Incorporating Visual Arts into English Language Teaching

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Abstract

Most English language learners in SVIAS consider learning English as a complex, tiresome, and uninteresting endeavor. They face unprecedented trials and tribulations in learning English as an additional language. Therefore, finding ways to stimulate learner involvement and motivation has become important for English language teachers. Current teaching methods, materials, and resources seem inadequate to fulfill the students’ attitudes, skills, interests, and needs. This experimental study examines whether integrating visual arts activities contributes to positive results for the students who would like to improve their English language skills. In addition to the experimental study, classroom observations were conducted. Arts can make learning exciting, unforgettable, and interesting. The advantages of incorporating arts in education have been extensively delineated in recent studies. Using arts in English language teaching helps to make learning exciting and unforgettable, decrease language learning anxiety, improve classroom atmosphere, increase memory and motivation, and build rapport with learners. This study aims to show the impacts of using contents visual arts in the English language classroom. The findings can assist English language teachers in promoting the use of contents related to visual arts in English class to cater to a range of preferences, strengths, and learning styles.

Keywords: English, Learning, Visual arts, Benefits, Learning styles and Incorporate

Introduction

Traditional methods of teaching the English language are not adequate to fulfill the requisites of the students who study visual and performing arts because they have a passion for artistic, dynamic, and meaningful education. According to Goldberg (2017), arts offer a congenial and essential channel to share feelings, knowledge, and experiences when studying a second language and trying to fit into a foreign culture. Chi (2017) elucidates that arts can act as a stimulus, refresher, facilitator, and guide, create an affinity between the students and lecturers and stimulate the students to learn creatively and think widely. Eubanks (1997) points out that arts can be beneficial in nurturing verbal development, and as the students become involved in activities related to arts, they are likely to become more interested in the subject matter itself. As a result, increasing attention has been focused on incorporating arts content in various subjects.

Research Questions

• Does incorporating contents related to visual arts in English language teaching motivate English language learners the students who study Visual & Technological Arts?
• Does including contents related to visual arts in English language teaching improve listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills of the students who study Visual & Technological Arts?
Research Hypothesis

Those who study Visual & Technological Arts in SVIAS are visual learners. Though they like written instructions, they learn effectively by reading information offered through visual mediums such as paintings, drawings, photos, texts with images, posters, graphs, maps, diagrams, videos, etc. They are most motivated when the subject matter is relevant to their interests. Therefore, this research hypothesizes, including contents related to visual arts in language learning, motivate the students who study Visual & Technological Arts and improve their listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills.

Literature Review

Ballesteros, P.A., et al. (2018) define visual arts as all of what can be seen and perceived in art forms such as drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking, ceramics, design, crafts, photography and video. They explain that visual arts inspire students, stimulate critical thinking, and provide a range of effective tools for teachers. Thus, employing materials related to visual arts is effective in the classroom as an approach to teaching various subjects.

Several studies exemplify that visual arts improve academic achievement. Deasy (2002) indicates that engaging visual arts allow readers to visualize and interpret the text and engaged readers more fully in content. Visual images direct the students to enhance their comprehension of reading passages and adjust their reading skills accordingly. Usually, in English language classrooms, underachieving students are more reluctant to write because they regard themselves as unproductive writers. Visual arts for many students do not generate a similar situation. Donovan & Pascale (2013) note that whenever visual images are presented in writing sessions, the students write extensive details and rich ideas. A study conducted by Bayri (2010) concludes that students appreciate the use of visual arts in speaking classroom. Consequently, the proficiency level of the students increased.

Humans are visual animals. Although we can process kinesthetic and auditory information, we take more information visually than through any other senses because the visual mechanisms of the memory are strong. Visual aids are not only powerful retention tools of the curriculum but also facilitate to surge understanding (Wolfe, 2011). Several studies confirm how well the mind processes and recollects visual information.

Gardner (1999) outlines eight kinds of intelligence comprising linguistic intelligence, musical intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence. By the time children start school, they have possibly recognized ways of learning which align more along the lines of certain intelligence than the other. Gardner’s spatial intelligence signifies the skill to perceive the visual-spatial universe precisely. This intelligence includes responsiveness to the line, figure, design, space, color and the connections that exist between these aspects. Learners with spatial intelligence prefer designing, drawing, visualizing, and doodling (Armstrong, 2009).

Every student learns differently. The VARK model, developed by Neil Fleming and Charles Bonwell, specifies four different learning styles: visual, aural, read/write, and kinesthetic. So, teachers should reflect on a variety of learning styles when selecting and preparing teaching and learning resources. Incongruities between teaching methods and leaning styles cause boredom and inattentiveness among students (Varela, et al. 2010). Therefore, a particular set of obstructive strategies is not efficacious with all learners. Teachers should admit learner differences and utilize stratagems that cater to the learners who study Visual Arts. This will enable the learners to employ their dominant or mostly developed intelligence.

Methodology

Sample

This study was conducted with the students in the department of Visual & Technological Arts. Twenty-two participants were selected using random sampling. All of them were informed about the research intended to be carried out during their studies. The participants were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups, each consisting of eleven students.
Details of the Research Tools and Procedure

The research tools were pretest and post-test. Pretest and post-test included tests of listening, reading, writing, and speaking. The total test duration is one hour. Listening, reading, and writing components were completed with no breaks between them, and the speaking test was conducted on another day. Both groups were pre-tested for assessing their abilities in listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills using traditional testing methods. The participants listened to a ten minutes conversation between two people set in an everyday social context and answered the questions as they listened. Reading section took about twenty minutes to answer a passage taken from a pre-intermediate English exercise book. In twenty-five minutes long writing task, the participants were required to write an essay using at least two hundred words. The speaking test was five minutes long. The participants were asked general a range of familiar topics. Then, the participants of the experimental group were taught by using contents related to visual arts. Teaching materials were extracted from Create to Communicate: Art Activities for the EFL Classroom, Dimensions in Learning English, Study Skills in English for a Changing World, and Integrating Visual Arts Across the Curriculum. The participants of the control group received traditional methods of instruction. This process lasted for four weeks without losing sight of the aims, objectives, and intended learning outcomes of the lessons.

Finally, the students from both the groups post-tested for comparing their competence in listening, reading, writing and speaking skills. The posttest completed by the control group was similar to the pretest in format, duration, testing methods, and evaluation criteria. The posttest done by the experimental group was similar in format, duration, and evaluation criteria but different in contents and testing methods.

Data Analysis

The results obtained from the tests held in the beginning and the results taken from the tests conducted at the end were analyzed using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. Furthermore, an informal interview was conducted with the students in the experimental group to get their opinions about incorporating visual arts-related activities in English language teaching.

Findings

| Groups       | Skills | Average Pre test | Average Post test |
|--------------|--------|------------------|-------------------|
| Control group| Listening | 48 | 52 |
|              | Reading   | 52 | 50 |
|              | Writing   | 65 | 69 |
|              | Speaking  | 54 | 50 |
| Experimental Group | Listening | 47 | 55 |
|              | Reading   | 50 | 59 |
|              | Writing   | 62 | 80 |
|              | Speaking  | 53 | 75 |

The students in the experimental group not only outperformed the control group but also exhibited a great level of participation, excitement, and engagement in learning English, and they were in favor of the practice of incorporating visual arts into English language learning. The students said that they are more likely to recall the lessons they learned through visual arts. Also, classroom observations supported the incorporation of visual arts into English language teaching.

Conclusion

Many teachers are reluctant to include contents related to visual arts into their classrooms due to the unfamiliarity of visual arts, curriculum constraints, and lack of time and resources. Integrating visual arts can function as a bridge between the usual learning process in the subject areas and encompassing chances for the students to make use of their artistic skills in a variety of capacities. The findings and insights gained from this research 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.
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