

Visual Arts and the Art of Writing

Art's subject is the human clay
(W. H. Auden, "Letter to Lord Byron")

Using the visual arts to teach writing in English to foreign university students is a student-centred process that requires a multidisciplinary approach in order to give the learner a comprehensive view of knowledge. This can be done in, at least, two different ways: literary texts prompted by works of art can be discussed, or the work of art can be used to trigger the students' imagination and lead them to produce their own texts.

This article focuses on the second possibility, since this is a hands-on approach to art as a way into writing. We chose to illustrate this technique by describing some ideas that can be put into practice to motivate students to engage in a variety of writing activities in the English as a Foreign Language class.

We began by choosing the following materials:

The Pop '60s – Transatlantic Crossing, an exhibition held at Centro Cultural de Belém in Lisbon, in 1997; and

Woman Lying Down by José de Guimarães.

The Pop '60s — Transatlantic Crossing featured works from several modern art museums and private collections, namely the Berardo Collection and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Collection. This exhibition about the Pop Art movement included works by famous artists such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg and Robert Rauschenberg, among many others.

Pop Art, which was a largely British and American cultural phenomenon of the late 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, was defined by Richard Hamilton (the British artist who was the first to use the term Pop in a 1956 collage) in a letter to Peter and Alison Smithson as being “popular [designed for a mass audience], transient [short-term solution], expendable [easily forgotten], low cost, mass produced, young [aimed at youth], witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, and big business” (Hamilton 1982:28).

Any form of art that expresses itself by using “the most accessible and immediately recognizable signs and symbols of contemporary culture” (Livingstone 1997: 13) is bound to attract the students’ curiosity and interest. In fact, Pop Art’s unusual features can be turned into challenging writing activities and, like all visual arts, it can help foster the language learning process by actively involving the students. Engaging imaginatively with the work of art shifts the focus of the learning process away from an analytic, structure-based, mechanical approach to language towards a more personal, emotional response, which finds expression in writing (Cf Collie and Slater 1992: 3-10).

At the same time, as students are often not fully aware of the range of writing activities and topics available to them, we feel that using the visual arts (in this case, reproductions of well-known Pop Art paintings) in the EFL class gives them the opportunity to choose from a wider selection of tasks and topics and may be an added motivation for writing.

Students must be able to understand the role played by the written word in modern societies. The need for writing is very extensive, but nearly half of the world’s population cannot read or write to a functionally adequate level, and approximately one-fifth of the world’s population is totally non-literate (cf Grabe & Kaplan 1996: 5-6). Nevertheless, in literate societies, many people engage in writing activities of some kind every day, which show their ability to control the written medium of language. These are largely work-related (involving texts such as questionnaires, memos, professional articles, business letters etc), but may also be undertaken for more personal reasons (i.e. shopping lists, personal diaries, letters, poems or short stories).

The way in which writing (of whatever sort) is approached in real life depends on a series of factors: the context (who writes what, when, for what purpose); the audience (who we are addressing), and the function or purpose of the text. We write to communicate, to call attention, to identify, to remember, to introspect or to create, be it in terms of

recombining different information available to us or in terms of aesthetic form. Students will have to realise that not all activities serve purposes outside the classroom or are addressed to audiences other than those made up of teacher and fellow students.

Looking back at established practices within the educational system, we see that the teaching of writing, be it in the first, second or foreign language, is only now beginning to be treated more seriously. The traditional approach to the teaching of writing put the emphasis on

correct usage, correct grammar, and correct spelling, and focus[ed] on the topic sentence, the various methods of developing the paragraph (...) and the holy trinity of unity, coherence, and emphasis.

(Britton 1996:30)

This led to certain assumptions, among which

the Romantic conviction that the creative aspects of the process [writing] are mysterious, inscrutable, and hence unteachable. What can be taught and discussed are the lesser matters of style, organization, and usage.

(Ibid)

This is brought home to us when we consider writing in EFL. Students have often been expected to focus mostly on correct grammar, spelling, and usage. In the mid 1960s, however, there was a shift that led to the distinction between process and product (cf Grabe & Kaplan 1996: 30-35).

Writing began to be seen as something that can be taught beyond the mere aspects of correct grammar and spelling. The teaching of writing moved from being teacher-centred to becoming student-centred. Special attention was given to the discontinuities between home and school uses of language. It is now generally accepted that the various registers used and demanded by the educational system at all levels are often very different from those students use in their home environment. This means that writing is seen as a process that combines complementary perspectives. Time must be spent on planning, prewriting, revising and editing to improve writing. To achieve this, students learn to move from writing for themselves to writing for an audience. They have to be made aware that writing, just like speaking, listening or even reading, is a skill that is used together with the other language skills to convey meaningful communication, and as such cannot be seen, or for that matter taught,

in isolation. This reflects the whole-language perspective, a movement which Halliday anticipated when he wrote, as early as 1978: “We learn to speak because we want to do things that we cannot do otherwise; and we learn to read and write for the same reason” (Halliday 1978: 205).

In our article we are mostly concerned with writing in EFL and with writing as a process, writing understood as composing, in the sense that students are encouraged to perceive the difference between writing a shopping list and writing an academic essay, which in a way encapsulates the difference between mere functional literacy and writing as a complex multi-faceted activity. Basic skills like the ones needed to write a shopping list or filling in a form are completely different from those required for the planning and writing of an essay. Essay-writing involves transforming, combining many pieces of information, and weighing up various rhetorical options and constraints (cf Grabe & Kaplan 1996: 5).

It is also essential that students understand that writing abilities are not naturally acquired. This will make them realise that they have to work hard and practise as much as possible; in short, they have to write if they want to improve their writing. Writing involves skills that have to be taught, practised, and acquired with experience. No set of instructions or list of points will instantly provide students with the ability to write well. And though it is true that the teaching of writing as process is student-centred, it is also important to acknowledge the role of the teacher as facilitator of learning.

Seen as a process, writing encourages self-discovery and the development of an “authorial voice”, and it becomes meaningful when the topics used to generate the activity are of interest to the student. Thus, the roles of informational content and personal expression are balanced with those of grammar and usage.

With this in mind, and going back to the activities we devised to be carried out with our students, we asked them to form groups according to their choice of one from a number of paintings from *The Pop '60s* exhibition. Students worked in small groups and each group was given a cut-up jigsaw puzzle of the painting they had chosen.

The activities we suggested were based on the notion that there are many different sorts of writing abilities. For Andy Warhol's *Judy Garland* (1979), the suggestion was to write a cosmetics advertisement to be published in a glossy fashion magazine and in a quality newspaper, while for Wayne Thibaud's *Pies, Pies, Pies* (1961) and *Boston Cremes* (1962) students had to devise two advertisements for a diabetes prevention campaign to be published in a monthly magazine for educated readers.

These ads were expected to abide by international advertising rules (cf Rabley 1996: 5) and students had to bear in mind the adequacy of the advertised product to the target market. Thus, they had to create a mood which fitted the product by answering the basic question: “Who writes what to whom, for what purpose, why, when, where, and how?” (Cooper 1979, 1996: 30). The ads had to use specific language features, including short, clever, easy-to-remember phrases or slogans, all of which had to be directly linked to the painting. Students were also reminded of the language functions, namely the persuasive function that language has in advertising.

For Claes Oldenburg’s *Five Studies for Cigarette Butts* (1966) and Andy Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Can* (1965), the challenge was to personify the objects depicted in the paintings and turn them into the narrators of their own stories. Thus, the cigarette butts were given identities and names and engaged in a dialogue that the students had to write and act out, while the can of tomato soup told the story of its life. Special emphasis was laid on dialogue writing (i.e. turn-taking, and conversational rules and structures) and narrative techniques (e.g. first-person v. third-person narrator, etc).

To round up this activity, students had to do their own research on Pop Art and the artist whose painting they had worked on. The information they managed to gather was brought to class, shared and discussed.

The second activity was based on a painting, *Mulher Deitada* (*Woman Lying Down*) (1981) by José de Guimarães, a contemporary Portuguese painter.

Woman Lying Down is a completely different kind of painting from those selected for the first set of activities, in that it is less figurative (and thus more difficult to interpret and understand) than the paintings by Pop artists discussed in class. With that in mind, the activity we devised for this work was divided into two different steps.

Students were first introduced to the basics of the silk-screen technique. They were asked to bring to class a variety of unusual materials ranging from bits of fabric, dry leaves, Styrofoam, empty milk cartons, glue, etc. Each group was given one piece of the painting which had been cut up into twelve parts. With the materials brought to class, students were free to use their imagination and creativity to make a new version of the section of the painting they had received. Each section was printed by using a simplified version of the silk-screen technique they had been

taught. All the twelve new sections were mounted onto a large cardboard and fitted together so as to form an unusual version of *Woman Lying Down*. Students were then faced with the two versions of the painting, the one they had created and the original one. They actively engaged in a discussion of the representation of the woman in both versions of the painting, using Guimarães' words as a starting point: "The artist must be given the freedom to question. Total freedom is essential for all creativity" (Guimarães 2000: 14). The original version of the painting was contextualised with a mural about the Portuguese painter's life and work.¹

After arousing students' interest by involving them in such an unusual activity (and, as far as we know, this was the first time the silk-screen technique was used in an EFL class at the Lisbon Faculty of Letters), we then asked them to imagine a story based on their own interpretation of the original painting. Narrative techniques were again discussed by students who were given total freedom to write their stories.

All in all, we feel that the students' response to the use of art as a way into writing was highly gratifying. When we devised these activities our aim was twofold: firstly, to help students to improve their writing in EFL in a stimulating, creative and educationally useful way that involved all of them; and secondly to help them realise how inspiring and rewarding art can be both inside and outside the classroom. We felt that students were not only motivated by the interaction of art and language but that they enjoyed themselves while learning that words and images are inseparable as they are both an extension of life.

This was a risk worth taking and, challenging though it was, it proved Guillaume Apollinaire's point in the following poem:

'Tis too high
 Come to the edge
 We might fall
 Come to the edge
 So they came to the edge
 And he pushed them
 And they flew.

¹ We would like to thank Cristina Carvalho and Helena Madureira who taught the silk-screen technique to the students, and who devised the mural on José de Guimarães' s life and work.

We knew it was too high, and that they might fall. But with these activities we pushed them to the edge – and they flew.

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