Museums, and particularly those dedicated to Fine Arts, provide an ideal setting for language learning. Artworks in their authentic surroundings offer interdisciplinary opportunities for learners at different proficiency levels, including beginners. This article explores the benefits of using artworks to teach foreign or second languages, highlighting the potential for personal expression in aesthetic and lyrical forms. We present examples of activities and corresponding written work, as well as the reactions of 6th graders following an EFL-workshop at Museum Ludwig in Cologne. This study demonstrates the effectiveness of integrating language learning with art appreciation in museums, and its potential for fostering creativity and engagement among diverse groups of learners.

The tasks of museums were long ago extended to include education, and educationalists know about the value of extramural places of learning (cf. Igl 1992) - also for language learning. Probably, however, it has never been easier than since last year to embrace the museum as a valuable learning site for foreign and second language teaching beyond the school building, because the new version of the museum definition of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) expands the concept once again, facilitating the participation of different groups of society with different objectives:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing. (ICOM 2022)

By emphasizing accessibility, inclusion, diversity, and sustainability, the current ICOM-definition adds the key words of the contemporary socio-political discussion to the previous, much shorter definition. It thus reaches out to a larger circle of visitors and enables language educators to encourage groups to participate in museum programmes who have not necessarily recognized the museum as a place they enjoy and could use for language learning.

Alberto Garlandini, president of ICOM (2020-2022), sees the role of museums in post-pandemic times primarily as promoting resilience through the healing effects of culture and the power of museums to transform society (Garlandini 2022: 9). According to Garlandini, one component of this power of museums lies in their ability to build community through education (ibid.). The parallels to the tasks of schools are thus obvious.
offers opportunities for personal, linguistic expression in aesthetic forms that are suitable for both beginners and even very advanced learners – and thus also learners with a migration background or refugees. The support of the teacher is needed here, who must provide offers for the form of text production and should provide lexical pre-relief without directing the learners in their engagement with the objects according to predetermined interpretations (Rymarczyk 2020: 315f.).

**Text production in the museum**

Creative writing allows learners a highly subjective access to the object they take up in their text production, but usually also poses linguistic challenges to novice learners, because it is not only necessary to apply the lexis of the foreign language, but also its grammar or syntax rules. One way to deal with this problem is to use very short texts, some of them lyrical, which sometimes even remain on the level of one-word utterances. Three examples of these texts, suitable for working with both children and adult learners in foreign language but also in second language learning contexts, are presented below. The texts (with the exception of the parallel poem in Fig. 5) were created by university students of English as a Foreign Language during a field trip that was part of a seminar on extramural learning. The students were introduced to the text forms which were mostly unknown to them and, of course, to experience the atmosphere of a museum as a learning space.

**Museum Graffiti**

In Museum Graffiti, students work individually, in pairs, or in groups to find a word to describe a work of art. Once the word is found, different colored, prepared (crochet) strings are selected and the word is laid out on the museum floor (cf. Fig. 1+2). The message of the text is mainly conveyed by the meaning of the word itself, but also by the color, materiality and "typography" of the laid string.

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1 Museum Graffiti was developed by Karin Rottmann, the former deputy director of the Museum Service Cologne. On the one hand, the activity was inspired by so-called "guerrilla knitting," a form of street art in which objects in public space are knitted around with colorful wool to new effect. On the other hand, the museum graffiti allows a colorful design of the texts, which is otherwise rarely possible in museums, as the use of colored pencils in front of the exhibits is prohibited (oral communication Karin Rottmann).

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Elflet

An Elflet is a poem that does not rhyme and obtains lyrical aesthetics through its formal structure (cf. Fig. 3a). In addition, a content requirement can be formulated for each line, which is varied according to the didactic objective (cf. Fig. 3b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1 word)</th>
<th>An object, mood, thought, smell, colour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(2 words)</td>
<td>What is this word like? What does this word do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>How does it behave? What is the word like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>Where is it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>()</td>
<td>What do you think about this word? What is your opinion about it? Something you want to tell the reader of this poem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there a conclusion/ an outcome/ a result?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Safety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>False belief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In our minds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel safe?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restlessness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The elflet in Fig. 3c was created for Julia Scher’s installation “Security By Julia X” (1991), which stereotypes a large surveillance desk of a security company with surveillance cameras, monitors, and various listening and other control devices. The alienation of the installation is based primarily on the pink camouflage pattern and the other objects in bright pink (see Fig. 4).
Parallel Poems

In parallel poems, the original form of the poem is taken up and filled with terms of one’s own choosing.

Poems by Eugen Gomringer such as “avenidas” (cf. Fig. 5a) or “Vielleicht” (cf. Fig. 5c) are very well suited as structural models, because they are linguistically simple, concise and contain multiple repetitions. The text of a secondary student with an immigration background learning German on Robert Indiana’s “Love Rising / Black and White Love (For Martin Luther King)” (1968) (cf. Fig. 5b) shows very clearly how the use of four nouns filled in on the lines provided can produce a meaningful text (cf. Fig. 5c).

It is obvious that this very subject-oriented approach is more appropriate for beginning language learners than an approach to artwork that is more art-historical or art-scientific. After all, learners can express their ideas on artwork even with a very restricted vocabulary and grammar knowledge. They are enabled to fully participate in the interaction on artwork, both verbally and non-verbally – which is hardly the case with traditional approaches.

Learner Voices

Sixth grade learners (n = 26) were asked to give their opinions after a project day “English lessons in the Museum Ludwig” (Cologne), a programme offered by the museum educators of this museum. Questionnaires were distributed to both learners and museum educators in order to explore reactions to the day. In the following, some of these voices are presented.

The item “I improved my English during the museum visit” was answered positively by more than half of the children (54 %) (“Yes, very much” (1 x) / “Yes, a lot” (13 x)). To the question “What exactly and why?” 10 out of 24 learners answered with reference to free speaking4 and the presentations of their texts:

“Because we learned to speak freely.”

“I [...] understood that you should not be afraid of presenting.”
These results are testimony of the students’ pride in their achievements in the foreign language which would not have been possible with more traditional approaches.

Obviously, the personal engagement with the artworks and their expression in the (lyrical) short texts enable a higher degree of involvement, identification, and appropriation than the treatment of scholastic topics in the classroom can. The students’ desire to communicate comes to the fore in the museum space and seems to displace the speaking anxiety that is otherwise often found, especially in presentations to larger groups – even in first language contexts (Herbein, Golle, Tibus, Zettler & Trautwein 2018).

The positive response to the museum as an out-of-school learning venue for foreign and second languages is also found among the university students, as evidenced by the statement of one student at the end of the first field trip day: "Until now, museums have never interested me, but now I firmly plan to go there with my students later."

"Because you just speak freely and sometimes you don’t think about what you are speaking and then most of the time you spoke correctly."

"So, I was able to express myself a little better than in English class!!!"

References


Herbein, E., Golle, J., Tibus, M., Zettler, I., & Trautwein, U. (2018). Putting a speech training program into practice: its implementation and effects on elementary school children’s public speaking skills and levels of speech anxiety. Contemporary Educational Psychology, 55, 176-188. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2018.09.003


