



Quick Arts-Based Activities to Enliven Your Classroom

by [Riah Werner](#)

Many English teachers are interested in using the arts in their classes, but they don't know where to begin. The visual, performing, and literary arts each have benefits for language learners. They can help students develop their creativity and personal expression, create a positive classroom atmosphere, and increase students' engagement in class activities. However, most teachers haven't received training in integrating artistic activities into language teaching.

This article provides solutions to some of the challenges that teachers might face when first incorporating arts-based activities into their classes. It also provides three quick classroom activities that use the arts to meet language learning objectives.

Strategies for Integrating the Arts Into Your Classes

When I ask teachers why they don't use the arts in their classes, they typically list several basic concerns: Many don't have access to art supplies. Those who haven't had any artistic training often aren't sure where to start. They're concerned that administrators, parents, or the students themselves will see art as a distraction from serious learning. They worry that using the arts will take time away from the material they need to cover in the curriculum. However, there are many proven benefits to using the arts in the classroom, and if you're interested in trying, a few simple strategies can help you overcome your concerns, learn the benefits for yourself, and start using the arts to deepen your students' learning.

1. Start With the Basics

Using the arts in class doesn't have to be complicated. In fact, simple activities often make the best starting point. You don't need art supplies or musical instruments to get your students exploring language through creativity. Many activities (including those described later in this article) can be done with nothing more than the students themselves, paper and pencils, and a little space in the classroom. Students don't need to create masterpieces, either. An overview of best practices in arts education found that students' experience with the arts is more important than the quality of their artwork (Seidel, Tishman, Winner, Hetland, & Palmer, 2009).

2. Explain the Benefits of the Arts

Some administrators may be confused when they see you using a new technique in your classes. In these cases, it's best to explain to your supervisor why you've chosen to use arts-based activities in your class and how these activities support language learning. You can share key research with them, such as the finding that using pictures first helps students communicate complex, detailed thoughts in their writing, with richer art leading to richer text (Olshansky, 2018) or the fact that the arts can improve students' motivation and self-esteem and increase cooperative learning (Guerrero, 2017). When administrators see that arts activities help students develop the skills they are concerned with, they'll usually get on board. Students also benefit from knowing the reasons behind what they're doing, so it can be good to explain how the arts activities support the language learning objectives of your class.

3. Link Your Activities to the Curriculum

Connecting arts activities to linguistic aims is central to convincing stakeholders that the arts are a valuable use of class time, even if arts activities are not explicitly included in the curriculum. Choi (2017) found that units centered on works of art can be designed to successfully fulfill curricular mandates and teach academic language while developing students' creativity and critical thinking skills. So, make sure that you link each activity to a specific learning objective when planning your lesson. Using quick activities as a supplement to more traditional modes of instruction can also help lessen resistance, so consider using an art activity as a warm-up or to practice a language point you've already taught your students.

4. Use a Variety of Art Forms

Different art forms have different benefits for language learning:

- *Drama*: Drama helps students develop intercultural competence and learn to communicate in contextually appropriate ways (Belliveau & Kim, 2013)
- *Creative Writing*: Creative writing in a second language increases metacognition and deepens learners' understandings of connotation and style (Eda Hancı-Azizoğlu, 2018).
- *Drawing*: Drawing helps students calm their emotions, increase concentration, and cope with difficulties (Rajuan & Gidoni, 2014).
- *Music*: Learning vocabulary through music improves recall (Werner, 2018).

Even artistic mediums that are less commonly used with English learners can have language benefits:

- *Dance*: Integrating dance and vocalization helps students speak more fluently (Bell, 1999).
- *Graffiti*: Discussing local graffiti helps students engage meaningfully with issues that are relevant to their communities (Robitaille, 2019).
- *Puppetry*: Using puppets reduces students' anxiety about speaking English, which increases their confidence (Prabhakaran & Yamat, 2017).

Approaching the arts from a multidisciplinary perspective creates space for students to practice a wide range of skills as part of their developing communicative repertoire, bringing together their multilingual and multimodal competences.

Three Example Activities

Each of these arts-based activities takes fewer than 10 minutes, uses simple materials, and can be used for a range of language topics.

1. Partner Drawing

In this simple arts-based information-gap activity, students use drawing as a scaffold to practice their speaking and listening skills. Drawing first gives students an anchor for their thoughts, because they can refer back to their picture as they put their thoughts into words (Olshansky, 2018).

1. Ask your students to draw a picture.
2. In pairs, have one student describe their picture to their partner, without showing it to them. The second student listens and draws what their partner describes.
3. Have students compare and discuss their pictures, then change roles.
4. As an extension to the activity, the students can write about their pictures.

2. Physical Drama

In this activity, students use creative movement to deepen their understanding of vocabulary. Any type of vocabulary can be used during this activity, because the process of embodying vocabulary improves students' ability to remember both concrete and abstract words (Macedonia & Knösche, 2011).

1. Ask students to use their bodies to represent the meaning of a vocabulary word. This representation can be either a physical shape or a simple movement.
2. In groups, have students form a tableau (a still image created with their bodies) to represent the word.
3. Ask the groups to add a repetitive movement to their tableaux.
4. Have each group add a sound to accompany their movement.
5. If you have access to a camera, you could also take pictures or short videos of each group, so students can see their work from the audience's perspective.

3. Personalized Songs

This activity draws on the power of music to help students remember specific language points. It works well with songs that have multiple verses that follow the same structure, such as "This is the Way I Wash My Face" or "If You're Happy and You Know It," which can easily be expanded to include more actions or different emotions (for detailed examples, see Werner,

2018). If the song has gestures, the students can create additional gestures to accompany their new verses as well.

1. Play or sing a song with multiple verses for your students.
2. In pairs or groups, ask students to think of new words to create additional verses for the song.
3. Have students perform their new verses for the rest of the class.

Conclusion

I've been using the arts in my language classes for the last decade with students of all ages and language levels. I've seen firsthand how students light up when they're allowed to tap into their creativity in the classroom. Making space for artistic expression in the classroom opens up new channels of communication, as students' artistic creations scaffold their language development and their excitement to participate encourages them to expand their communicative repertoires. I hope these activities will enliven your classroom as well.

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