

THE ART MUSEUM AS A PLACE FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING: OPENING SPACES, REDUCING INHIBITIONS, UTILIZING POTENTIALS

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.

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programmes at primary and secondary level and the role of visual literacy in this context. This is closely connected to the use of works of fine arts in teaching foreign languages, in the classroom and in museums.

¹ "A non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment" (ICOM, no year).

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 definition¹. 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.

[...], I would like to highlight the museums' power of providing long-life learning opportunities to all members of society. That is particularly important after two years in which educational institutions have been severely limited. Through their collections and programs, museums participate in threading a social fabric that is essential in community building and shaping an informed and engaged civil society. (Garlandini 2022: 10)

Why art museums?

While in principle museums of any kind lend themselves as extramural learning venues for foreign and second language teaching (cf. various examples in Rymarczyk (2013)), the art museum is characterized by a special suitability, which is primarily based on the interdisciplinarity given by the subjects and genres of its exhibits (Goldberg 2021). The contents of the artworks can be taken up and assigned to individual school subjects, ranging from the depiction of cities, animals, plants, or, for example, specific geographical regions or historical epochs, etc., to topics such as social criticism, sustainability, or climate change in contemporary art. However, assignments to subjects via the artistic medium of expression are also possible, if, for example, color effects in painting are assigned to OpArt or exposures in photography are assigned to the subjects of Biology or Physics.

Another argument for the special suitability of art museums is the possibility to link to the nationality of the artists and thus to focus on target language cultures, but also on the cultures of origin of the learners (ibid., p. 29).

Heterogeneous learning groups

Weaker students (Rymarczyk 2016: 270) or learning groups with inclusive needs (Rymarczyk 2015: 204f.) benefit from the primarily visual, non-linguistic input as well as from the way the exhibits are presented, which, for example, can draw attention to essential aspects by cleverly hanging pictures. Finally, it is also the individual confrontation with the works of art, which is characterized by authenticity and learner orientation and

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 Graffiti²

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.

Fig. 1

„Die Rasenbleiche“ (The lawn bleach),
Max Liebermann, 1882/83
Text: „Textilart“



2 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).

Fig. 2

„Die Schlafenden“ (The sleeping people), Hermann Scherer, 1924
 Finished Text: „Bliss“



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).

Fig. 3

Structure, content requirement, and example of an elflet

___ (1 word)	An object, mood, thought, smell, colour	<i>Safety</i>
___ ___ (2 words)	What is this word like? What does this word do? How does it behave? What is the word like?	<i>False belief</i>
___ ___ ___ (3)	Where is it?	<i>In our minds</i>
___ ___ ___ ___ (4)	What do you think about this word? What is your opinion about it? Something you want to tell the reader of this poem.	<i>Do you feel safe?</i>
___ (1)	Is there a conclusion/an outcome/a result?	<i>Restlessness</i>

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).

Fig. 4

Text presentation in front of Scher's "Security By Julia X" (1991)



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."

avenidas Eugen Gomringer	1..... Name: 1..... 1..... and 2..... 2..... 2..... and 3..... 1..... 1..... and 3..... 1..... and 2..... and 3..... an admirer	1. noun 2. noun 3. noun
avenidas avenidas y flores		
flores flores y mujeres		
avenidas avenidas y mujeres		
avenidas y flores y mujeres y un admirador		



Vielleicht

Vielleicht Hoffnung
Hoffnung vielleicht

Vielleicht Ziel
Ziel vielleicht

Vielleicht Respekt
Respekt vielleicht

Vielleicht Liebe
Liebe vielleicht

Fig. 5

Model, structure, preparation and text of a parallel poem³

3 English version:

- Perhaps
- Perhaps hope
hope perhaps
- Perhaps aim
aim perhaps
- Perhaps respect
respect perhaps
- Perhaps love
love perhaps

4 By "free speaking" the learners referred to the fact that the museum educator had encouraged them not to read out their texts but to present them without looking at their texts. Apparently, the learners had not been used to this kind of presentation and called it "free speaking" although, in fact, it was rather a recital of their learned texts.

"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!!!"



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."

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