

An art-based approach to teaching English language speaking skills

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Abstract

Learning to speak in a foreign language can be a very challenging task for learners. This could be due to the way speaking is taught, the lack of motivation or limited opportunities to practice the foreign language. Visual art has been found to provide a creative and imaginative platform for communication that can stimulate learner involvement and motivation. This study attempted to measure the impact of an art-based approach on teaching English language speaking skills to intensive English language program students at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman. The researchers used the one-group pretest and posttest research design. The themes of the art work were based around the 17 sustainable development goals. The results showed a significant improvement in students' speaking ability and overall language level. In addition, the learners were enthusiastically involved in the language learning process. The findings of the study assert the positive impact of visual art on speaking in particular and language proficiency in general.

Keywords: *English language teaching; Oman; speaking skills; using art to teach English.*

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language has always been a big challenge. Many factors contribute to the complexity of the task such as limited exposure, the absence of a clear goal for learning the language, limited number of classroom hours, etc. This often results in low motivation which in turn leads to low achievement. Numerous studies have been written about the low proficiency levels among learners in Oman (Al-Issa, 2020; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman 2018). Some of the reasons behind this low achievement is the use of conventional methods of teaching (Al Muhaimed, 2013; Teemant, 2010). Recent research has tried to find creative and innovative approaches to make foreign language learning experience more interesting and effective. Art has been long used as a vehicle for learning other subjects (Lastra, 2017). This wide spread use is due to the fact that art is a neutral vehicle for learning as it provides students with content to create, analyze and talk about. Art conveys what it means to be a human being, challenges the intellect and provides rich experiences in analysis, exploration, reflection, observation, imagination, experimentation, and communication (De Jesus, 2016). In addition, art has been found effective in developing children's motivation in learning, developing their knowledge through multicultural art, developing their attitudes to the art, and developing art language (Al-Amri et al.2016, p.59). McMahon, Klopper, and Power (2014:2) argue that “learning through art enhances students’ social, emotional and academic outcomes, as well as their knowledge and understanding”, aspects which reflect the whole learner approach to education. Art gives learners the opportunity to contemplate and express their emotions and values (Gibson, 2003). In language education, art has the potential to engage student learning in a meaningful and enjoyable way (Werff, 2003), thus enhancing their English proficiency (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2012) as well as increasing their motivational level (Ekoç, 2020). Motivation is key in the language learning process especially in contexts where the target language is learned as a foreign language. In such contexts art provides the learners with a meaningful and enjoyable content for using the language to communicate their views using the target linguistic forms (Werff, 2003). However, art involves hard work, persistence and perseverance (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2012). Students need to have a clear purpose and guidance. There are also certain skills students need to acquire such as noticing, analysis and interpretation.

This research study attempted to investigate the use of visual art as a potentially engaging subject for improving learners’ speaking skills based on the premise that art provides a creative and imaginative platform for communication. For many students, speaking remains a challenging task. This is especially true for low level learners who often lack the linguistic competence and possibly also motivation to speak the foreign language. Looking at a picture, singing a song, or even getting involved in a dance sequence, all provide new learning opportunities and challenges to students (Lloyd, 2017, p. 6). According to Chi (2017, p. iv), “arts serve as a stimulus, refresher, guider and facilitator in English language learning”.

Different approaches have been proposed for teaching speaking skills. These range from direct approaches that draw students' attention to conversational rules and linguistic features of the language, to indirect approaches that are based on the students' acquiring conversational competence through meaningful tasks. The latter have gained more popularity recently influenced by the calls for developing learners' communicative competence. In the process of introducing a creative activity in the form of art, students engage with the activity because of the self-enjoyment and satisfaction that art brings to them and not for getting a physical reward (Ben-Chetrit, 2014). This intersects with the modern approaches to language teaching which emphasize that learners best acquire language by interacting with the social and physical world around them. As Žemberová (2014) states, "integrating the arts and language learning in the classroom not only increases the students' understanding of art but also allows them the opportunity to look at, listen to, talk about, share and create art. It can also enhance and develop their foreign language vocabulary and language skills" (p.243). Thulasivanthana (2020) conducted an experimental study on "participants [who] were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups, each consisting of eleven students." (p. 53) in order to examine the usefulness of integrating visual arts into English language teaching. The students in the experimental group outperformed students in the control group in the four English skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking). The students in the experimental group reported that incorporating visual arts into English learning helped them recall the lessons they learned and increased their motivation to learn the English language. The findings of this study "assert that the use of visual arts in the English language classrooms attracts learners' interests, offers a meaningful context for the learners, and stimulates the students to become more enthusiastically involved in the language learning process" (Thulasivanthana, 2020, p. 54).

2. Methodology

2.1. Context and Participants

The study aimed at examining the effect of teaching the English language through art on students' speaking skills. The research targeted students who were studying intensive English courses in the foundation program at the Center for Preparatory Studies (CPS) at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman in Fall 2021. It was applied to the students in level one (FPEL0120), specifically in the listening and speaking course. This is the lowest proficiency level. Students received 18 hours of English instructions per week (6 hours writing skills, 6 hours reading skills, 6 hours listening and speaking skills). There was one experimental group (21 students) that was taught listening and speaking using art, and one control group (20 students) which followed the traditional course materials. Two out of the six hours assigned for the listening and speaking skills were dedicated to cover the art-based materials for the experimental group. The groups were taught by two different teachers.

2.2. Procedure and Instruments

The study employed the one-group pretest-posttest design in measuring the impact of the art-based approach on students' speaking skills. The experimental group was taught speaking using art. The course material was based on the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) agreed upon by 193 world nations and announced by the UNESCO in 2015. These 17 themes address the global challenges that humanity faces. These were chosen for their universality and potential interest among university students. Students were guided to work in pairs and choose a sustainable development goal which they thought was important to raise people's awareness about and relate it to the Omani context to create an art work. Instruction followed a working model developed by the research team which consisted of four stages: Explore, Develop, Express and Share (EDES). In the *Explore* stage, the students learned about the 17 UN SDGs and understood their meanings and impact. In the next stage *Develop*, they proposed a plan of action to tackle one of the themes which they thought could affect their local community. In the *Express* stage, students had to decide on a type of art work they thought was best to use to express their thoughts/suggestions about the chosen theme. The implementation started at the beginning of the fall semester 2021 and lasted for eight weeks.

A speaking pre-test and a post-test were developed by the research team and administered to the experimental group in weeks one and eight. The test consisted of an art work the students had to describe orally using some guiding questions. The researchers used two comparable versions of the test for pre and post testing. The students' answers were independently recorded and marked by a third teacher based on an assessment rubric that contained criteria related to fluency and accuracy. The total mark was out of 20.

3. Results and Discussion

The results show a positive impact of art on students' speaking ability in the experimental group. The pre and post test results indicated that the students' improved in both aspects of speaking. The average score of the pre-test was 9.2 (Standard deviation =1.1) and increased to 14.8 (Standard deviation = 1.5) in the post-test. The paired samples t-test showed a statistically significant improvement. The criteria related to fluency improved from 5.80 to 8.83 (out of 12), while those related to accuracy improved from 3.42 to 5.97 (out of 8). The degree of improvement was very similar in both. In order to get an insight about the impact of the art-based approach on students' overall language level, the researchers looked into the total course marks (out of 100) for the experimental group and compared them with those of students following the traditional approach. The results showed that the students in the experimental group significantly outperformed their counterparts in the other group, according to the t-test, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: T-test results for art-based and traditional teaching classes

Section	N	M	SD	T	Significant	Cohen's d
Art-based teaching group	21	82.30	5.93	1.90	.033	5.07
Traditional teaching group	20	79.30	3.97			

The results suggest that art has the potential to enhance the language of description and comparison because it allows learners the opportunity to explore and express their thoughts and opinions. This finding supports the claim that art can be very effective for struggling students (Rabkin and Redmond, 2006). Expressing ideas and feelings through art is of immense value as a way to respect, explore and share the traditions of different cultures. The findings of this study corroborate those by Ekoç (2020) who found that the works of art motivated students, helped improve their critical thinking and improved their appreciation of art.

Gains in the experimental group went well beyond test scores. The art-integrated lessons energized the class teacher who was very enthusiastic about her lessons and about learning more about the SDGs in order to sustain students' interest and accommodate their questions. The teacher became a resource for students' art works and accepted a new leadership role in developing supplementary materials and supporting and directing students' work. This was a true indicator of her passion about the approach. In addition, the participating teacher, the director of the Center for Preparatory Studies and other teachers who attended the students' art exhibition expressed fascination with the art works. The students produced art works around their chosen SDG's and linked them to the Omani context. It was clear from the magnificent art works they produced and the presentations they gave that they had understood what the SDG's meant and what actions were needed to realize them. Such meaningful language use transcends mechanical reproduction of the target language that conventional speaking exercises tend to promote. This is moving away from teaching speaking through practicing language patterns to communicative language use. As stated earlier, the development of CPS' students' expression and creativity are key program objectives. We believe that this art-based approach helped realize those objectives.

4. Conclusion

Learning how to speak fluently and accurately in another language can be a big challenge. The task is exacerbated in situations where the target language is learned as a foreign language. In such contexts, motivation is key in the learning process. Therefore, educators need to think of creative ways to engage students in the language. The findings of this study clearly show that visual art has the potential to engaged students and enhance their speaking. Art provides learners with a meaningful and enjoyable opportunity to use the language to communicate their views using the linguistic forms.

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