

Integrating the Arts to Facilitate Second Language Learning

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Abstract

The arts as a core content area are integral to a well-rounded education. The arts have a profound ability to enrich the lives they touch and can be an invaluable tool for teachers at all levels to enhance instruction for English Language Learners. English Language Learners (ELLs) or Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in New York State enter the public school facing the multiple challenges of learning English, mastering academic content, bridging distances between the home country and their new home, and negotiating new cultural and social contexts. By integrating the arts and art making into English language teaching and learning, students will develop and deepen their understanding of their own and others' human experience. In combination with reading, writing, speaking and listening, the arts can open doors for high levels of analysis and also challenge students to explore themselves and their surroundings, and thus find avenues for sophisticated comprehension and communication. The arts convey what it means to be human, challenge the intellect and provide rich experiences in analysis, exploration, reflection, observation, imagination, experimentation, and communication.

Keywords:

Arts

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1 Introduction

For ELL/LEP students, it is imperative to make teaching and learning culturally relevant and to enable access to prior knowledge upon which new skills and concepts can be built. It is critical for educators to understand the ways in which students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds profoundly influence their experiences in the classroom. The visual arts enhance language development by offering non-verbal methods for communication and understanding and by providing a platform for students to create mental images. Integrating the arts into language arts and the content areas for ELLs can give students the opportunity to engage in new and varied approaches while gaining positive emotional responses to learning, understanding others and communicating their own ideas (Moore, Koller, and Arago, 1994).

2 The Arts as Core Content

The arts as a core content area are integral to a well-rounded education. Additionally, a movement to integrate the arts across the curriculum will showcase their contribution to critical areas of learning and their relevance in our schools; it is hopeful that all teachers of ELLs will find continued value participating in professional development aimed at incorporating the arts in classrooms as effective tools for reaching students (Moore, Koller, and Arago, 1994). Opportunities to practice the arts benefit students' cognitive development and enhance literacy and language development. Students from highly diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds with varying academic needs thrive in programs that incorporate the universal language of art elements and

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images; access multiple intelligences; and encourage critical and conceptual thinking along with technical and creative problem-solving skills. Students engaged in quality arts curricula develop confidence and find outlets for individuality and self-inquiry. While engaging in a variety of learning styles, their imaginations and visual awareness are stimulated and they learn to understand the work of others and express their own point of view (Moore, Koller, and Arago, 1994).

3 The Process of Second Language Learning

Krashen (1988) theorized that English language learners come into the learning environment with a set of conditions that affect the process of their second language acquisition. The conditions to be considered are the learner's: (a) age, (b) mindset, (c) personality type, and (d) ability to process input of the English language. His theory implies that the input provided by the teacher must be comprehensible, and if not provided with context clues and gestures, the student will have difficulty with comprehension.

Considering the factors that enhance second language learning, it is intuitive that in order for the English language learner to acquire language, the environment must be established on optimal learning conditions. Krashen (1988) maintained that these learning conditions should include direct comprehensible input and the opportunity for social interaction as a way to rehearse the acquiring language. When you reflect on the importance for teachers to be mindful of Krashen's theory of "optimal learning conditions" when planning instruction, you can understand how by integrating the arts in the curriculum would not only motivate the learner but facilitates second language learning by inspiring new and creative ideas based on the language experience presented through the arts as a stimulus.

4 The Challenges Faced by the Second Language Learner

The challenges faced by ELLs are many. Coleman and Goldenburg (2010) emphasized that the ultimate challenge faced by ELLs in all-English instruction is learning academic content while trying to become proficient in English. Coleman and Goldenburg (2010) maintained that because of this challenge, many educators do not know to what extent ELLs can keep pace academically with English speakers; nonetheless, the goal should be to make academic content as accessible as possible for these students and promote English language development as students learn academic content.

5 The Arts Content - Integral to Education

Through the arts, young people have opportunities to develop their voices; enhance multicultural awareness; take pride in heritage; and recognize their role in, respond to, and participate in the world at large.

Rucinski-Hatch (1996) affirmed that by placing art within the context of the lives of ELLs and enabling them to express their ideas visually as well as by speaking and writing, teachers can:

- Build on prior knowledge.
- Scaffold instruction.
- Create a bridge between written and spoken language.
- Make learning relevant and meaningful.
- Help students develop self-esteem.
- Foster creativity.
- Develop an appreciation of the past.
- Highlight similarities and differences.
- Foster higher order thinking skills.
- Promote high levels of analysis, reasoning, and questioning.
- Support creative thinking.
- Model problem solving.
- Emphasize interpreting and communication of ideas.
- Enhance students' ways of observing, responding to, and representing the world.

6 Arts Integration & Second Language Learning

How are we to incorporate art and ESL? Pearce (1997) provided a well-designed activity to demonstrate how to integrate the arts in a lesson. First, we begin by selecting paintings that lend themselves to this activity. Which paintings are appropriate depends on the level of the students and the focus of the lesson. This activity can be used at all levels of ESL and can be adapted to meet the particular needs of the students. For very beginning level students (those students who are beginning literacy), paintings should be chosen that show figures and depict activity and movement. This enables the students to discuss the “who-questions”. “Who are these people?” “What are they doing?” Students should work together in groups of at least two but not more than four. When the students are given their assigned painting, the title should be covered. They should be told to examine the painting, discuss it and write a story together about it. A handout prepared by the instructor should be distributed. This provides a guided composition format for the students to work from. The instructor can spend some time with each group as they discuss the story of the painting and write their answers. They should be instructed to take only their answers from the handout and combine these answers to form a composition. Each group may then present their painting and composition to the rest of the class. The actual title of the painting can then be revealed and students can compare their title with that given by the artist. The teacher can give a short biography of the artist (Preece, 1997).

Following are sample questions for handout for lesson concentrating on “wh” questions and vocabulary development:

1. *Who are these people?*
2. *Where are they?*
3. *What are they doing?*

This plan could be modified according to the needs of the group. For example, the instructor may wish to do this as a whole-class activity using a slide or poster rather than a print in an art book. The focus of the lesson might be simply on “wh-questions” or the present progressive. At the more advanced level, questions emphasizing the present perfect tense, past tense, “if” clauses, etc. might be included. For students at the very beginning level (non-literate), the teacher may want to do this as strictly an oral activity. The teacher has the freedom to structure this activity as she or he deems appropriate.

7 Conclusion

The arts have a profound ability to enrich the lives they touch and can be an invaluable tool for teachers at all levels to enhance instruction for English Language Learners. The visual arts enhance language development by offering non-verbal methods for communication and understanding and by providing a platform for students to create mental images. Integrating the arts into language arts and the content areas for ELLs can give students the opportunity to engage in new and varied approaches while gaining positive emotional responses to learning, understanding others and communicating their own ideas (Moore, Koller, and Arago, 1994). Therefore, it is my recommendation as an educator and researcher of many years that classroom teachers of ELLs and even general and special education teachers devote time when planning instruction on thinking of creating a learning environment in which not only are they fostering the content objective but that this learning environment is one that is diversified, personally addressing the learners need and interest. I believe that by integrating some of all forms of the arts in the classroom we will help to facilitate in the process of cultural and language acquisition while making the classroom experience fun!

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