose this one because it is a method which is appropriate in any context when “specific knowledge is required for a specific problem in a specific situation, or when a new approach is to be grafted on to an existing system” (Cohen and Manion, 1994). For this reason, as researchers we started with a biographical observation in order to create a good environment before performing the interview taking into account that this study research was addressed to children; for what we stated some categories such as impact of arts, EFL teaching, teaching through arts and vocabulary context.

First of all, we planned to observe over three sessions in which we recalled the main ideas and reactions into the classes using our journal as a tool. Observation was an extremely handy tool for researchers in this regard. This is why research is “characterized by a prolonged period of

intense social interaction between the researcher and the subjects, in the milieu of the latter, during which time data, in the form of field notes, are unobtrusively and systematically collected” (Bogdan 1972: 3). It could allow researchers to understand much more about what goes on in complex real world situations than they can ever discover simply by asking questions of those who experience them. Then, we interacted with the students in order to ask them simple questions, taking into account that they, and their parents as well, needed to sign a concern format where they understood the reasons why we developed this research.

Besides, the idea was to create spaces for short interviews, which were the mainstay of qualitative research and, within many research approaches, they were the central method of data collection. In a few words, we could say that interviews “enable the researcher to gain complex in depth information from participants” (Wengraf 2001). Although researchers may at time strive to uncover facts, the focus of most interviews is not about getting specific answers to questions but rather to develop understanding and interpretation of people situations (Tierney and Dilley 2002, Warren 1988). |

Once parents or adults in charge accepted the concern format, we started the questionnaire by recording an (unstructured) interview to get those experiences into our research. Those, at the same time, were the instruments for achieving our study research because arts help to develop creativity and to release it whenever possible; which was what we expected to see through the students’ experiences (life stories). As researchers, we visited the workshop called “Hello Yellow” and we were into its context by observing the workshop to see how all the materials could be useful as an artistic way for producing writing. Students had the chance of expressing

themselves in such a way that they could build fluent experience without a pre-established questionnaire. Eventually, all the students' experiences were reflected on our recording interview with simple and familiar questions. Regarding the previous information, they told us how their experience had been while learning some useful writing skills through arts into a workshop environment. The idea was to contribute to the action research theory to found accurate solutions for improving EFL motivation on written skills. "Research instruments are simply devices for obtaining information relevant to your research project, and there are many alternatives from which to choose". (Wilkinson and Birmingham 2003).

Besides, triangulation was achieved in this study by examining the survey responses, observing the selected teacher directly, and following up the observations with questions generated from review of the observations and survey data.

Results

The research question of this study aimed to answer 'what is the impact of teaching through arts to explore creative context writing in EFL students?', and we have found authors that support some of the ideas that we already developed during our study research. For example,

Graves (1994) considers drawing to be a natural part of children's progression in writing; and also the Hello Yellow director stated that "We can definitely use the arts, and by the arts, I don't think it's just plastic art. I also think it's music, is dance, believe that you can use all of the arts to support and continue enhancing it all the time by student's reading and writing, it's just the way the arts keep students away another way to express themselves; so, I think that has actually helped with the reading and writing processes"; but, according to what we could observe in the Hello Yellow workshop, drawing was not directly aligned with the writing skill, due to the fact that the children we worked with were from early ages and the activities developed were designed for this population only; so, for this reason, for them was easier to develop other skills such as speaking, listening and reading more than writing.

During our research project we found the following categories: In the first category 'EFL teaching', we noticed that Hello Yellow's kids learn English in a more interactive way, which is through arts. We evidenced during our observation that teachers worry about students' personal life before beginning the class, then they make a short review of the previous class where students read the words that they write by using repetition to enhance the pronunciation of those words. (Ana's journal). In this place it is believed that the process of learning is more meaningful than just only a final result, due to there are some students which present some difficulties when learning in a school context; that is why when they participate in Hello Yellow's activities, they feel motivated and know how to overcome those difficulties to enrich their own learning.

In the next category 'Teaching through arts', we noticed that the Hello Yellow director through several investigations she realized that teaching through arts is better for kids of early ages, and that is why she decided to create her own place to teach English. When we asked her if she thinks that is possible to teach or develop writing, this is what she expressed: "I don't think that you can teach reading and writing entirely through the arts but I think that using the curriculum of using a classroom with our based activities can help supporting the writing process" (Director's interview).

In the third category 'Impact of arts', we encountered that art has a strength potential at the time of fostering different abilities in students who have some learning difficulties. This is the case of particular student who has autism, and she was able (only in Hello Yellow) to develop some skills that she was not able to manage in her school and at home. Besides, regarding this issue, the director stood: "We recently decided to take children that were a little bit older we have one particular case over a child that has a diagnosis of autism so we decided to work with her as well and we have seen that through the English classes she is getting more comfortable with her level of English and her mother is also having a summary because of the feedback at home and she is using English more try to find objects into speaking complete sentences" (Director's interview). Finally, we could conclude that the research place added a touch of arts when they teach English to encourage students as a strong motivation to develop activities in a more meaningful way, improving at the same time the target language.

Last, in the final category 'Vocabulary context' we realized that Hello Yellow students developed mostly their listening and speaking skills but the research place also gave an

opportunity for children to continue fostering their reading and writing skills by giving them an important sense, not only learning grammar itself. Children were immerse in a context where everything they learned about was associated with the things they were surrounded by without the need of translation as a mean to understand because in this case, English is not a tool but a mean to interact among others.

Discussion

Given the previous results, we evidenced the connection between these categories in the research project supported by Ruppert's idea (2006) which stands that learning experiences into arts contribute to the development of academic skills by including different areas of reading language development. In this research we found that all the categories have connections among the others, but we could say that our category base was 'EFL teaching', since our principal objective was the English teaching and we connected it with our second purpose that was art; which, for teachers, might present an invaluable tool for facilitating the instruction of language learning because this represents a very different way of understanding learning (and more for children, who were the target population for this research).

In our first category 'EFL teaching', we have found the importance of developing good and meaningful strategies with children, where they can find out the importance of learning and, in this case, by implementing arts in different ways with the main idea of fostering and enhancing the target language; due to most of them study in bilingual schools, so at least there they are in direct touch with English and they are able to maintain trivial conversations and to follow instructions regarding the academic field.

Second, in the next category 'Teaching through arts', we have found that it is critical to provide children an exposure to a variety of learning opportunities and styles, different kinds of adult mentors and role models by giving possibilities for positive relationships among peers, parents, and other adults. The art community is a rich reservoir in this regard. So, arts are windows on a world wide in the same way that science helps us to see the world that surrounds us. Literature, music, theater, visual arts, media aids (films, photography, and television), architecture, and dance reveal aspects about ourselves, the world around us, and the relationship between both. The study of the arts helps students to develop a sense of judgment, of choosing, and of asserting their choices. Only they can decide how they wish to interpret a passage. This is a quality of the self that cannot be "taught" but must be developed by placing art within the language classroom setting and enabling them to express their ideas visually as well as by speaking and writing. Children get motivated with the things they enjoy and they like to do the most; also, they need to have self-confidence and low anxiety in order to have better results and not to create any mental block which will affect them in their future; this is what Stephen

Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis (1970) stands, that one obstacle manifested during language acquisition is influenced by emotional variables which can prevent learning.

In our third category 'Vocabulary context', we have established that most educators agree in the way that arts can engage diverse learners and provide themselves with different opportunities to share among others. There are several tools for educational improvement which consist in giving a meaningful usage into the vocabulary development skills, so when it concerns arts students are required to carefully notice, analyze and interpret diverse texts by thinking critically, proposing problems, making decisions and generating multiple solutions. Thus, the development of these capacities make students better learners. Children who have difficulty in written and/or oral language may find that artistic expression might help them to organize their thoughts and rehearse their means of expressing them (Hoyt,1992).

Finally, in our last category 'The impact of arts', it was evidenced that arts served to motivate students, to facilitate the development of ideas, to provide rehearsal and to help finishing the structure of those ideas for later written pieces. Education becomes more integrated and conceptually rich, where students can learn and retain more; where harder data is needed to convince those in charge of funding programs that arts are not a frivolity or add-on the curriculum.

However, this project had a special consideration regarding the COVID-19, because during the contingency we had to stop assisting to the research place, so this led us to decrease the number of participants to continue with the research through some other modifications at the

time of carrying out the techniques of data collection tools, such as virtual interviews and modified questionnaires. Also, there are some recommendations for future research that include envisioning studies with a larger sample size of students. Qualitative studies should also be conducted to measure the impact of arts on student writing achievement. Future studies might also benefit from observing teachers at regular intervals throughout the school year to gain a more complete view of the teacher's instructional practices. Teachers also need to be informed of current brain research studies and their educational implications.

The purpose of the study was to determine how arts and writing were connected, but due to the findings during the research project, we concluded that through arts could enhance better the other skills such as speaking, listening and reading especially in early ages, because our target population was not ready yet to develop very structured writing skills as we thought at the beginning of the research.

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