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Art as a path to language – art-based language learning and the development of language awareness

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Art offers opportunities for experiential and functional learning – pedagogical emphases that are central to all language teaching, regardless of the language. Art-based language teaching draws on a range of art forms: music, drama, literature and creative writing, visual arts, crafts, multimedia-based forms of expression and combinations of these. This chapter introduces the opportunities of art-based language teaching and key considerations for its practical implementation.

Art-based learning is rooted in immersive and aesthetic experiences¹ and is a holistic approach involving different senses and emotional experiences together with a certain freedom and spontaneity. These elements enable a learner-centred approach and can support collaborative learning where joint activities provide natural places for interaction and for the formation and sharing of knowledge. In art-based learning, opportunities for content learning are opened up to students through sharing interpretations and experiences in a variety of ways. At the same time, students become part of a learning community² within an art-based learning environment that enables inclusive experiences and promotes a sense of belonging. Working towards common goals requires developing ideas, agreeing on division of labour, managing the working process, negotiating skills, and evaluating learning. This working approach both requires and develops a good working atmosphere of studying together collaboratively as a community.

Art-based activities not only open up the possibility of communal learning, but also personalise the learning process. During arts-based activities, teachers have the opportunity to follow students' activities from a distance and also to get know the students within a freer context.³ The focus of art-based learning can be, for example, students' emotional experiences and reflections on their actions, experiences and emotions. Identifying and reflectively examining important aspects and emotional experiences contributes to the learner's self-knowledge and thus helps build learner identity.

1 Löytönen & Sava, 2011.

2 Keskitalo, Aerila & Rönkkö, 2017.

3 Aerila & Kauppinen, 2020.

Art-based learning as a support for language awareness and language teaching

Art-based learning in language teaching often requires more planning than, for example, text-book-based teaching and learning. Self-knowledge and opportunities for identity building are key objectives of emotional and interaction skills development at different educational levels. They also connect with the objectives of language teaching: identifying and developing students' linguistic resources and language identity. Moreover, art-based approaches enable students to make their own culture, interests and linguistic resources visible.³ Through art-based methods, the linguistic diversity of the group is naturally highlighted as art-based practices are based on experientiality – providing opportunities for expression through multiple ways of communicating and for experiencing connection with others, even if there is no common language in the conventional sense.⁴

Try it!

- Rap-a-rhythm helps students discern sounds and word and sentence stresses when creating a lyrically and musically coherent rap song.

Being and becoming visible is a central feature of art-based learning. If the texts and tables of learning material are too far removed from students' everyday language and experiences, it can be difficult for them to make connections with their own language and the language practices of their familiar environment. Personal meanings are strengthened when the students' own experiences are taken into account. This can be achieved, for example, through video assignments. For instance, students could be given the task of creating makeup tutorials in different languages. In this way, the language becomes a flexible tool that can be creatively used for multiple purposes both for learning and for fun.

Artefacts created through art-based methods is rich in conscious and unconscious personal meanings that the student may not always know how to verbalise. Students' creations make the content being studied and the experiences, attitudes and emotions

4 Kauppinen & Aerila, 2020a.

related to it visible to the individual producing the work as well as to the other learners and the teacher. Artistic creations offer themselves as experiences that can be interpreted by others without verbal language being an obstacle. Art-based activities make the interpretations of the students, and of others involved, meaningful. When evaluating students' creations, diverse feedback should be provided in accordance with the learning objectives of an integrative learning process. Language can be learned, for example, by describing the colour scheme of, or asking questions about, a work of art.

Literature as a channel for language learning

Literature as an art form offers both a starting point and a channel for building language identity through experiences. For literature-based language education to succeed, engagement with reading and literature as a meaningful reading experience is required. Language teaching that treats literature merely as samples of language to be analysed cannot be considered as authentic literature education or art-based learning. Studying literature, the joy of reading, and reading engagement are especially important for multilingual children. Leisure reading improves the development of language skills in general and contributes positively to the development of second and foreign language vocabulary, reading speed, amount of reading, and motivation.⁵

Various art forms have been established to varying degrees in the teaching of literature and language education in Finland. For example, since the early days of Finnish basic education students have acted, painted and drawn and performed music together based on stories and poems. Art-based methods give the language learner opportunities to experiment with different channels of personal meaning making and expression. In addition, methods that evoke emotions and that are interactive in multiple ways can support students in creating their own language and language learner identity, i.e. in conceptualising what kind of language user they are, why certain forms of language use are appealing to them, and what opportunities these can offer for developing as a language user and learner.

Combining different art forms in reading activities supports student participation. Art-based approaches also support social reading engagement, as students negotiate, act as leaders and participate in decision-making.^{6,7} In addition to reading engagement, literature-based language education also develops, for example, children's self-esteem and self-awareness as well as perseverance and patience.⁸ In this way, literary choices and activities associated with reading can support the development of language and cultural identity.

An art-based education checklist for teachers:

- The teacher does not need to master any art techniques or principles of artistic expression: enthusiasm to try ideas is sufficient.
- Be open to trying everything! A wide variety of art forms can work well in teaching when a framework for activities is provided, yet freedom of thought and expression are not restricted. To ensure creative thinking is not stifled, student activity should not be excessively steered or limited. It is important to allow students the freedom to make highly individual interpretations based on the tasks provided. Multidisciplinarity inspires artistic expression!
- Create a 'Reading River' of personal reading experiences. This helps visualise the learner's personal reading preferences and their relationship to cultural meanings and values. It is also a good tool for developing language and cultural identity and is suitable for people of all ages and languages.
- Cultural considerations should be taken into account when choosing art forms. For example, certain forms of illustration may have important religious meanings.
- Choosing an art form is not about selecting the right materials or technical skills, rather the most important thing is the experiences and emotions that are evoked. Negative feelings are also significant.
- Art-based language learning methods work best in school when they become a natural part of the language learning environment. When students learn in school to regularly reflect on their own language use and the background to it, the foundations are laid for continuous learning and an enduring interest in reading, self-expression and versatile language use.
- Any art form or combination of art forms is suitable for literature-based language education. The TARU projects have experimented with miniature poetry gardens, text composition, different forms of theatre (kamishibai, shadow theatre, reading theatre), filmmaking, photography, creative writing, escape room pedagogy, experiential storytelling, and literary trails (performance).

⁵ Lao & Krashen, 2000.

⁶ Aerila & Kauppinen, 2020.

⁷ Santos, Pettig & Schaffer, 2012.

⁸ Coholic, 2010.

More on the art-based methods trialled in the IKI-TARU sub-project is available on the project website. Here are a few examples:

Silent books: Silent books are books without traditional text and are suitable for readers of all ages and languages. Silent books can be interpreted in many different ways and read in many different languages. The site provides tips on how to read silent books and offers a list of different silent books to try.

Kamishibai theatre: Japanese kamishibai theatre combines visual art, writing and storytelling and is suitable from early childhood education and throughout basic education. The site provides information about kamishibai theatre and different practical case examples of teachers' experimenting with kamishibai.

Reader's theatre: Reader's theatre is all about dramatic reading aloud. Reader's theatre practises reading fluency and can also be used effectively in language teaching. The site provides information about reader's theatre as well as downloadable reader's theatre manuscripts.

Shadow theatre: Shadow theatre is suitable for students of all ages and supports the use of imagination in storytelling. The site provides downloadable shadow puppet templates.

'Hop into Stories': A booklet for parents and early childhood educators on the power and importance of reading. The booklet is downloadable in six languages.

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