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Bringing Paintings to Life: Learning the French Language at Junior High School in Conjunction with Art

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Abstract

In the 21st century, the century of robotics and technological development, in general, school should become more competitive and appealing by moving away from the traditional and, in some cases, sterile learning process and by adopting innovative and modern practices, which eliminate the barriers between different areas of knowledge. These practices can, also, create a link between school knowledge and the world beyond the narrow boundaries of school classrooms, thus meeting students' needs and interests.

Our experiential cultural programme, inspired by the Foreign Language and Art course curricula and based on the principles of interdisciplinarity, encourages students, through an experiential approach to foreign language (FL), to acquaint themselves with the artworks of great painters and various art movement proponents, and helps them to use French in speaking and writing tasks. It is intended for pupils aged 12-15 whose level of language proficiency is A2-B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

What is more, it highlights the importance of the teacher's role, who by using appropriate and innovative educational and pedagogical tools, can become a fellow traveller in the journey towards knowledge acquisition.

Introduction

Nowadays thanks to technology, when learning a FL, school pupils can come into contact with multimedia texts that incorporate sound, images, text and movement. This coexistence of diverse media shows the range of communication channels open to modern-day man. G. Mega (2011) asserts that, "visual language is a particular communication system based on a set of specialised media and codes ... Colour, lines, tones, pattern, texture, shape, form and space comprise the vocabulary of images". It is common for meaning to be conveyed via images when teaching foreign languages, which is why textbook authors regularly incorporate images that complement the texts or relate to cultural elements in order to introduce school pupils to the culture of the country whose language they are learning.

The importance of integrating visual arts into foreign language learning began to be recognised when debate about effective learning processes opened and researchers began to explore how

interdisciplinarity could improve learning effectiveness[11]. Greek Government Gazette Issue No. 304/B/13.3.2003 (p. 4367-8) has the following to say in this regard:

> To the extent possible, horizontal linkage between the detailed curricula for individual subjects is required... The interdisciplinary approach allows pupils to develop a uniform set of competences and skills, a holistic understanding -one might say- of knowledge, which will allow them to express personal opinions on issues which are related to each other, by tying them into aspects of day-to-day life, so as to create their own worldview, their own outlook on the world.

References to the benefits of interdisciplinarity can be found as early as 1958. One illustrative example is the extract which follows:

> The interdisciplinary approach obliterates the boundaries between courses as separate disciplines of teaching, unifies the content of teaching by examining phenomena and life problems from all sides, and in doing so, teaches the child without cutting him/her off from life; instead it teaches him/her through life, through the environment; it teaches by utilising life; teaches him/her about life" (Maloukos, 1958).

E. Kanga has also argued that thanks to interdisciplinarity, suitable conditions are laid to showcase group dynamics, and a suitable framework within which students can practice cognitive and social skills is created, where they can develop critical, creative and practical ways of thinking (Kanga 2002, Kanga 2006).

It is an uncontested fact that works of art are precious treasures that can be utilised in the teaching process to achieve a wide number of goals. There is no doubt that the visual arts are tied into the day-to-day lives of children and are an integral part of the visual culture in which they participate (Pedagogical Institute, 2011). The visual arts utilise and expand pupils' imagination, inventiveness and creativity. Compared to conventional teaching processes, visual-based education contributes to expanded perception for children and helps them acquire new knowledge.

The purpose of this paper is to disseminate best practices in which we managed to marry art with foreign language teaching (using an interdisciplinary approach) and awaken pupils' interest in both the foreign language and the visual arts.

Detailed curricula for Foreign Languages and Art

One of the principles of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) is to preserve the cultural and linguistic individuality of each people. Today's school pupils, who will become tomorrow's citizens in a globalised environment, must have the skills which will allow them to communicate effectively with others, by overcoming prejudices and discrimination. Of course, that presupposes that they have grown and developed as personalities, as individuals. It has already been frequently stressed that foreign language courses can help achieve this objective. Opening up horizons to other worlds,

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[1] Government Gazette, Issue No 304/B/13.3.2003 (p. 4367-8)

other cultures, other ways of thinking and lifestyles, and to diversity, can contribute considerably to the cultivation of young minds.

Just some of the activities recommended in the detailed curriculum for the French language[2] are simulation, pantomime, dramatisation, painting activities, as well as activities focusing on the assimilation of information about space, time, similarity and difference. One can easily understand that these activities are aimed at all learning styles (linguistic, musical, intrapersonal, etc.) (Gardner, 1993), and also create suitable conditions for cooperation within teams to ensure that pupils can develop social and organisational skills.

On the other hand,the detailed curriculum for art states that[3] the overriding purpose of art is to awaken the sensitivity and creativity of each and every pupil. From primary school to the end of mandatory schooling, pupils are required through the use of images and symbols to express emotions and experiences; to recognise values and ideas within the artistic creations; to understand that art is affected by the historical events of every age; to comprehend the multifaceted importance of artistic creativity; and to recognise the role of art within diverse cultures. In junior and senior high school, those objectives are supplemented by the goals of understanding and critically analysing an artwork and the role of the artist in his own time.

Numerous studies have shown that pupils who observe works of art "develop in the round (in cognitive, emotional, aesthetic and stochastic terms) and this holistic development contributes to a deeper understanding and comprehension not just of themselves but also of the reality that surrounds them". (Mega, 2011). Pupils become aware of and familiarise themselves with the cultural products of their own culture and those of other cultures, learn to respect the ideas, views and value systems of others and so the 'Other' and anything different ceases to be so foreign. Gradually, they improve their observational skills and cultivate their capacity for critical thought, as they shift from merely observing and describing artworks to interpreting them. At the same time, their imagination is cultivated as they are called upon to 'delve into' new worlds, new world theories and viewpoints.

Moreover, theatre as 'an artistic format, a way of familiarising oneself with knowledge, a therapeutic and relieving medium, a cognitive and expressive tool, a way of co-existing and cooperating inside and outside of school" (Frangi, 2011) has been proven to cultivate the imagination and raise awareness about social issues, develop sensory perception, and bolster socialisation among school pupils. Through theatre activities at school, pupils learn to co-exist and cooperate to achieve a common objective, experience empathy and

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[2] No. Φ52/82/8096/Γ1) of 2006

[3] Government Gazette 303/B/13.3.2003

learn to better approach anything which differs from their own personal codes and value systems.

It is clear that the detailed curricula examined above converge in certain respects, and that skills that cut across diverse sectors can be developed by linking their subject matters. These elements of the detailed curricula for foreign languages and art led us to innovatively combine foreign languages with painting and theatre (dramatisation of art).

Presentation of the cultural programme

The cultural programme entitled "Bringing paintings to life with the aid of the French language" was run during the 2013-2014 school year.

General objectives:

- To provide stimulus using representative artworks from various art movements.
- To develop pupils' imagination and creativity to devise foreign language dialogues.
- To cultivate a team spirit and develop cooperation between pupils when presenting their results (by creating a video).

Specific objectives:

- To enable pupils to learn about the most important art movements and the leading proponents.
- To teach pupils to 'read' and interpret an artwork.
- To practise the French language (writing and dramatising dialogues in a foreign language).

20 pupils in the 2nd year of junior high school (at CEFR level A2) took part in the programme.

The following movements and their proponents were studied:

16th century
- Renaissance art: Leornado da Vinci
- Classicism: Nicolas Poussin, Claude Lorrain

17th century
- Rococo: Jean-Antoine Watteau

18th century
- Neoclassicism: Jacques-Louis David

Early 19th century
- Romanticism: Delacroix

Late 19th century
- Realism: Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet
- Impressionism: Claude Monet, Edouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir
- Post-Impressionism: Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh

Early 20th century
- Expressionism: Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Edvard Munch
- Fauvism: Henri Matisse
- Cubism: Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque

Interwar period (1920)
- Surrealism: Marx Ernst, Salvador Dali, Joan Miró

Modigliani

Implementation - Programme phases

The method used was cooperative team-building and during the programme two languages (Greek and French) were used. The Greek language was used in the theoretical part of the programme, given the high level of information being provided to pupils, relating to art movements and their proponents. The French language was used in activities related to the knowledge that was acquired. Pupils gradually acquired a quite rich new French vocabulary and this was driven home via the following interactive pedagogic activities which sought to familiarise pupils with the world of art in a primarily playful manner:

- analysis and interpretation of paintings where the didactic purpose was to describe people, situations, decor, and emotions ...
- getting pupils to express the emotions evoked by studying the paintings,
- online tours of art galleries and museums, primarily from abroad, and the pedagogic activities those organisations suggest,
- making pictures with jigsaws,
- building collages,
- role-play games (inspired dialogues between the people in various paintings from the same artist),
- creating powerpoints and presentations in the classroom about a specific artist and his work,
- creating quizzes with questions relating to artists from a specific movement and their work,
- knowledge competitions.

The programme continued with the pupils themselves selecting the paintings they wanted to bring to life. Working in partnership with the art teacher, the pupils chose paintings they believed could be reproduced in the most persuasive manner. For technical and practical reasons, most of the works chosen were portraits. The pupils and their art teacher tried to convey the decor, colours, faces, clothes, and, above all, the emotions captured in the faces in the paintings, as best as possible. The following paintings were selected:

Joconde : Leonardo da Vinci
La cène : Leonardo da Vinci
Danseuse à la barre : Edgar Degas
Joueurs de cartes : Paul Cézanne
Le portrait de Madeleine Bernard : Paul Gauguin
Portrait de Marguerite : Henri Matisse
Portrait de Madame Matisse : Henri Matisse
Autoportrait à la palette : Pablo Picasso
Mère et enfant : Pablo Picasso
Paul en arlequin : Pablo Picasso
Portrait de femme : Modigliani

In the next stage, the theatrical portrayal of the paintings by the students was done by introducing short dialogues or monologues

primarily inspired by the lives of the painters being studied during the programme. The translation into French was done with the aid of the French teacher.

The 'dramatised' paintings were then recorded on video with the aid of the IT teacher while the background music for the video was provided in cooperation with the music teacher (http://7gym-kalam.mes.sch.gr/index.php/2011-11-05-17-15-01/113-2014/206-2014-06-29-18-44-22.html).

This programme was screened on the day all the cultural, environmental and health-education projects carried out in the Prefecture were presented. The programme was also presented to parents and pupils as part of a cultural event held for the end of the school year.

Evaluation of the programme

This cultural programme used and highlighted the interdisciplinary approach and helped pupils understand that to interpret artworks requires the "synergy of many academic sectors or philosophical approaches or historical events or cultural references" (Mega, 2011). The pupils understood that the acquisition of knowledge comes not only via conventional, traditional teaching methods but also via experiential methods, which place the pupil at the core of learning, let him act on his own, take the initiative, become more involved in personal extracurricular experiences and activities, express himself and create whatever and how he pleases. As part of the dramatisation process, the pupils involved learned how original materials in non-theatrical format could be 'brought to life' and become stageable material. They used all their imagination and creativity, exchanged views and ideas, recalled stories and facts, repackaged personal experiences and utilised knowledge that could contribute to achieving their shared goal. In short, the theatrical process improved cooperation and bolstered self-esteem for all of them.

As far as foreign language learning was concerned (French in this case), the objective was achieved indirectly through an environment of interactive feedback where the pupils ceased being passive recipients of knowledge and instead, using the foreign language as a 'vehicle', became active, involved analysts - interpreters of artworks and creators of cultural products (dramatisation and videos).

The teacher served as a mediator (Vygotsky, 1962) between the authentic material and the pupils, and utilised the foreign language being learned as a tool for acquiring extracurricular knowledge, while also facilitating pupils in developing their language skills in the specific foreign language. S/He also helped the pupils build on existing knowledge and experience and create their own world view using an experiential approach and feedback processes (Beck, 2008). There is no doubt that learning a foreign language from topics that come from outside the narrow boundaries of the classroom ties the foreign language into new life experiences (Berns and Erickson, 2001), and thereby meets the needs and interests of pupils more.

As far as personality development is concerned, pupils bolstered their self-esteem as they discovered their hidden potential thanks to the activities suggested to them, and began to see the teacher in a different light: he ceased being someone who facilitated an

uninteresting educational process and became a fellow traveller on their journey towards the acquisition of knowledge.

In the context of pupil self-evaluation which took place after the programme was over, all pupils were given a feedback form, and the answers to the questions on it shows how each pupil had experienced this special interdisciplinary experience within the school environment (see Annex I).

Weaknesses and ideas about how to continue the programme

The timeframe within which we operated and the objectives set from the outset on cooperation with the pupils did not allow us to have the programme evaluated by the pupils in order to acquire a picture of how effective our intervention was, both in acquiring a new level in French and in familiarising the pupils with art and its cultural products. Our ambition is to run this programme for pupils at the next educational level (senior high school), where they will have a better grasp of the foreign language, in order to dramatise more complex paintings, creating more imaginative and rich dialogues.

Conclusions

Following the advice in the detailed curricula for foreign languages and art, we managed to blend foreign language and art classes to help pupils become more actively involved in the learning process.

We consider that this venture helped, as much as possible, in achieving emotional balance in pupils and gave them the opportunity to discover their artistic bent, to express themselves, and to have fun while learning; all done through the vehicle of the foreign language.

Completion of this programme gave pupils the chance to realise how important teamwork is, how important the sense of 'belonging' to a group which has a shared objective is, and how vital it is to make a collective effort to realise that objective. Implementation of this venture shows how teachers can play a different, but very important role: that of using pedagogic criteria to identify and select suitable sources, multimedia texts and any other stimuli which could bolster pupil participation and utilise their imagination and inventiveness, while also taking the initiative when it comes to experimentation, and educational innovations in the context of the pedagogic/didactic praxis along side them.

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