

USING IMAGES TO IMPROVE LANGUAGE AWARENESS

Maria ALEXE

National University of Arts Bucharest

Abstract

Improving language awareness is a major task of language teaching. A modern teacher should be creative in order to stimulate students' creativity and to increase their motivation. Using their abilities and their professional background may be a creative solution.

This paper presents a suggestion of developing students' language abilities by using images created by themselves. The experiment took place at National University of Arts.

Key words: awareness, creativity, image, motivation

1. Work Hypothesis

Images impact in communication is a well known fact, a reality used in advertising and teaching as well. As many teachers can attest, learners seem to become more motivated about language acquisition when images are involved, especially authentic images. Most of them are using videos, where images and audio supports stimulate language acquisition, the innovative aspect of the approached analyzed in this paper is that students' own images are transformed into a learning support and as an aim of increasing learners' motivation in advanced and intermediate classes.

Art students express themselves through images, a fact that teachers of English should take into consideration when designing their teaching-learning strategies. Learners are intrinsically motivated when they are interested in learning tasks and outcomes for their own sake, and that results in internal feelings of self-determination and competence. Gardner and Lambert identify two related types of motivation, which are called instrumental and integrative [Gardner, Lambert, 1972]. As one may say art is all around us and in its large variety of forms it presents fantastic opportunities for all kind of activities.

Our approach deals with integrative motivation because this one is held by students who want to join with the culture of the second language group and become involved in different cultural interchanges. A growing interest and a large number of critical materials describing different strategies can help students to improve their language acquisitions. Materials from English speaking countries do not always reflect the learning needs of adult learners; some cultural values learners are interested in, in our particular case visual aspects and creative writing.

Rather than simplifying teaching methodology, or dubbing down curriculum standards a language tutor should search for an approach that creates a friendly atmosphere. As future artists students of National University of Arts Bucharest are proud of their work and eager to exhibit it. This particular attitude gave me the idea to use their own artistic production as a support for developing language skills in a creative way. Generally speaking the time that may be allocate for learning a foreign language is quite limited. Insufficient practice time for students who have to cope with studying a new language and to read and write for content at the same time is a limit that may be surpassed by using images instead, a support that they are familiar with.

2. Theoretical Background

The learning strategy used to develop students' language awareness is based on the following methodological approaches:

- Student centered classroom. Exhibiting their own work students are waiting for the teacher's comment, but mainly for their colleagues' observations. A good class management leads to a well design debate and as a consequence to keep the class interactive.
- Situational Language Teaching. Students' work, mainly those from the Photo Video section re-create in class a stimulating situational language environment
- Autonomous learner. A competitive and stimulating climate is created and students start to learn independently, to develop their vocabulary and to make efforts in order to improve their grammar.
- Collaborative learning. A good learning strategy which makes less advanced students to recuperate their handicap. Is quite difficult to use in an environment where each student had a strongly developed ego. Some problems may appear.

My experience has taught me that the use of a new approach is not without problems, but some those problems are actually a step in achieving a new teaching strategy. One of the

issues a teacher may encounter is the students' enthusiasm in promoting their artifacts, they may be very exciting and it would be an overloading learning supports. In this case the tutor should make a selection according to her own goals. If not a generous idea may turn into a waste of time.

3. Experiment description

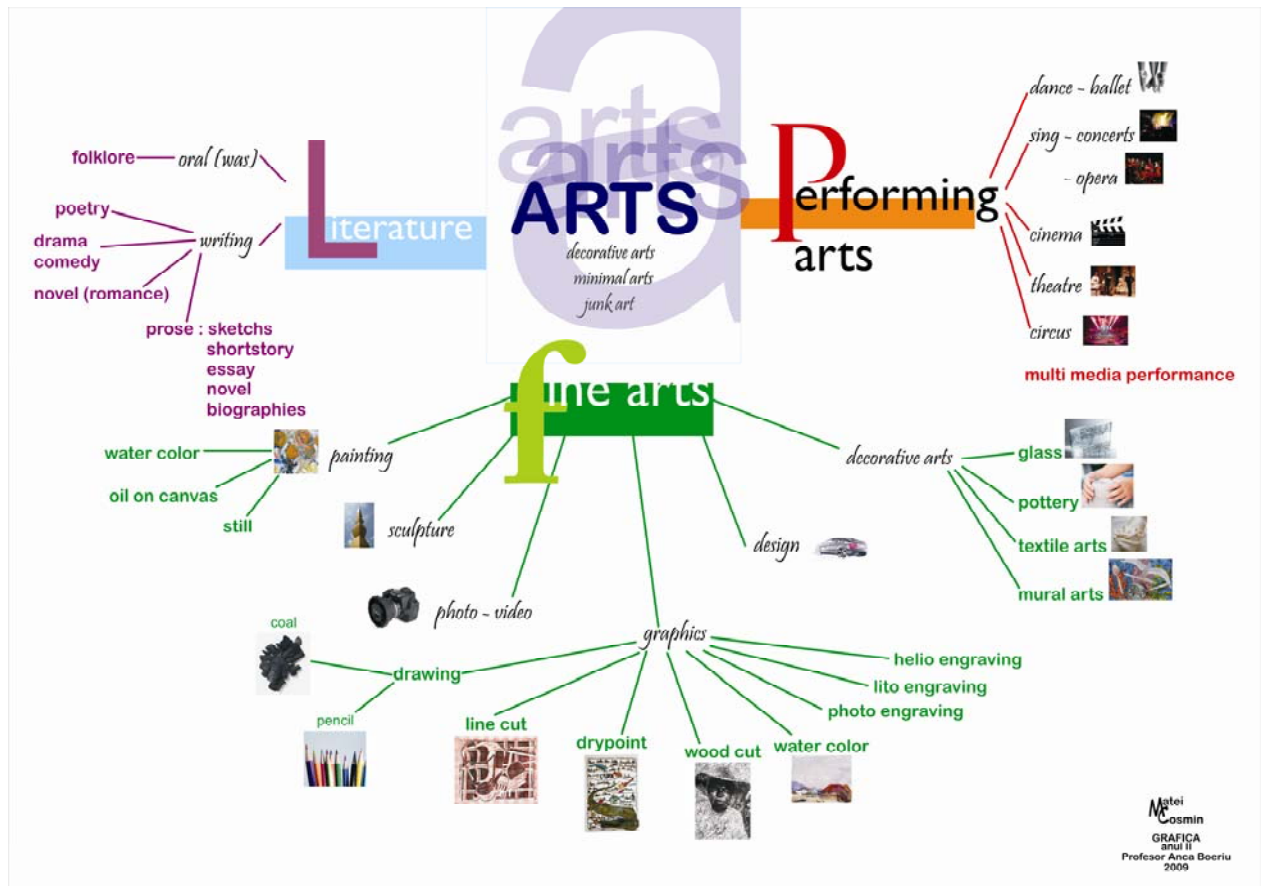
Teachers have long used the media, particularly video materials to build background for specific topics or to motivate students' reaction and analysis. What this experiment brings as a new component of an already used methodology is the fact that the images used by the tutor in order to achieve his goals are images of artifacts done by the students and used to develop language awareness in upper intermediate language classes.

Images were used to teach English in the following sections of the National University of Arts Bucharest: Photo-Video and Digital Images, Graphics, Painting, Pottery Glass and Metal. In other group from Sculpture, Design, Restoration the seminars are still using "traditional" text-books. Design section remained in this group on purpose, because students from Graphics and Design are generally speaking the best, they were split so that each group has a leading group. Photo-Video and Digital Images as well as Art History students are involved in that experiment because they need a lot of descriptive writing in their future profession.

Activities are designed for the First Year – and they are considered as a bridge between general English and LSP, an opportunity to underline the use of a foreign language in their future professional life.

Stage 1 During the first seminars students are asked to imagine a mind map. They can work together and somebody is supposed to design the mind map on the blackboard. With the resulted scheme learners go home and develop it into a more elaborate map, having an artistic image, illustrated by according to their personal view. One of the most successful topics was that connected to ARTS. Previously this was a topic for the second year, but because of the increasing language abilities of the students now this topic is discussed in the second semester of the first academic year. A mind map designed by one of the students is exhibited in front of the class and becomes a subject of debate. Even if this is a successful activity it is not without problems. Students are in the mood of concentrating on the artistic image and to pay less attention to the language aspects. Teacher as a facilitator has to determine them to pay attention to the language acquisition.

After those two seminars dedicated to ARTS any topic suggested by the learners can be a stimulus for a new mind map, consequently for a new debate and a new opportunity to exhibit their work in front of their colleagues.



Stage 2 In this stage the teacher's goal is to develop students' ability in writing descriptive texts and managing to express their own opinions. They are encouraged to bring into the seminar some their works from their professional seminars: paintings, short movies, photos. These are presented by the authors and described in a critical way by their peers. It is an exercise that not only develops vocabulary, but leads to a critical thinking.

Stage 3 This stage of the experiment refers to the evaluation process as well. Students gather in small group (3, 4) and produce an artifact for the seminar, according to the given topics. The group has to present their work and the class discuss their assignment. In this stage one of the major problems in an Art university is to convince them to work in group and to share their ideas and achievements. Some amazing results are the best motivation for continuing this way of animating the seminars.

The leading staff of National University of Arts is very supportive and encourages this type of activity by offering a public space to exhibit the best projects. One of the most successful projects was a short movie made by two students from Photo Video and one from History of Art about the building which hosts the University. Some pictures from the movie accompanied by explanations were exhibited on the ground floor lobby for a week, fact that made them the main topic of that week seminars.

4. Conclusion

This experiment has not reached its end so the conclusions may be different after another stage of experiment. As I hope this article demonstrated, art definitely has a place in the language classroom and leads to a multidimensional development of students' creativity. Activities incorporating art are motivating for the students and stimulate their professional activity leading to a better and larger language acquisition.

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