

Using art to engage adults with low levels of English in reading: An action research project

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ABSTRACT

Art has been shown to engage students in reading while also supporting them to gain meaning. However, most of the research in using art in the English language classroom has focused on its use with young learners. This may point to the perception of art as frivolous and not applicable to rigorous academic learning with adults at university. Using an Action Research project conducted with the writer's own classes at a university English language centre in Australia, this assumption is questioned and another proposition put forward: that art can inspire engagement, develop clarity through using visual representation, and enable students to co-create knowledge. The Action Research project detailed in this paper asks how creating puppets and performing puppet role plays can encourage students to engage with class readers through discussing data gathered from four different classes. Findings suggest that when students are positioned as creative subjects they are more able to gain the significance of language, and thus deepen their engagement with texts in English. Art has the potential to transform students' attitude to learning, encouraging them to form new relationships with the subject, language, each other, and themselves, rather than just learn new facts. This paper concludes by recommending that further studies in the use of art in adult learning environments consider how important attributes of art can be harnessed while

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still enabling classes to meet strict learning outcomes. Although the benefits of art are numerous, it can be left off university curriculum because of its emergent and abstract qualities. If art is to be viewed as more than a mere adjunct to real learning then research must clarify how art can be experimental and exact, abstract and concrete.

INTRODUCTION

Inspiring students to engage with class readers in the university English Language Centre classroom can be an arduous task. Reading texts designed to teach English are usually accompanied by comprehension questions that require students to read and then answer questions about the text to clarify and show their understanding. Yet in his discussion on the teaching of reading, educational researcher John Macalister (2011) warns that reading comprehension questions are overused. He argues that in order to be effective comprehension questions must be carefully considered and crafted and teachers need to have a clear goal for the class. Most comprehension questions are not well designed, Macalister finds, and are therefore ineffective and mundane in their ubiquitousness (p. 164). In a quest to discover ways to teach reading that do not rely on comprehension questions, I want to look at how art can aid students' engagement with class readers. This paper considers art in a broad sense, as any creative endeavour which values exploration and the production of something new. I wish to rescue the status of using art to teach reading, and explore how artistic activities can allow students to create their own knowledge, rather than simply reiterate information from the teacher or text. I wish to ask how art can support students to engage with class readers, how it can support them to make meaning and retain interest. This paper is framed by the research question: how can students with low levels of English be supported to engage with class readers through making art?

The majority of research about the use of art in language learning relates to working with children in primary school and kindergarten (Fennessey, 2006; Gorijian, Hayati & Barazandeh 2012; Hamblen, 1993; Patterson, 2015). University English language centres do not typically include art as an integral method of instruction. This may indicate a widely held assumption that art is a play-based activity and therefore best used with children, as it is not academic enough for adults or

universities. However, this study suggests that art can be an effective language-learning tool with adult learners of English in the university classroom. Art may have an important role to play in showing students different ways to understand a written text, therefore enabling students with low levels of English or difficulty in reading another approach. Art allows students to approach texts in a multitude of ways, using a multitude of senses and ways of considering the learning task.

This paper tracks an Action Research (AR) project that I conducted with my own General English (GE) classes at a large university English language centre in Sydney, Australia, in which I explored the potentials of using art in the teaching of reading. It asks how creating puppets and performing puppet role-plays can increase students' engagement with class readers. AR is used as the method of enquiry in this paper due to its aptitude for practice-led research and increasing popularity in the field of education. Anne Burns (2010) writes about the value of AR for teachers, maintaining that "AR is an appealing way to look more closely at puzzling classroom issues or to delve into teaching dilemmas" (p. 6). I look to art as a potential strategy for student engagement due to its capacity to enliven the classroom and encourage a communicative approach to learning (Savignon, 1991). I often use art in the English language classroom, especially role play and modified acting games; however, when I have tried these techniques with my current student cohort I have discovered that they were shy and over-anxious about making mistakes when performing in front of the class. This anxiety prevented students from engaging deeply with the work. Instead, I began to ask students to use other objects or pictures to stand in for their own bodies. This AR project focuses on the use of puppets as I found that they engendered a sense of play and creativity rather than anxiety with my students.

BACKGROUND

Throughout the four cycles of my AR project I worked with four different GE classes across GE1, 2, and 3. As a practice-led method of enquiry, and as a teacher-researcher, the AR method is able to respond to the confines of my work and the work of ELICOS university teachers (Burns, 2010, pp. 6-7). I teach each student cohort for 5 weeks, so I created cycles that were 5 weeks in length, and then repeated and adjusted

the activities conducted in each iteration. This paper reflects the constraints of my work so each cycle was the same length, but worked with different student cohorts. The students in this study are at the lowest levels of English taught at my university English language centre and the course starts at a basic level. Three classes I worked with were quite small, with about 8 students in each, and one class had 18 students.

The English Language department at my university English language centre teaches three levels of GE and six levels of Academic English. Students attend my language school in order to gain entry into a large technical university, where they will usually study business, engineering, information technology, accounting or design. The majority of students are Chinese and have studied English throughout high school, yet they remain at a beginner level, perhaps due to teaching standards, large class sizes, or their lack of interest and/or aptitude for English language. Students' parents typically pay for their tuition, and many report a pressure to succeed in their study. My students are often tired due to being immersed in English for many hours a day while having low English language skills, coupled with staying up late playing video games or watching DVDs. Many students complain that they do not like learning English and often struggle to stay engaged in class. In the context of teaching reading, only a few students report that they read English language texts in their free time or for enjoyment. Despite these struggles, most students have good attendance and come to class every day. However, only about half of the students regularly finish all their homework.

The inspiration for my AR project came one afternoon as I was marking my GE1 students' homework. While all eight students had completed or attempted the grammar and writing sections of their homework, only one student had tried to tackle the reading text and answer the accompanying comprehension questions – and this student got all of the answers completely wrong. On the following day when I asked the remaining seven students why they did not complete the homework reading exercise, they said it was too long and hard. Two issues with reading began to emerge: firstly, my students seemed overwhelmed with new language and struggled to see how words fit together to make meaning. Secondly, many students did not like reading, complained

about having to read long texts in English, and often simply copied other students' reading comprehension answers when set as a class task.

Due to my students lack of engagement with reading I reasoned that art may act as a bridge to the written word. A wide range of educational literature reports on how art assists learning, including language learning. The New York State Department of Education (2010) points out that art assists teachers to scaffold learning, emphasises the communicative potential of language, and fosters critical thinking skills (pp. 3-4). Their practical guide shows how using art in the English language classroom, or conversely providing English language instruction in the art classroom, makes "learning relevant and meaningful" (p.3). Students who participated in their visual arts program reported that it "made learning and education fun" (p.33). In reviewing the arts in Australian education policy and practice, Robin Ewing (2010) argues that students engage with school education when classes are relevant to their own realities and experiences (p. 31). She looks at the research on student motivation and points out that student-directed learning is consistently cited as a way to increase student motivation and engagement (pp.31-32). Using art to explore classroom readers may enable more student-directed learning than traditional reading comprehension questions and therefore encourage student engagement. On beginning my AR project I also hoped that art would be a suitable classroom tool for students with low levels of English, offering different ways to support their burgeoning language.

ACTION RESEARCH CYCLES

Throughout the four cycles of my AR project I worked with students who had low levels of English. I worked with one GE1 class, one GE2 class, and two different GE3 classes, collecting data through baseline and follow up surveys, audio recordings which were then transcribed, photographs of students doing the activities, and a teacher journal in which I recorded my observations throughout the process. Ethics procedures for my college were followed, including maintaining confidentiality of students' identity and information; all students were explained the purpose of the study, their potential role in it, and told they could withdraw at any time. Two students did not want to be photographed, but all other students agreed to be recorded and share

their ideas on my AR activities. All cycles were audio recorded and transcribed, and I took between 5 – 10 photographs during each cycle. Excerpts from audio recordings and photos of activities are included in this paper in order to express the tone and aesthetics of the research. These were chosen due to their capacity to give a general representation of students' reactions to interventions, and exemplify areas of analytical interest. Baseline surveys were conducted in week one, while activities and feedback were delivered in weeks two and three.

In the first cycle of my AR project I asked my class of eight GE1 students to visually represent characters from the class reader and then explain their artistic choices to the class through reference to the text. After working with students to predict information within the text, and then assisting them with new vocabulary and pronunciation I divided students into two groups, who each read the first four pages of the class reader aloud with my assistance. I asked one group to portray the two main female protagonists, and the other group to show the male protagonist. Students were asked to represent these characters through a range of props I brought to class, to create a puppet that shows what this character would look like if it came to life. Puppet props were not specifically designed to fit the text, but consisted of objects that can be used in different ways, for example, buckets for heads, wigs, scarves, money, a map, and paper for students to draw on and cut out. Although each of the three protagonists are drawn in the pages of this class reader I attempted to guide students to show more than could be seen in the pictures, prompting them to move beyond showing only what the characters look like (smiling, blonde hair). I went to both groups and asked them to show what their characters were doing, feeling, thinking, and saying. Both groups were then asked to introduce their puppets to the class, explaining why they made each artistic choice in the creation of their puppet, and how they gleaned this information from the class text.

On reflecting upon the first cycle a major issue emerged that informed the second cycle. When students were making their puppets I realised that they were still missing important parts of the narrative. I could see that they knew simple information about the characters, but I was not convinced that they followed some of the more complex

parts of narrative within the story. To assist students comprehend complex parts of the narrative, I decided to ask them to represent the unfolding narrative of the text and not only the characters in cycle two.

In this second cycle I used the same text, but this time with GE2 students, who had slightly higher levels of English. I began this cycle with the same prediction, vocabulary and pronunciation exercises that I used in cycle one and then, like in cycle one, split the class into two groups to read the first four pages. However, in this round I asked students to re-enact the story so far as a puppet role play. In contrast to cycle one, cycle two focused on representing the unfolding action in the class reader rather than showing the personalities, feelings, and ideas of the three main characters. Consequently, I brought in props that were more specific to the text's narrative, like a toy plane, a box for a bus, toy money, sunglasses, buckets and spades, as well as paper and crayons.

When they presented their puppet role-plays to the rest of the class I asked questions to elicit conversation about how they had represented the action within the story. Students used their puppets and props to retell the narrative.

T And where are they going?

S1 They want to go to the beach.

.....

T Where do they go to the beach?

Students look through class reader to find the information

S2 Ninety Mile Beach

.....

Students work with the teacher to make the beach, which is a piece of paper with 'Ninety Mile Beach' written on it

T What is 'mile'?

S2 Very long

T And what are they doing?

S1 Looking for Michael bus

T Oh, they are looking for Michael on the bus?

S1 Yes, on the bus

Students referred to the class reader and the visual scene in front of them to build and express meaning, with the written text acting as a map, and the puppet scene as its landscape.

A different class reader was used in cycle three, as I wanted to see how puppet role plays could work with another text, and ensure that this activity was not text-specific. The unfolding action in this new reader is more complex, as it is written in the first person and the protagonist wrestles with what is true and what is a product of his imagination. I worked with GE2 students in cycle three, who have slightly higher levels of English than the classes from previous rounds. I began the third cycle in the same way as the previous two cycles, with content prediction and pre-teaching vocabulary and pronunciation, before breaking into small groups to read the text. In this cycle, however, instead of requesting the two groups of students role-play the same section of text, I gave them different sections, and they only read their piece. I worked with the jigsaw method of instruction, in which students have different but complementary pieces of information that fit together like a jigsaw. Students then teach each other the missing pieces of information, so they must cooperate and interact to build shared meaning (Gömleksiz, 2007, p. 617). In my project, I asked one group to show the action that occurs on the first and second pages of the book, and the other group to show the action that occurs on the third and fourth pages. After each group presented their role plays to each other I asked the other group to retell what they saw happening in the presenting groups' retelling.

In the fourth and final cycle I decided to use a third, more difficult, class reader with students in order to ascertain how these activities worked with a small range of texts, and not just one particular reader. This text is more complex than readers used in cycles one and two, as the protagonist weaves many of his memories, thoughts, and hopes into the action, and several social issues are explored, including gender roles, bullying, poverty and unionism. In this round I worked with a class of 18 GE3 students, who have slightly higher language skills than the GE1 and GE2 classes from previous cycles. Due to the complexity of this text, the social issues it tackled, and the challenges of understanding the text I saw students face in cycle three, I spent one hour doing pre-reading activities in cycle four in the lesson prior

to beginning to read the text, mainly focusing on the social issues raised by the text and the types of language associated with these.

The following lesson began with a quick revision of what we knew about the reader and some of the social issues we explored in the previous lesson. I decided to stay with the jigsaw approach I trialed in cycle three, as it required students to focus more on each other's presentations, so each of the four groups of students received a different piece of text. Students' puppet role-plays were presented to the class, and the story unfolded as an eclectic and cooperative description of the class reader.

INSIGHTS

These four cycles of AR with my GE classes offer several insights about the ways in which art can encourage students to engage with class readers. While art is not usually used as a method of instruction in university English language centres, this research challenges the reluctance to embrace the use of art, particularly when working with students who have low levels of English, reading complex texts, and encouraging student-centred learning.

As this research focuses on student engagement with class readers through art, I was encouraged to notice that using art immediately caught students' attention. In my project students' curiosity enticed them to take risks and learn in different ways. Working with puppets was new and novel unlike the usual comprehension questions that guide classroom reading activities. When working with puppets students were often laughing, discussing, checking, and fully engaged in the activity. In fact, in cycle one a group of students gave up their break and the promise of a cigarette to add finishing touches to their puppet. In this instance, which was during Ramadan, one Muslim student said that he was going to take a break and have a cigarette as night had fallen and he had not smoked all day. However, after being cajoled by his group this student decided to stay to help them perfect their puppet, and smoke after class. This anecdote shows the value of group work for creating a social obligation to engage with class activities, and also suggests that students were engaged because their learning task was new and novel, offered an opportunity to be creative, and to present work they are proud of to the rest of the class.

Working with puppets in small groups enabled students to co-create knowledge as they built a moving visual picture of a written description together. Comprehension questions that accompany class readers are usually designed to be done individually, and require students to consider the text alone and then write what they understand. Yet when creating puppets and puppet role-plays students are asked to construct and retell their understandings of the reader as a whole group. In presenting the story together, students co-create meaning, and work together to create a spoken and visual story. I noticed that students who are not usually engaged in group speaking or writing activities, and tend to let the stronger students take over, were able to participate in ways that did not demand spoken or written fluency. In cycle three, one group of five students presented the action from the first few pages of the class reader. Two of the students (S1 and S5) are confident in class and tend to dominate group activities, whereas two students (S2 and S3) are often unengaged in class and have low speaking skills. Presenting work using puppets enabled these students to have a role in the group work, as they could move the puppets to support what the other students were saying, and use other students' language to bridge their own. This puppet presentation was done at the end of a long activity and shows how, despite S2 and S3's general lack of engagement and disruption in class, they manage to take part in the presentation:

- T Can you show me what happens in chapter one of [class reader]? In English
- S1 In school
- S2 (repeats) In school
- S1 Yeah, Jason ah work in school, yeah, and in ah in football and he look many students play football
- T Good, good, more people talk [names S3, then S4]. What happens? He is playing football...
- S2 is laughing in the background, joking with S3*
- S4 And football come to his eyes
- T Good (to S2 and S3) please listen. Yeah? (to S4) The football comes to where?

S2 and S3 continue to laugh

T Listen to S4

S4 Eyes. And go to home

T Show me, show me 'the football comes to his eyes'

S1 Yeah (to S2 and S3) Show, show

S2 and S3 re-enact the football hitting the protagonist's eyes, saying 'boom' then pretending to scream

T And now what?

S2 *(in a funny voice)* Sorry, sorry, sorry

S1 And then students - no - two students said, ah

S2 Apologise?

S5 Jason looked eyes

S4 He go to home

S5 Jason looked at his mirror

S3 Go mirror

S2 Wake up, go to home

T He goes home, wakes up, and now what is he doing?

S4 See eyes in the mirror and thinking 'how can I move that ah -'

T What's this one called? *(makes a circle around her eye)*
br- ... br-... ?

Students repeat br- but cannot remember the full word

T Bruise

Students repeat

S4 How can I get that bruise and thinking and go to mother room

S3 Make-up

S5 Take make-up

S2 Yeah

T Can you show me? Put on make-up?

S2 and S3 begin to draw on the puppet nots eye

S1 What is? (laughs)

T Ohhh. Beautiful.

S2 and S3 are typically unengaged in class work, preferring to play and laugh rather than sit still and when they are required to do quiet individual work either sleep, play on their phones, or try to copy other students' work. Yet this excerpt shows how presenting puppet role plays channelled their raucousness into a playful activity. S2 and S3 were able to show the action of the story while the other students retold it, adding in or repeating words in English when they could. They were not shamed by not being able to speak coherently or in full sentences, and could still participate, where usually their low language skills make participation difficult. Even when students' language is minimal, they can use visual cues to make meaning, thus creating a bridge to support their growing language acquisition. This excerpt also shows how students work together to build meaning from readers, creating a cohesive narrative through repeating each other's words and phrases, speaking and visually representing the action within the reader.

However, this capacity to engage students through playfulness and creativity can also create a challenge when working with art in the university English classroom. In each cycle, when I opened my suitcase to reveal colourful and crazy props, puppets and dolls, wigs and scarves, students shrieked and began to play. Every class got excited, noisy, and distracted. They took photos of themselves in colourful wigs and spoke in silly voices using the finger puppets. Although I tried to mitigate this raucousness by gradually bringing in less exciting props, on reflection I see that the students' excitement and sense of play generates an important attitude to learning. In my regular classes I regularly reprimanded students for playing on their phones during class, falling asleep, drifting off and not following the lesson; however, the props and puppets brought colour, movement, play and silliness into the classroom. The learning environment became fun, social, and light hearted. This light-heartedness suggests an attitude to learning that allows for experimentation and error,

qualities essential for learning, but often shunned by my students due to the shame of being wrong. Playful props took the pressure off students, signalling that this activity was more about experimenting with ideas than presenting perfect English back to the teacher.

IMPLICATIONS

Play may be an important method of education in the English language classroom because it stimulates its own motivational response, according to a seminal paper by psychologist Robert White (1959). White establishes the notion that some activities are motivating in themselves and do not require an external drive. People engage in activities like play and exploration without secondary reinforcement and participation is its own reward (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 5; White, 1959, pp. 299–302). Many researchers and teachers in language learning and the arts write about the potential of art to create a kind of sustained engagement. Maxine Greene urges teachers to learn from artists, pointing out that artists have certain ‘wide-awakeness’ when they are creating art (as cited in Sullivan, 2000, p. 220). Creating art requires one to pay attention, look deeply, and sustain this depth of attention throughout the act of making (Sullivan, 2000). Making art requires and teaches creative play, and the ability to use and manoeuvre signs. In play, a bucket may become a head, a bag, a mountain, a sign that can shift and change according to its placement. In her analysis of the ways an arts-based curriculum can assist communication and cognition, Stephanie Urso Spina (1995) shows how the creation and perception of art scaffolds second language acquisition. Like art, language is a series of signs that shift and change according to context. Whether viewing art or language, one must look to both the whole and its parts, seeing how they work together to make meaning. In order to comprehend class readers students must make sense of language at both a micro and macro level, likewise, in order to appreciate visual art viewers look to brush strokes and interplays of light, as well as the overall image.

I discovered that art enabled my students to have a deeper, more engaged concentration on their readers, which in turn, supported their abilities to conduct textual analysis. In cycle one for example, making puppets helped students clarify the narrative and go deeper into the text. Students initially created puppets who were ‘happy’, yet as I kept

prompting them with questions, reminding them to put everything they knew into the creation of their puppets, their puppets grew in complexity. Eventually students showed that the females were happy (drawing a smile on their puppet), worried about being late (through adding a watch), excited about being in New Zealand (placing a map with the puppets), and had found the male's mobile phone (putting a phone next to them with the name of the male attached to it). Making puppets and using puppet role-plays based on class readers with my GE classes enabled us to clarify complex meanings. This is especially important with some class texts, like those that students will write essays about, be examined on, or grasp difficult concepts that are embedded within.

Theorists, curriculum developers and teachers have noticed the way art can support students' comprehension of the written word and consequently, many schools and programs have developed a range of courses that utilise art to aid reading. Theorist of drama and education, Betty Jane Wagner (2002) looks at the Whirlwind Program in Chicago in which actors work with students from kindergarten to grade eight to read, act out, draw pictures, and create 3-dimensional versions of storybook characters. Students who participated in this study improved three months quicker in the Iowa Test of Basic Skills reading scores students who did not participate. The reading improvement showed by these students was so impressive to policymakers that results made front-page news in the Chicago Tribune (Wagner, 2002, pp.5-6). In other programs, art has also been shown to improve reading aptitude and engagement, particularly with students who are reading below their grade level or require remedial assistance. For example, the large-scale Reading Improvement Through Art (RITA) program from the United States shows promising results. In the RITA program vocabulary and reading were integrated into art classes, and art concepts were used within reading programs. This style enabled students to see concrete examples of abstract concepts and provided students with work that was interesting, stimulating, and consequently motivating. This program worked from the assumption that some learners need a wider variety of approaches when learning to read, approaches that help them contextualise words and how they fit together. RITA assisted students to comprehend abstract language skills through concrete experiences

created through art. When analysing the results of RITA, it was found that participating students improved their reading skills more in one semester than they were predicted to in the entire year (Corwin as cited in Hamblen, 1993, p.196). My findings underscore what other researchers have discovered about how art engages students in their learning.

This AR project also reveals the benefits of representing the written word visually, particularly when working with complex texts, or beginner students. Visual representation of the written word enabled my students to clearly grasp complexities within the text, particularly when trying to decipher what is fundamental to the narrative and what is only incidental. Researchers in language acquisition, McFee and Walker, found that many learners think visually and find concepts easier to acquire through visual representation (as cited in Hamblen, 1993, p. 196). Art that makes written concepts tangible can enable and aid students to understand the written word. When a text or word is displayed visually students have another way to understand language as they can both read and see the text. In fact, McFee reports that some learners really struggle to understand abstract concepts when visual learning does not accompany instruction (as cited in Hamblen, 1993). Researchers recognise that art is particularly beneficial when working with abstract or difficult concepts and with learners who have low reading or verbal skills (Cahill, 2014; Gorjian, Hayati & Barazandeh, 2012; Janson and Shilleref as cited in Hamblen, 1993, p. 196; The New York State Department of Education, 2010, p. 2; Wielgosz, 2013). Students with low levels of English have a smaller range of tools to make meaning and express themselves in the target language. With these learners art can provide an essential bridge to the written word, as instruction is delivered through writing, but also through movement, colour, form, and physical relationship.

The final finding of my AR project is perhaps most relevant to university English language centres like my own, who strive to support student-centred learning and foster independence, yet face the pressure of preparing students for university in a short time. Like other researchers, my AR reveals the way art enables students to generate their own language and develop independence in their English expression (Illes, 2012; Savignon, 1991). Lessons in reading usually require students to

reiterate aspects of the text by asking them to repeat and practice specific language or concepts but my AR activities encouraged students to use whatever words they had, accompanied by puppets and props, to generate their own combinations of words. Students supplemented their words and filled in gaps in vocabulary knowledge with props and movement of their puppets. Although my students' sentences were stilted and grammatically incorrect, audio transcripts show them beginning to generate their own utterances, thus developing a capacity to create meanings in English independently. An excerpt from cycle two shows how a student tries to use their own language to explain what is happening in the class reader. When I asked the student about the bag she represented in her puppet scene, and who it belonged to, she moved the props to show the unfolding action and said:

*She running after him he doesn't - no taking - taking Sarah's bag
I say you look for my bag because and ah - fast Michael and lost
and dancing (she is referring to 'bungee jumping' but doesn't
know the term in English) take my [speaks in Chinese] doesn't
take bag so this one this one dancing take Sarah's bag - Jessica
- Sarah's bag (she reads) 'Jessica, my bag! Sarah calls'. Ah....
[speaks in Chinese] Michael.... she running catch Michael so
Jessica forget take Sarah's bag.*

This student managed to express that the bag belonged to Sarah, but Jessica was supposed to be looking after it while Sarah went bungee jumping. Sarah's bag was lost when Jessica spotted Michael and ran after him, leaving behind Sarah's bag. Instead of simply finding the right part in the text and reading it back to me, through creating a puppet role play the student was required to be autonomous and use her own language to explain this complex concept.

Student autonomy is well recognised as an important step in learning. Sandra Savignon (1991) stresses the importance of learner-centred approaches in her analysis of language acquisition, maintaining that students must be positioned as active learners who can construct their own meanings. Researcher in teaching English as a Foreign language, Eva Illes (2012), affirms that literature can be taught in a way that engenders autonomy instead of merely requiring students to repeat facts. Although a lot of research points to the importance of student

autonomy, university English Language Centres can struggle to integrate more emergent work into curriculum as they work to prepare students for imminent and challenging exams. Despite these concerns, Illes and Savignon caution that learner autonomy is actually integral to language acquisition as it positions students as active creators of language.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes by recommending the use of art in the university English language centre classroom. My AR project shows how art can support students with low levels of English to engage with class readers, through offering them visual representation to support the written word, and supporting an active learning environment driven by students' own language and knowledge. By inviting students to visually represent their ideas they can express their own relationship to texts, internalise information, and develop an emotional connection to the subject that aids recollection (Bustle, 2004, pp. 420-421; Wielgosz, 2013). While my project and many others show the benefits of using art to teach language, it remains an area that is underutilised with adult learners. This may be due to teachers' lack of interest or supposed ability, or a response to an educational bias towards training for tests. Educational theorist Lynn Sanders Bustle (2004) asserts that a focus on testing and standardisation has positioned art as an adjunct, or an add on to 'real' learning. Art is considered frivolous, or applicable to younger learners whose learning is not considered to be as important as older students (Bustle, 2004, pp. 416-417).

With pressure on university English Language Centres to deliver specific learning outcomes in a set period of time, art can be considered too emergent, experimental, unknown and abstract to be part of essential curriculum. However, some of these concerns may be mitigated through creating classes that have clear learning outcomes and rationales for using art. Bustle (2004) writes that when teachers work with visual art they must ensure to '[construct and communicate specific guidelines up front to help students with the creation of visuals' (p.422). Secondary teacher Tara Shoemaker Holdren (2012) is aware that exam-driven curricula demand that each class has definitive outcomes that can be rigorously tested. When asking 21 of her 11th grade English students to explore a class text through creating pieces of visual art,

Holdren created a clear and detailed learning rubric that covers areas such as 'Assessment Objectives' and 'Literary Connection and Aesthetic Analysis'. This rubric clearly states how class objectives meet national learning outcomes, and how students can achieve high marks (p.699). This approach shows how the malleable qualities of art can be shaped so that it supports existing curriculum in university English language centres, and meets students' needs to prepare for and pass exams. Art can be used to make meanings from class texts, and in order to use it effectively, teachers and curriculum writers must be clear about why they are employing art, and exactly how it will support student learning.

I suggest that further studies in the use of art in the university English language centre classroom and other adult learning environments develop the argument that art is more than mere ice-breaker or accessory learning activity, and uncover the best ways to work with art to reach learning outcomes. Studies could examine how using art to engage students in reading enhances students' comprehension and their overall marks. By justifying the use of art in university English language centres creative activities can become more commonplace, better designed, and more thoughtfully conducted. Further studies could take a more student-centred approach and work with students to develop, refine, and evaluate classroom artistic activities. If teachers want students to participate in work that is ordinarily found arduous and complex, then they must discover ways of engendering engagement, perhaps through art. Additionally, in order for university English language centres to find value in the use of art, teachers and researchers must clarify the most proficient ways of using art to support their curriculum.

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