

Benefits of the Arts in Kindergarten – An ESL Perspective

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This article discusses the benefits of the arts in an ESL kindergarten classroom and gives some suggestions for teachers to integrate arts in the ESL curriculum.

Introduction

Not all of us can be a Vincent Van Gogh or Picasso. As teachers we often think we have to be artistic to introduce or teach arts to students. However, being artistic is not a prerequisite for teachers who want to introduce arts to young children. It requires a creative approach to curriculum design. For the past five years I have been teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to kindergarten students in Taiwan. Most English kindergartens in Taiwan seem to have a very academic approach to learning and students are not always provided with hands-on activities, not to mention opportunities to express themselves non-verbally or creatively. Language learning is considered an academic process for many and writing and reading skills are prioritized. There is little or no emphasis on arts in the English curriculum since parents have such unrealistic expectations of their children that ESL teachers feel no time can be “wasted” on drawing pictures and painting! Teachers have to focus on producing and eliciting language.

The challenge is to educate parents and ESL teachers on the value of the arts in kindergartens, and how students can still learn language through arts activities. I would like to discuss the benefits of the arts in an ESL kindergarten classroom and put forth some suggestions for teachers to integrate arts in the ESL curriculum.

Defining "The Arts"

First of all it is necessary to define what is meant by “the arts” since more often than not, teachers only provide painting and crafts classes when trying to accommodate the arts. There is so much more to this area of learning. Arts education includes four distinct discipline areas, each with a separate body of knowledge and skills including: **dance, drama, music and visual arts** (Black, 2004). I will expand on each of these areas and provide ideas for integration.

Benefits of Arts for the Young

According to Ruppert (2006) learning experiences in the arts contribute to the development of academic skills, including the areas of reading and language development, and mathematics. In Ruppert’s study on the benefits of art on student achievement, he found that, “certain forms of arts instruction enhance and complement basic reading skills, language development and writing skills”. He explains how dance has been employed to develop reading readiness in very young children, and the study of music has provided a context for teaching language skills.

Providing students with the opportunity to practice the arts, have multiple benefits, some of which are:

- access multiple intelligences,
- develop higher thinking skills,
- enhance multicultural understandings,
- build self esteem,

- gain positive emotional responses to learning,
- engage through a variety of learning styles.

Why should we introduce the arts as early as possible? According to Wright (2003) children wonder at the world, and they look and touch and listen as they learn more about their surroundings. For this reason we have to provide activities that can encourage children to make images, to explore their thoughts and ideas, and to communicate their thinking to themselves and others. A good curriculum that includes art education can assist children to find logical connections and to develop expression, and assimilation through their artistic play. Art is an important means for self-expression (Wright, 2003).

Spontaneity, imagination, play, experimentation, and lack of inhibition are desirable components of making art and for promoting freedom of expression. Students learn to express themselves in different ways – not just verbally. Even when these expressions are non-verbal, important learning and transference can take place. They get to dance, do role-play and paint their feelings. Artistic learning experiences accommodate students with different learning styles and also those students with emotional needs or behavioral problems. Students who have trouble expressing themselves verbally may excel in painting, dancing or drawing. Since many of us see our role in the classroom to provide each student with equal opportunity to succeed in life, we cannot ignore this important aspect of learning and intelligence.

Integrating the Arts

When the arts are integrated in the early childhood curriculum, children are given opportunities to express themselves visually what they may not be able to say verbally. Young children can develop independence, confidence, pride, and self expression through hands on learning in an environment that stimulates creativity through the arts.

When the appropriate materials are used for the child's development, it promotes the child's verbal and nonverbal expression, physical development, and social and emotional skills. According to Rabkin, co-author of the book *Putting the Arts in the Picture —Reframing Education in the 21st Century (2004)*, the arts are deeply cognitive, not simply emotive, and the arts provide the “tools of thought” for developing the imagination and enhanced learning across all subjects. He writes,

“At its best, arts integration makes the arts an interdisciplinary partner with other subjects. Students receive rigorous instruction in the arts and thoughtful integrated curriculum that make deep structural connections between the arts and other subjects. This enables students to learn both deeply. Integrated arts education is not arts education as we generally think of it. It is designed to promote transfer of learning between the arts and other subjects, between the arts and the capacities students need to become successful adults.”

As a supporter of the theory of social constructivism, I believe that supporting children's learning in the arts is as important as supporting their learning in any other discipline. “As in all disciplines, socially constructing learning in the arts requires sensitivity to children's areas of understanding that have not yet matured and working within these areas.” (Wright, 2003) Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development is used to describe this sensitivity to children's readiness for new challenges. The teacher becomes a co-participant in the process and has to guide the student in constructing knowledge. This underlines once again the important role we as teachers have to guide our students through the creative process. To do so effectively, it is important that an art program should be multi-dimensional. Arts in my English class have mostly been response activities to literature or holiday crafts. Here in Taiwan the ministry of education does not provide any national standards for ESL kindergartens and since most English kindergartens are private schools, each school is responsible for its own curriculum. It would be helpful if ESL teachers could be provided with some national standards or guidelines on arts in the curriculum. Most ESL teachers are native English speakers from North America, Australia or South Africa. An international perspective on the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness is thus of the utmost importance.

Getting Practical

There are four recommended methods that can be used for guided learning in arts

1. Modeling or demonstrating
2. Providing descriptive feedback

3. Explaining to help organize children's thought
4. Asking questions to extend children's ideas and understanding

Since "the arts" is so much more than just painting and making animal masks with paper plates, educators have to step up to the responsibility of integrating meaningful art activities into the existing curriculum. The challenge in the ESL class is to ensure language learning is happening while students engage in art activities. The following are some practical guidelines as to how ESL teachers can elicit language learning through art activities.

Visual Arts

As Wright states, "one key starting place for the integration of arts can be through story" (2003, p.266). A teacher can integrate visual arts with language arts by giving children a literature response activity. After reading a story, ask students to draw a picture of their favorite character or moment in the story. If the students have writing ability, let them write a key sentence with the picture. If these are very young students, ask them to tell you about the picture and write their words or labels for the picture. The use of magazines in the ESL class should never be underestimated. For example, when you want to teach the children words about "feeling", they could page through a magazine to find pictures of people who are happy, or sad, or angry. I often grab a few extra leaflets at the grocery store and when we discuss healthy and unhealthy food, students can cut examples of these and glue onto a plate. Making phonics collages from magazine and newspapers is also another great visual art activity. Say for example the letter and sound of the day is Aa /a/, then students should find this letter and pictures of words that start with the sound.

Using clay to make sculptures is another aspect of visual arts. I have found students love to make letters to write their name or their friends' names. This also benefits fine motor development. Thematic units lend themselves very well to the integration of arts and learning. As teachers plan a theme, think of art activities related to the topics of discussion in class. We have to accommodate learners with different learning styles in the ESL classroom too. We often just focus on repetition and the ESL textbook given to us. Visual, tactile, kinesthetic learners will surely show progress in language learning when presented with artistic or practical activities to apply language or knowledge.

Music and Dance

Teachers can integrate music and dance into a PE class. My ESL students benefit from doing exercise to popular English songs. They start singing these songs spontaneously when the song becomes familiar to them. Songs also introduce new vocabulary or sentence structure. No better song to teach conditional phrases to elementary students than "If I were a millionaire"! There are countless songs teaching days of the week, months of the year, greetings, the weather, movement, animal names and so much more! While students are occupied with writing tasks or art projects, teachers could play English songs in the background. I have been surprised many times by students telling me that, "My mommy has this song in the car!" Learning takes place indirectly. As teachers we should think creatively in providing a "language-rich" environment. Often the emphasis in an ESL class is on being print rich. Posters and word walls and labels can be found all around the classroom. Teachers should consider bringing in a third dimension to this learning environment. And it isn't necessarily a visual dimension!

Instead of just using available musical instruments, students could make "noise-makers" to use. Dried beans in a jar, empty coffee-can-drums, dried pasta in a plastic bottle, etc... Most pre-school teachers have probably done one of these crafts. It is important to focus on the process of making crafts, and not just the product. Pre-teach students the vocabulary of things needed for the crafts or music class. During the lesson, call on students to show the items needed or used, and afterwards, talk about the process. Photo posters of the kids doing these crafts, serve as excellent reminders of the process and their involvement.

Drama

Again, it is also easy to integrate drama by making animal masks or puppets and have children pretend to be an animal. My class did this with "The ants and the grasshopper" and they had so much fun being the lazy grasshopper or the annoyed ants! Children could make props to retell the story to their parents or in the class, to their friends for dramatic play. The relationship between drama and the development of literacy skills among young children is well documented. The following examples

resulted from a study by Ruppert (2006) on how the arts benefit student achievement. The results showed that the use of dramatic enactment can make a measurable difference in helping students reach such important curricular goals as story understanding, reading comprehension and topical writing skills. Story reading is probably the most common approach to teaching reading. Teachers could use drama to provide a beneficial supplemental approach. Allowing pre-kindergarteners to act out their favorite part of a story fosters the development of their literacy skills. Dramatic play also serves as a motivator for learning. Students' overall understanding of a story improves once engaged in the enactment of the story.

The Environment as the Third Teacher

One of the tenants of Reggio Emilia is that the environment is considered the "third teacher". The classroom is made into a beautiful space by using natural light, plants, large windows, and the children's own artwork. No commercial posters are displayed. Graphic arts are heavily integrated into the program to demonstrate cognitive, social, and language development. Concepts are presented to children via multiple approaches, including print, music, drama, puppetry, and even shadow play. Teachers do not have to feel the burden of having to decorate the class by purchasing expensive materials or by spending hours at home making classroom "decorations". I usually have a basic theme for my class for the semester. At the beginning of the semester my class looks a little barren, but as we make progress through the semester, the children's work is being shown and it is evident that learning has taken place. When teaching young learners, teachers would probably have to label the students' work or dictate what they had said about their art projects. In discussing their art work with them, we again emphasize that the process is just as important, if not more important, than the product!

Conclusion

The most important value of integrating artistic learning in early childhood education is that it allows children to explore their own creativity as well as promotes their creativity and imagination. This will benefit them in some jobs they may pursue later in life and even their approach to learning in general. By exposing children to different artistic learning activities, they develop an appreciation for the esthetics. It is also possible to build self-esteem when giving children positive feedback, putting their artwork in the classroom's gallery or on the bulletin boards that parents and visitors appreciate. Teachers can make artistic learning more meaningful for students by integrating it with their everyday learning material and experiences in the classroom, instead of just having an art class once a week on a Friday afternoon! ESL teachers should embrace the challenges the integration of arts offer, even if resources and standards are few or non-existing.

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