

“MUSEUM AUDIO DESCRIPTION AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING TOOL”

Questo contributo si concentra sull'audiodescrizione (AD) museale, originariamente intesa come strumento di accesso ai musei per le persone con disabilità visive, per considerarne il potenziale per l'apprendimento delle lingue straniere. L'AD filmica è già stata indagata per soddisfare le esigenze di nuovi gruppi, fra cui migranti e studenti, e come attività per la didattica delle lingue. Analogamente, in questo articolo si propone l'AD museale come strumento pedagogico per lo studio delle lingue (ad esempio l'inglese), in un contesto di apprendimento formale o informale. I vantaggi dell'AD museale per la didattica delle lingue saranno discussi analizzando un esempio di AD museale in inglese e proponendo un piano didattico che comprende l'applicazione dell'AD in task passivi e attivi.

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¹ In line with the terminology adopted by the Council of Europe (2001), a receptive activity requires concentration on reception of a message as opposed to productive activities, which may include oral or written production.

Introduction

This contribution focuses on museum audio description (AD) as a specific instance of museum translation originally devoted to widening accessibility and as an AD sub-genre offering an intersemiotic and “intersensorial translation” (De Coster & Mühleis, 2007: 189) of artworks and artefacts, in order to consider its potential as a tool for foreign language learning (FLL). Although originally addressed to blind people, AD (especially screen AD) has been investigated from different perspectives within the framework of Audiovisual Translation, also acknowledging its value for other target groups, such as the elderly, migrants and individuals with additional cognitive needs (Perego, 2017). More recently, screen AD has also started to be explored as a receptive¹ and productive teaching activity for foreign language (FL) education.

This paper argues that museum AD may similarly be revisited as a didactic instrument that could be adopted to engage with various groups, including people

studying FLs (e.g. English). In particular, ADs provided online by museums may be a valuable tool for both formal and informal learning. The benefits of museum AD for teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) will be discussed by analyzing an example of museum AD script in English available online. Furthermore, a lesson plan will be proposed, aimed at the development of receptive and productive skills through museum AD, with a view to designing innovative programs directed to secondary and tertiary education students.

Museums as sites for discovery and language learning

Despite their traditional elitism, museums have taken on board their educational mission (Hein, 1998), striving to be inclusive learning spaces. Born as “centers for public learning” (Falk & Dierking, 2013: 14), museums are in fact “free-choice/informal educational institutions” (ibid.: 25). As such, they are not expected to teach or disseminate knowledge but rather to facilitate learning, or “lei-

sure-learning” (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999: 21). In the last few decades, the concept of the “constructivist museum” (Hein, 1998: 35) has been increasingly embraced, considering the learner as an active agent involved in the meaning-making process and in the construction of knowledge, with a subsequent shift from an education-based to a learning-based model. Museums are certainly in a privileged position to inspire curiosity and critical thinking, thanks to their multimodal and multisensory inputs and to the power of their tangible and intangible collections. Through a range of communicative modes and types of translation, museums can invite the co-creation of multiple levels of meaning and encourage a social, interactive experience, in a journey (Falk & Dierking, 2013: 17) encompassing – and moving beyond – the actual visit itself. Few empirical studies have investigated language learning practices in museums, most of them in the Anglo-Saxon context. Shoemaker (1998) described an English for Students of Other Languages (ESOL) project at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, showing that museum artworks inspired students’ oral and written communication in the target language. Ruanglertbutr (2016) demonstrated how interacting with the Potter Museum of Art in Melbourne enabled students to use art-specific vocabulary and understand the value of cultural heritage within a democratic society. Nagata (2018: 47) discussed the linguistic and intercultural potential of ESOL programs carried out at Victoria & Albert Museum, London, to “respond to the needs of the underserved population” of language learners. Given the increased international mobility and migration, other studies (e.g. Clarke, 2013; Fazzi and Meneghetti, 2021) have focused on museum-based ESOL programs for migrant students and their impact on identity construction and social inclusion.

AD as a language learning tool

Translation has slowly started to be regarded as an increasingly accepted and beneficial task-based practice in language education (Laviosa, 2014; Pintado Gutiérrez, 2021), without necessarily involving professional translator training among its purposes. Although the effectiveness of audiovisual (AV) materials in the FL classroom is now supported by a large body of literature (Lertola, 2019), the main modalities of Audiovisual Trans-

lation experimented and integrated into FLL have been subtitling and dubbing (e.g. Chiu, 2012; Díaz Cintas & Fernández Cruz, 2008), only more recently followed by AD. The latter has received increasing attention, also thanks to European funded research-led projects, in light of the growing awareness about accessibility issues in the media and the rapid flourishing of this professional practice.

AD is an access tool that “makes the visual images of theatre, media and visual art accessible for people who are blind or have low vision” (Snyder, 2013: 12). While originally addressed to this main target audience, research has acknowledged the potential of AD for all, sighted and non-sighted alike, e.g. to guide students’ attention and complement regular teaching tools (Krejtz et al., 2012). Within the context of FLL, studies² have focused on the application of receptive and productive AD in face-to-face, blended or online contexts for gaining diverse language competences, including vocabulary development (Martínez Martínez, 2012; Ibáñez & Vermeulen, 2013; Walczak, 2016) and oral skills (Talaván & Lertola 2016; Navarrete, 2018, 2021).

The first studies in this area have explored the potential of receptive AD for vocabulary acquisition (Martínez Martínez, 2012) and to foster lexical and phraseological competence (Ibáñez & Vermeulen, 2013). Furthermore, receptive AD has proved to be able to successfully complement traditional didactic methods and encourage peer cooperation between disabled and non-disabled learners (Walczak, 2016). Only later were experiments on productive AD carried out, whereby language learners were asked to audio describe an AV product, which is in line with the increasing tendency of having FL students record descriptions (Thomas & Schneider, 2020). For instance, Talaván and Lertola (2016) tested productive AD with Spanish students of B1-level English for Specific Purposes (Tourism) by focusing on oral fluency while recording the AD of two tourist advertisements, with encouraging insights as to the potential benefits of productive AD tasks for oral and writing production, as well as oral and reading comprehension. In addition, the two scholars emphasized the extended potential of such a pedagogical resource beyond the acquisition of language skills, encompassing also a

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² See Lertola (2019: 51) for a more comprehensive list of experimental studies on the potential benefits of AD in FLL.

social dimension, as “students can produce something useful ... to promote accessibility (at different levels) outside the educational context” (Talaván & Lertola, 2016: 60). Navarrete (2018) also carried out a small-scale experiment with productive AD tasks to study the enhancement of oral skills (fluency, pronunciation and intonation) with university students of B1-level of Spanish as a foreign language, collecting positive feedback from the participants regarding the AD impact on language learning.

In her review of the didactic value of Audiovisual Translation in FLL, Talaván (2020: 575) argued that productive AD tasks are “supposed to imitate real AD, so that learners may perceive the importance of transferring the information contained in the images as accurately as possible, as if they were really making the corresponding AV content accessible for a person with visual challenges.” She also listed a diverse spectrum of skills that can benefit from this practice, among them writing and speaking production, lexical acquisition, functional and grammatical content, and cultural awareness. The author further suggested that AD may be applied at all L2 proficiency levels provided there is some flexibility in the task: while beginners may be asked to write short sentences with simple descriptions, complete AD scripts can be achieved by more advanced students.

Finally, by drawing on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) and on its Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018), Navarrete (2021) remarkably suggested that didactic audio description should be considered as a type of mediation task, in which the learner is a social agent accomplishing a task in a real-life situation, i.e. mediating between the AV product and other people by using aural/written discourse to interpret what can be seen.

Proposing museum AD as a language learning tool

Drawing on the results from the literature on the application of didactic AD to FLL, this paper argues that museum AD may similarly be revisited as a pedagogical instrument that could be adopted by educators and learners of FLs (e.g. English). If the same benefits of didactic AD hold true for museum AD, the latter may bring a fundamental educational and social value to the FLL classroom. In addition, it could promote the acquisition of art-specific vocabulary and foster greater awareness of the value of cultural heritage in our societies, thus potentially having an impact beyond language education. In particular, ADs provided online by museums as part of a virtual visit experience may be a valuable tool for both formal learning and home self-learning, especially after the Covid-19 outbreak and the resulting closure of museums, schools and universities all over the world. Another advantage offered by the provision of AD of resources other than AV products (i.e. other multimedia materials that do not include an audio/video component) is that technology may only partially be required for the completion of the task. Since specific software is not necessary to employ museum AD in an educational context (apart from recording tools in the case of recorded AD), technical issues may be avoided, and fewer digital skills are needed.

Museum audio description, i.e. the descriptive guide of an artwork or artefact, is here envisaged as part of a lesson plan comprising authentic communicative tasks framed within the task-based action-oriented learning method. Furthermore, the benefits of museum AD for FLL will be discussed by 1) analyzing an example of museum AD in English available online and 2) proposing its application within a B2 English course, with a view to designing innovative programs for FLL, potentially directed to secondary and tertiary education students. Due to obvious space constraints, the present paper will not discuss a specific assessment rubric for the proposed activities. Nevertheless, rubrics from previous studies experimenting with didactic AD (see e.g. Talaván & Lertola, 2016; Navarrete, 2018) may arguably be relevant to museum-AD activities.

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Analysis of an example of museum AD

The material employed in this research includes an AD of an artwork from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. The museum website provides pictures of its paintings – offering students and practitioners a colorful, inspiring didactic resource – as well as a pre-recorded AD in English³ for a selection of paintings (ranging between 2 to 6 minutes each). Among the fourteen ADs available on the MoMA website, an extract has been selected in Table 1 to highlight the AD richness, especially in terms of vocabulary.

This museum AD could allow students to expand their vocabulary range, spanning from specialist terms related to the artistic technique (“brushstrokes”, “patches”, “flecks”, “daubed” and “clusters”) to the multisensory analogies used to describe the colors and light (“an abstract mist of color”, “the cool green depth of a pine forest”, “the gleaming blues and greens of a peacock’s tail” and “vast, dancing surfaces of reflected sunlight”). Not only do such analogies offer a poetic interpretation of the artwork but they recreate a visual image that may evocatively promote recollections of personal life experiences and foster memorability in the long term. Furthermore, students can learn to vary formulation to avoid frequent repetitions, e.g. in the way elements of the artwork are described. Finally, this visual description engagingly refers to the painter’s experience (“a meditation in paint”) as well as to the viewer’s own experience of looking at the painting (“The scale of these three huge paintings allows one not just to look at them but rather to immerse oneself in them”), thus potentially encouraging personal reactions and the expression of subjective perceptions.

Lesson plan

The lesson plan proposed includes a preliminary receptive activity to help students become familiar with museum AD, followed by a productive, hands-on activity to create an AD from scratch. As will be illustrated in the following sub-sections, both are intended to be flexible, as they can be customized for different levels of language proficiency.

Claude Monet. <i>Water Lilies</i> . 1914-26
The scale of these three huge paintings allows one not just to look at them but rather to immerse oneself in them. ... Each of the canvasses is completely devoted to water – the edge of the pond is never shown. It’s a mysterious, shifting world. Nothing is clearly defined. The paintings are made up of blurry, merging brushstrokes , forming an abstract mist of color . In the darker areas of the canvas, where the water seems to be in shadow, it has the cool green depth of a pine forest . Lighter areas reflect back the sky in the gleaming blues and greens of a peacock’s tail . There are also vast, dancing surfaces of reflected sunlight, daubed onto the canvas in chaotic patches of creamy paint. Clusters of green floating lily-pads fill large portions of the pond. And flecks of pink, lilac and yellow on the pads convey the water–lilies themselves. These paintings are a celebration of Monet’s lifelong devotion to the effects of light. The result is as much a meditation in paint as it is a visual record of Monet’s own garden and pond.

Table 1

Example of museum AD (source: MoMA)

Receptive activity

In this preliminary activity (see the sample structure in Table 2), after a general introduction, an authentic or adapted museum AD can be played without looking at the described artwork (e.g. a painting, a sculpture or another object) to let students experience art in a different way, i.e. through their ears. Before playing the recording, learners should be given instructions that are meant to guide the activity and facilitate concentration during their listening experience. For instance, learners can be informed that they will listen to the recording of a visual description of an artwork and that, after the listening activity, they will be requested to pick out concrete information and write down what they have heard and can remember. Questions may be asked about the painting’s overall content, as well as about specific details. After showing the image of the painting and collecting feedback, students may be provided with the AD script, which can be employed for reading comprehension to guide learners in the exploration of the AD, while potentially playing the recording again with the text and image now at their disposal.

Due to temporal limitations, it is recommended to include in the AD scripts only the information pertaining to the figures and elements depicted in the paintings, without too much contextual information. Ad hoc ADs may be created, but the use of existing material made available by museums would make the preparation of the activity less time-consuming.

³ Available for fair use for educational purposes on the MoMA website: <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/3?locale=en> (accessed on 25 July 2022).

Phase	Description	Objective
Warm-up	General information is provided about the task	To guide the task and set up expectations
Listening activity	Students listen to a sample of museum AD with their eyes closed	To develop listening and concentration skills
Writing activity	Students are asked general/specific questions about the work of art	To test students' understanding of the recording
Collecting feedback	Students are shown the work of art described; feedback is collected on their experience	To reflect upon one's work
Reading activity	Students read and analyze the AD script along with the picture of the artwork	To develop reading skills, better understand the visual information and make students more familiar with AD

Table 2

Sample structure for a receptive activity with museum AD

Productive task

As suggested by previous studies (Talaván & Lertola, 2016), in productive AD tasks students are not expected to create professional ADs, but they are provided with the necessary resources to best perform the task. Practitioners play a crucial role, but a balance is needed “between teachers’ control and learners’ initiative through periodic guidance and feedback” (Lertola, 2019: 79). Nonetheless, emphasis is on creativity, mediation and the social value of the AD, i.e. describing a visual input to other people, especially (but not exclusively) the non-sighted. The steps in which the task is structured are indicated in Table 3.

Table 3

Sample structure for a productive task with museum AD

Phase	Description	Objective
Introduction and set-up	Students may be divided into pairs; each student/pair is assigned a work of art	To prepare students for the activity
Brainstorming vocabulary	General information about each work of art is provided, including art-specific vocabulary	To gather background knowledge and understand the visual information to be described
Preparing for the AD activity	Students receive appropriate guidelines for AD production	To make learners familiar with AD and guide the activity
Writing the AD	Students are asked to write an AD script of an assigned work of art (individually/in pairs)	To develop writing production skills and use relevant lexical and grammatical content related to descriptions
Oral performance	Students deliver/record their AD orally	To develop speaking production skills (and technical skills, in the case of recorded AD)
Feedback	ADs are discussed in class (peer-review and teacher's feedback)	To reflect upon and improve one's work

The practical activity is anticipated by a set-up phase (e.g. group division), an introduction to the artwork(s) selected and a brainstorming session to help students learn and use the specific art-related vocabulary required to carry out the AD task. Furthermore, students’ attention should be guided by practitioners through the main steps for the preparation of a museum AD, by drawing on existing professional guidelines that can be simplified and adapted for pedagogical purposes.⁴ Along with a professional AD sample (presented in the former receptive task), ad hoc flexible guidelines are a fundamental introductory resource to pave the way for the productive practice.

Before delivering their AD or recording their voices, students can be invited to prepare a script, but naturalness of speech should always be aimed in the description of the images (Talaván & Lertola, 2016: 61). The writing activity can be devised as a purposeful activity, either collaborative or individual. In the latter case, students can then review a classmate’s script, carry out a group discussion, and finally select the most adequate script, hence promoting the co-construction of meaning. Along with the visual description, students could also be asked for a personal response to artworks considered as “creative texts”, thus providing them with an opportunity to express their feelings, perceptions and attitudes, and ultimately their personal interpretation of the art pieces.

If live AD performance is chosen, the activity will not require any recording software. On the other hand, in the case of a recorded AD, the activity can be designed in the form of a podcast activity (King & Gura, 2007). The recording option offers students the opportunity to produce a tangible output, which can be used multiple times and may help develop a sense of communicative achievement. The final step will include the analysis of the linguistic errors based on peer-to-peer and teacher’s feedback.

⁴ For professional museum AD guidelines, see Remael et al. (2015). For models of pedagogical AD guidelines, see Ibáñez & Vermeulen (2013), Talaván (2020) and Navarrete (2021).

Conclusions: new language learning tools at the museum, in the classroom and online

A fast-growing body of research supports the integration of Audiovisual Translation tasks such as AD in the FL classroom. Integrating AD into language education enables learners to acquire a range of language and transferable skills, in particular creativity and critical thinking, and at the same time increases accessibility awareness for both teachers and students. This contribution has sought to discuss museum AD – a sub-genre of general AD – as an innovative pedagogical resource in B2-level FL environments, for both formal and informal learning, which can be adjustable and applicable at different levels. While it has already been acknowledged that the social purpose of audio description makes it a motivating task for language learners, it is here argued that the cultural dimension provided by heritage makes museum audio description even more valuable as a learning resource and a social and cultural mediation task. Although this proposal was aimed at EFL students, a similar approach may arguably be applied with different language combinations and involving students from distinct lingua-cultural contexts, potentially also people with visual impairments.

Of course, the present paper is only a small, preliminary contribution, setting the basis for further investigation on museum ADs in the FL classroom. Alongside visual descriptions of artworks, other types of museum ADs, e.g. from archaeology and science museums, could also be adopted, hence potentially embracing museum AD for content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in subjects other than art history. Furthermore, empirical evidence is needed to observe the benefits that museum AD can bring to language learners and practitioners: experimental studies are thus necessary to validate this proposal, e.g. through questionnaires and language assessment tests, in order to examine the various skills that could be developed, as well as the specific challenges posed by such a new didactic resource.

While it has already been acknowledged that the social purpose of audio description makes it a motivating task for language learners, it is here argued that the cultural dimension provided by heritage makes museum audio description even more valuable as a learning resource and a social and cultural mediation task.

Didactic audio description should be considered as a type of mediation task, in which the learner is a social agent accomplishing a task in a real-life situation, i.e. mediating between the AV product and other people by using aural/written discourse to interpret what can be seen.

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