

Teaching English to Very Young Learners Through Art

Elisavet Veliou

House of English Language School & Research Centre
beliouelisabet@gmail.com

Maria Argiri

House of English Language School & Research Centre
mary.3193@hotmail.com

Evaggelia-Tereza Kontogeorgou

House of English Language School & Research Centre
eveterekon@yahoo.gr

Abstract

Teaching very young learners is one of the most challenging, yet, most rewarding things in the field of TEFL. Teaching kindergarten students and first graders focuses on teaching the language by creating experiences. This paper is about teaching English to very young learners (5-7 years old) through Art. The paper explores some of the key characteristics, needs and strengths of the very young learners and the way some Art forms can be used in order to teach English to them. It focuses on how teaching very young learners through Art, means exposing students to authentic paintings instead of flashcards, turning them into live works of Art, having them create individual and group Art projects and exposing them to performing arts, while learning and producing the target language. Finally, the paper shows how Art places the children in the centre of the learning procedure, giving them reasons to use the language and engages them meaningfully in the learning procedure.

Keywords: Art, pre-junior, phonics, meaningful, learning, experience.

1. Introduction

Teaching very young learners has always been one of the most challenging things in the field of education. The age of the learners in combination with their short attention span and their profile which will be analyzed later on, makes teaching them a demanding task, yet a most rewarding one.

Let's take a look at those very young learners. Who are they? Their age ranges from 3 to 7 years old but there is methodology for teaching 2-year-olds too. Most language schools in Greece have language classes for age groups from 4-5 years old (pre-k groups), 5-6 years old (kindergarten groups) and 6-7 years old (pre-junior groups). In this paper we will focus on pre-junior level students who are taught pre-reading and pre-writing skills along with topic vocabulary and new structures. For the rest of the essay, I shall call those very young learners VYL.

At the beginning of this essay, we will look at the VYL profile, the methodology we use for teaching those age groups and we will explore how those VYL learn. Then we will examine the benefits of using Art as a teaching tool when it comes to those age groups.

Finally, we will look at the activities a language school can incorporate in its syllabus when teaching English to VYL through Art, so as to keep them actively engaged in the learning procedure and achieve the learning objectives for that age group.



2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Very Young Learners' Profile

Very young learners are kinaesthetic learners which means that they learn while moving around, while being active. They have a very short attention span as well. The average attention span of a 4-year-old ranges between 8-20 minutes, for a 5-year-old between 10-25 minutes, for a 6-year-old between 12-30 minutes and for a 7-year-old between 14-35 minutes. Very young learners are naturalistic learners. They love outdoor activities and whatever has to do with the natural world. They are egocentric and easily bored, that is why the teacher has to prepare a lot of activities for the same learning objective. They are less shy than older learners since school has not deprived them of their spontaneity and they are not afraid to make mistakes. They enjoy imitating and are skillful in listening accurately, that is why it is important that the teacher is a perfect language model for the students.

Moreover, very young learners enjoy learning through playing, acting, making and doing but mostly by exploring and discovering. They are imaginative. They understand language as units not separate words. They interpret meaning without necessarily understanding the individual word and they learn indirectly rather than directly. Very young learners love praise and reward and should be given positive feedback every time they achieve a goal. Finally, they develop physically, mentally and conceptually every day. That is why the activities differ from level to level and the teacher should always pay attention that they are age appropriate. (Ersoz, A., (2007), *Teaching English to Young Learners* and Rodríguez-Lopez B. and R., Varela-Mández, (2004) *Models of Teaching Foreign Languages to Young Children*).

2.2. Methodology for VYL

As regards the basic methodology when teaching very young learners online, the focus should always be on Listening and Speaking. The emphasis should be on the meaning and not on the form for these levels, and this can be achieved through fun, engaging activities that create the need for communication. Authentic material, songs, stories, fairytales, plays, games, movement and interaction are essential to teach VYL online as well as tasks that arouse their curiosity and initiate production – Art can surely achieve this result. Sole use of L2 in the classroom is essential, same as routines since children of that age feel comfortable and safe knowing what follows.

There is a special kind of language we tend to use with those age groups called “Motherese”. You can also find it as parentese, caretaker speech, input language, child-directed speech, baby talk. The teacher uses simple words such as “tummy” for abdomen, “mummy” for mother, “boo-boo” for wound or hurt with a shift in the vocal timbre. When it comes to commands and classroom language, we use the so called “teacherese”, simple commands, with repetitions accompanied by body language. Demanding but manageable and developmentally appropriate activities should be selected and finally the sessions when it comes to online lessons should be short, since children of that age have a short attention span, but frequent.

In general, VYL learn a foreign language when they are actively involved, use their senses to make sense of the environment, practice role play and share their experiences with others. They should gradually be able to solve problems, practice and refine their skills, and imitate others after observing them. The teacher must be a perfect language model since the students will mainly imitate his pronunciation. Students should be exposed to a wide range of materials and activities, be given lots of examples, lots of repetition and practice and they should be given the time to react to any stimulus so as to be able to respond to it. Last but not least, at



an emotional level, VYL must see that someone is interested in what they do or are trying to solve, feel safe and loved and be praised for their effort. (Harmer, J., (2007) *The Practice of English language teaching* and Gardner-Neblett, N and K. C.Gallagher, (2013), *More than baby talk: 10 ways to promote the language and communication skills of infants and toddlers*).

2.3. Teaching Through Art: Literature Review

Art has always played a very important role in language teaching. Many researchers and educators around the world, have been implementing Art-based material into their lessons. In this review, we are going to take a close look at the various research projects that have been conducted on this matter, present and analyze their results.

Visual Arts and aids are very important to language teaching and they are used by many educators. As noted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (1999, p.8) “Children first learn to respond aesthetically to their environment through touch, taste, sound and smell, and their natural curiosity suggests a need for sensory experience”. Art and its various forms are perfect for raising students’ sensory awareness and reinforces their innate curiosity for the world and their needs for exploring and experimenting. Moreover, “Learning in and through art can contribute positively to children’s sense of personal and cultural identity and to their whole development” (1999, p.8). So, through Art, students broaden their horizons, meet new cultures and learn from and about them. All these elements, greatly affect their emotional growth and development, as well as their linguistic identity.

Furthermore, when it comes to visual aids, Andrew Wright illustrated the importance of pictures in his handbook *Pictures of Language Learning*. He explains that “pictures have a major role to play in the development of student skills in listening and reading” and that “the pictures have motivated the students, made the subjects they are dealing with clearer, and illustrated the general idea and forms of an object or action which are particular to a culture” (Wright, 1989, p.1). This is the reason we use a variety of different paintings when presenting topic vocabulary. Paintings have a lot to offer to students and teachers alike, as they provide meaningful context and encourage further discussion. Greek students are not often exposed to works of Art, so paintings and other forms of Art such as sculpting, photography, etc., always attract their attention and make the lesson and the target language more memorable. This is reinforced by a study titled “Using Visual Materials in Teaching Vocabulary in English as a Foreign Language Classrooms with Young Learners”, conducted by Dorela Kaçauni Konomi (2014) in Korça, Albania. According to the data collected from this research, young children enjoy and value their visual-implemented classes.

In a recent article by Jorge Sette (2021), *Teaching English Through Art*, it is noted that “Art, therefore, lends itself perfectly to the job, as it provides a wonderful canvas (pun intended) to design innumerable language activities on. It allows the inclusion, in the English class, of other subjects studied in the curriculum, such as history, geography, mythology, psychology, and literature. So, it makes for great CLIL lessons” (Sette, 2021, para. 7). As we can see, Art is capable of encompassing many themes and subjects. Through Art, students learn about history, geography and talk about books, authors and even, new forms of Art. There is always a specific purpose and students are acquiring language rather than just learning it.

To sum up, Art and its various forms, play a very important role when it comes to language teaching and more specifically when teaching English as a Foreign/Secondary Language. Its benefits and their importance to the students’ linguistic and emotional growth and development are pivotal. We include all forms of Art in our lessons, as all educators



should, since learners and especially VYL tend to get easily bored and our activities should always keep up with their interests and developmental stages.

2.4. Teaching Through Art: Benefits

The benefits of teaching English through Art to VYL are numerous, as they are exposed to a wide range of Art-based materials and practices. In the following paragraphs, I am going to present some of these benefits and, also, expand on them.

First of all, through Art, we can present and discuss difficult concepts and the different characteristics between them. For example, Art movements like Abstract Art and Realism, are presented visually to the VYL, as they are quite difficult to comprehend and analyze for their age. As we can understand, the use of real paintings in a class has many advantages for the students and makes the lesson more memorable for them.

Art projects boost students' critical thinking and help them in developing creative problem-solving skills. Educators can have multiple Art-based projects and give VYL the chance to work together, as teams or pairs, to create their own works of Art, to solve Art-based puzzles or to play creative games.

Moreover, teachers must have a bank of creative activities always in mind. VYL get easily bored and easily distracted. They benefit a lot from kinaesthetic and visual-based activities, although not all of them are the same. They have different developmental stages as well as interests, so the activities should be interesting and engaging for all of them. Through this variety of different Art-based activities and games, students develop their fine and gross motor skills, as well as their risk-taking skills and inventiveness when coming face to face with riddles and puzzles. Also, they are solely exposed to L2, so they develop their language skills as well.

It is advised to have them work together to create something, as at this age they are very egocentric and this is a characteristic trait that all educators should work on. When learning through art students engage constructively with each other. They even teach one another by assigning them different parts of the same project. Students learn to share materials, work with others, help their classmates, comment on others work, thus empowering social skills, collaboration and group learning.

Furthermore, Art education connects VYL with their own culture as well as with the wider world. As mentioned above, students of these ages are very egocentric and feel that everything is for and about them. Through the exposure to many different forms of Art, materials, Art movements, Artists and cultures, they learn about the world around them and how they should be part of it. They come in contact with diversity and learn how to accept it.

Summing up, Art lessons are always very fun and entertaining for students and teachers alike. They offer a variety of benefits that play a major role in VYLs' development in all fields. Children can create their own pieces of Art and learn and understand the world through them. As Julia Cameron wrote "We are, ourselves, creations. And, we, in turn, are meant to continue creativity by being creative ourselves" (Cameron, 2006: 9).

3. Methodology

In our Language School we have designed a program to expose VYL to the English Language through Art. The lessons take place twice a week and we do not use any coursebook.

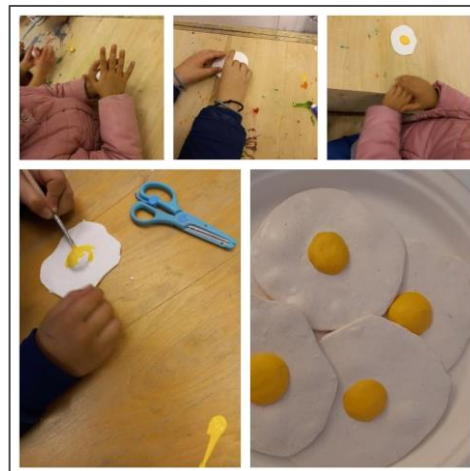
The first session is mainly devoted to the teaching of phonics. Students are taught the first 26 sounds of the English language but not in alphabetical order. We introduce more commonly used letters such as s, c, p, t first, then we add some short vowels so as to move on



to make CVC words, we continue with the less frequently used sounds and then add one more vowel at the end of each set. We also avoid teaching visually similar letters together since children may be easily confused. All letters are presented through authentic paintings or sculptures. The children are presented the new letter/sound, then they have to find the hidden letter in the painting/sculpture and mime the related action (eg. H for Hat: Ss mime that they are wearing a Hat). Finally, students make a craft related to the word and action. You can see examples in the following pictures:



Melted clocks to learn c, k and ck



E for egg

To consolidate the form and sound of the letters students play games to recognize the sounds, such as swat the sound or light the sound (using torches), kinaesthetic/Performing Arts games, and finally they are exposed to many multisensory activities to practice both form and sound.

During the first session students are also taught the topic vocabulary. The teacher presents paintings and works of Art instead of the usual flashcards. For the purpose of this paper, we have carried out research in our school to study the efficiency of the program.



A group of students was taught the topic vocabulary using paintings and works of Art, while the other groups were exposed to it using flashcards. We noticed that although the short-term results were the same in both groups, with students remembering the words during the practice and production stages, the results were different in the long run. Students who were taught the topic vocabulary through Art could recall the words better after a long period of time and had associated them with the corresponding piece of art. That is because Art, when used in teaching, enhances observation skills. Students learn to observe and process better what is in front of them, thus, improves their cognition and memory.

The second session of the week is devoted to the consolidation of the taught language. Students practice and produce language through activities which are related to Art. Examples of the following activities follow:

1. Students recognize the colours in paintings. They learn about cool and warm colours, they mix colours and they make new ones.
2. Students make their own paintings made of shapes. They present them to their classmates. They become alive paintings forming shapes and present their alive painting.



3. Students draw the school objects and then create a wall mural. They present it to their teachers. They also play games such as “What is missing?” using their wall mural.

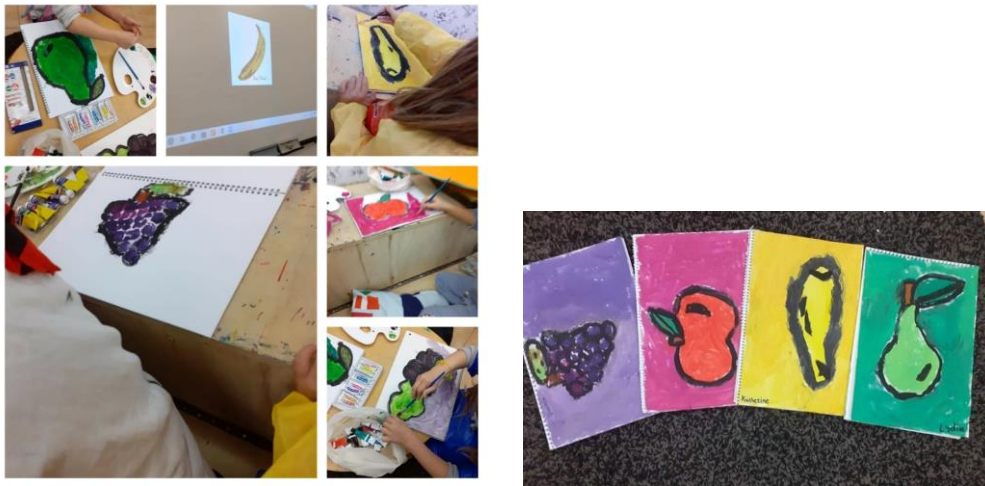


4. Students mold the farm animals and create a farm. They present the farm to their classmates. The handmade farm animals can be used to play vocabulary games as well.

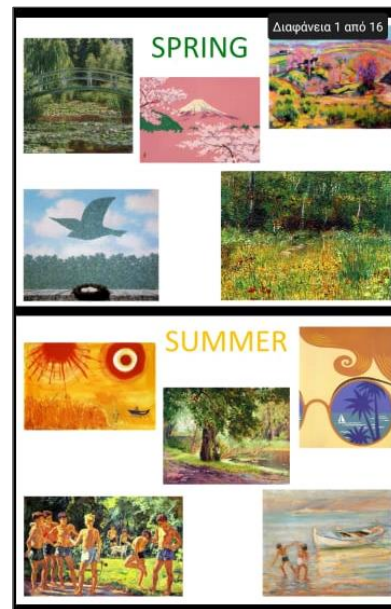


5. Students are inspired by Pop Art and paint fruit and vegetables. They create their own handmade, works of Art flashcards, present them to their classmates and play multiple vocabulary games with them.





6. The four seasons are presented to the students through different kinds of paintings. Students are also called to identify the season when shown different paintings. To consolidate vocabulary, we involve Performing Arts activities where students mime the season according to the piece of music that they listen to after identifying and naming it. At the end of the lesson, students are divided into groups and make their own piece of art based on four different painting techniques and then they present it.





ACTIVITY

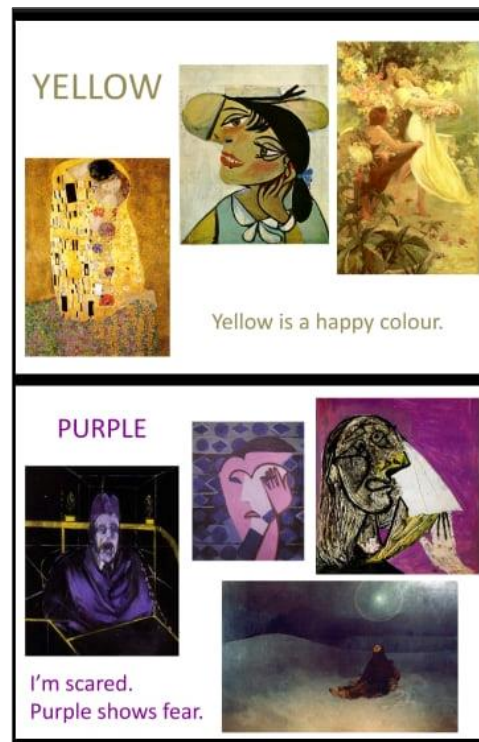
Paint a 4-seasons tree using the following paintings as an inspiration!

Art movements:
Pointillism (Georges Seurat)
Impressionism (Vincent van Gogh)
Art Nouveau (Gustav Klimt)
Cubism (Piet Mondrian)



7. Students associate feelings with colours and are shown examples of paintings. Students realise that sometimes the same colour can provoke different emotions, depending on how the painter has used it. For example, blue can be associated both with calmness and sadness. In their paintings they are encouraged to choose their own interpretations of those colours. They are invited to produce their own works of art according to how they feel and present them using the vocabulary they have already been taught (e.g., a portrait: parts of the face vocabulary).





4. Conclusion

In a 2019 article in the journal Trends in Neuroscience and Education, Dr. Hardiman and her colleagues described the results of a randomized controlled trial looking at students of the fifth grade who were taught science content, some using practices from arts education, and others with more traditional forms of teaching. The researchers came to the conclusion that students with more limited reading skills, remembered more science if they had learned it with the integrated arts methods. We could easily conclude that the same applies to foreign language teaching. Art allows for elaboration and repetition, and memory is surely enhanced



through repetition. Art also allows children to develop in many creative ways on the taught material. So, especially for VYL who have not acquired literacy skills in the foreign language, Art is the perfect way to introduce them to it since learning becomes creative and “visible”.

Acknowledgments

This paper is an output of the research I have conducted in our Language School & Research Centre. So, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the many parents who trusted us and believed in a different Education System, when it comes to teaching English as a foreign language. My gratitude also goes to my colleagues who have been teaching those age groups and helped me carry out this research, Miss Maria Argiri and Miss Evaggelia Tereza Kontogeorgou. Finally, I am very grateful to my students who helped me see through their eyes, made me want to become a better person and a better educator and have always helped me choose “the road not taken”, and that has made the difference in my life and theirs as well.

Bibliographical references

- Cameron, J. (2006). *The Artist’s Way Workbook*. England: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Ersoz, A. (2007). *Teaching English to Young Learners*. Ankara: EDM Publishing.
- Gardner-Neblett, N., & Gallagher, K.C. (2013). More than baby talk: 10 ways to promote the language and communication skills of infants and toddlers. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG child Development Institute, North Carolina, pg. 2.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English language teaching*. Essex: Pearson Longman.
- Hardiman, M. (2019, April). *The effects of arts-integrated instruction on memory for science content*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2211949317300558>.
- Konomi, D. K. (n.d.). *Using visual materials in teaching vocabulary in English ...* Retrieved on February 25, 2022 from: <https://conference.pixel-online.net/NPSE/files/npse/ed0003/FP/0311-SERA209-FP-NPSE3.pdf>.
- Rodríguez-Lopez, B., & Varela-Mández, R. (2004). *Models of Teaching Foreign Languages to Young Children*, *Didáctica (Lengua y Literatura)* (Vol. 16), 163-175, 167-168.
- Sette, J. (2021, March 8). *Neurolanguage Collective Magazine*. Retrieved February 25, 2022, from: <https://neurolanguagecollective.com/edition-6-march-2021/teaching-english-throughart/?fbclid=IwAR0wLQuczB4lylT9ofmS6ROCh9lIEk9zs7nvYBkGbJVbvRRA63z2WHw7sl>.
- THE STATIONERY OFFICE. (n.d.). *Visual arts - curriculum*. Retrieved on February 25, 2022 from https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/b47c06be-46d9-4e98-828b-ff69537d7670/PSEC04A_Visual_Arts_Guidelines.pdf.
- Wright, A. (n.d.). *Cambridge University Press 978-0-521-35800-2 - assets*. Retrieved on February 25, 2022 from: https://assets.cambridge.org/97805213/58002/excerpt/9780521358002_excerpt.pdf.

