Bridging the “Culture Gap”:

The Impact of Arts-based Content Lessons on English Learners

Abstract

The emphasis on testing in curricular content areas has left little room in most U.S. schools for education in the arts. Yet research supports the pedagogical value of aesthetic education, particularly for English learners (ELs), who are increasingly numerous in U.S. schools. This paper presents a qualitative research study focused on incorporating aesthetic education into instruction for ELs. Twenty-three graduate education students at a private university in Queens, NY participated in an artist-led workshop rooted in the aesthetic education theories of Maxine Greene (Greene, 1995, 2001, 2007) and structured around the four-stage knowledge acquisition schemas of Torbert (2006) and Heron and Reason (2006). These trainees developed and implemented arts-based lessons in their classrooms. Interviews with teacher participants revealed that their EL students appeared to have expanded their understanding of subject area concepts and vocabulary while increasing their English proficiency. Participants’ feedback regarding their students’ experiences also supported research that suggests that arts based education helps develop ELs cognitive, linguistic, and cultural abilities. This paper also suggests teaching approaches, including two sample EL content lessons.

Keywords: aesthetic education, arts-based teaching, English Language Learners, ELLs, content areas, media
Bridging the “Culture Gap”:

The Impact of Arts-based Content Lessons on English Learners

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Introduction

Despite the value that many Americans place on cultural diversity, many U.S. schools struggle to meet the challenge of serving students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Similarly, state and federal education standards often emphasize the importance of education in the arts, yet many U.S. schools do little to integrate student engagement with the arts into their curricula. In recent years, this twofold challenge has become even more daunting than in the past. First, the number of English learners (ELs) in U.S. schools has never been greater, and the proportion of the overall student population that they represent is likely to increase (Goldenberg, 2008; NCELA, 2011). Second, the high-stakes testing movement that has dominated primary and secondary education in the United States in recent decades has forced many schools and teachers to focus on achievement scores in core academic areas. The mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (NCLB, 2002), for example, dictate that many schools must show performance increases in curricular areas such as English language arts (ELA) and mathematics or suffer consequences.

This emphasis on testing in curricular content areas has left little room for aesthetic education in many schools. Research suggests, however, not only that we lag behind other nations in fostering our children’s ability to engage with and have knowledge of the arts, but that in doing so we are depriving the growing population of EL students of particularly powerful opportunities to develop their linguistic, academic, and cultural competencies.
The lack of aesthetic education in U.S. curricula is not nothing new (see e.g., Richmond, 1998). Over and above a general awareness, however, it is important that legislators, curriculum planners, educators, and the public at large understand the following facts:

1) the arts are supposed to be treated as a core academic subject under NCLB (see Title IX, Part A, Section 9101 (1)(D)(11));

2) teachers in all curricular areas can incorporate arts and aesthetic education into classroom activities in ways that align with the goals of schools, districts, state, and national standards; and

3) there is a growing research basis to support the view that such efforts may be particularly fruitful in fostering the academic development and success of ELs.

Indeed, research suggests that keeping ELs engaged requires providing them with work that is continually motivating and challenging without forcing them to depend on language alone to construct meaning. (Cummins, 1981; Eubanks, 2002; Spina, 2006; Zwiers, 2004, 2008). As McGuire (1984) has asserted, an approach that makes use of the arts can allow students to form new associations and meanings based on innovative experiences. In fact, experiences with the arts lend themselves to creative and imaginative responses while promoting engagement and discussion, thus motivating students to develop their vocabularies and rhetorical skills. Such experiences can provide a foundation upon which to build academic language and overall academic success.
The study reported here represents an effort to translate the above observations into action research that can contribute to the understanding of how the creative side of our children’s education can be enhanced. The purpose of action research is to improve the scope, pertinence, and quality of instruction by augmenting teachers’ understanding of their own practice and of its relationship to the environment in which they live (Torbert, 2006). Heron and Reason state that in action research “the primary procedure to use is inquiry cycles, moving several times between reflection and action” (2006, p. 145).

In the study reported here, a group of graduate education students who were already practitioners with ELs in their classrooms participated in an aesthetic education workshop, in which they developed arts-based content lessons that were tailored to their curricular areas and shaped for their own EL students. Participants provided feedback through interviews conducted after the workshop and again after classroom implementation. The qualitative results of the second round of interviews, which focused on the feedback that participants received from their students and on participants’ own classroom observations, are presented, analyzed, and discussed in light of literature on ELs and aesthetic education. This data is also viewed through the lens of the four-step knowledge acquisition protocols articulated by Torbert and by Heron and Reason.

Literature Review

Aesthetic Education: Its Meaning and Place

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1 Another version of the author’s review of literature for this research also appears in her forthcoming TESOL Journal article “Integrating Aesthetic Education into Professional Development for Teachers of English Learners,” which focuses on aesthetic education as an element of teacher training and on student teachers’ responses to their own practice.
Aesthetic education encourages new connections, patterns, and perceptions through the appreciation of and reflection on meaningful experiences with the arts (Greene, 2001). Such education encompasses

the entire field of art in which lines, colors, forms, and their structures, motions and interrelations are used to create visually, auditorily and/or kinesthetically perceptible works. These include painting, drawing, sculpture, printmaking, pottery, architecture, industrial design, photography, cinematography, textile arts, basketry, typographical arts, multimedia arts, vocal and instrumental music, dance and indigenous forms of visual artistic expression (Spina, 2006, p. 99).

As noted, the subject matter of aesthetic education has often been treated as, at best, an adjunct to curricular content areas in U.S. schools (Richmond, 1998), a state of affairs that is not only regrettable but, to some extent at least, permissible only via a misinterpretation of existing curricular standards. In addition to NCLB, New York State, for example, recently adopted the Common Core Standards, a set of internationally benchmarked principles that takes account of students’ eventual workplace and post-secondary educational expectations. The Common Core State Standards for English language arts, for example, specify rigorous grade-level expectations in the strands of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in order to prepare all students, including ELs, to be college and career ready (New York State Education Department, 2011). However, David Coleman, a co-author of these standards, has made it clear that the arts should be given a prominent place in daily instruction. According to Coleman, students should engage in sustained study of works of art from a variety of media in order to “cultivate [their] observation abilities”:
The arts reward sustained inquiry and provide a perfect opportunity for students to practice the discipline of close observation whether looking at a painting or lithograph, watching a drama or a dance, or attending to a piece of music. New York State is therefore requesting a sequence of materials that cultivates students’ observation abilities in the context of the sustained examination of magnificent works of art that are worthy of prolonged focus. Classroom work would be spent on in depth study; several days or longer might be spent on a specific work. What is requested are a set of arts modules that bring to bear observing, listening to and appreciating expansive works of art across disciplines and grades (Coleman, 2011, p. 1).

Although one might wonder what works of art will qualify as “magnificent” enough for inclusion—and, indeed, one might debate whether such works alone are of pedagogical utility in aesthetic education—it is refreshing to learn from Coleman that there are plans to include such “arts modules” in the curriculum of schools in a state that is not only extremely populous and influential but that is also home to a great many ELs (NCELA, 2011).

**The Role of Aesthetics and the Arts in Teaching English Language Learners**

Students appear to be able to engage mental abilities that encourage higher order thought processes while internalizing input that may not be visual, such as sound or mood (Saxe, 1990). Moreover, practices such as writing based on the arts (Grauer, 2005) have substantiated the effectiveness of arts education in providing input, context, and background for learning that is not dependent on native-like linguistic comprehension. This is due to the nature of the study of visual arts instruction can build cognitive connections to language and enhance students’ ability to capture ideas.

The results, according to the researchers, suggest that visual arts instruction can build cognitive connections to language and enhance students’ ability to capture ideas.
works of art, which requires students to participate in multiple levels of scaffolding while engaging actively in the arts experience. An education encompassing the arts may thus be key to developing the cognitive, linguistic, and cultural abilities of ELs (Gardner, 1988).

Andrzejczak, Trainin, and Poldberg (2005) reported on a project that made use of art creation in the pre-writing process, in which students were given time to elaborate on their ideas, construct descriptive passages, and develop their skill in using relevant vocabulary. Participants began by observing their world, after which they created works of art and subsequently responded in writing to their own finished products. The results, according to the researchers, suggest that visual arts instruction can build cognitive connections to language and enhance students’ ability to capture ideas. The typical sequence in language arts instruction involves writing first, followed by an art project based on the writing. Reversing the order allowed students to engage with their thoughts, feelings, and images through art with paint or crayon before writing a single word. This process resulted in a rich play of sensory details. Creating the art work before writing helped all students to develop a deeper perception of their sensory awareness. This approach can be advantageous for ELs, as it allows them to create without being hampered by the search for words that they may not yet know how to use.

Different forms of art making can assist ELs to make comprehension more meaningful (Eubanks, 2002). For example, students can learn to visualize the connections between art and reality by creating drawings to interpret their understanding (Arnheim, 1990; Platt, 1977). Drawing the meaning of a word yields a result that visual learners may find easier to retain than standard memorized definitions, and Sleichter and Reid (2004) suggest that the arts can support comprehension for students who have other learning styles as well. Thus, a student who learns kinesthetically will be more likely to retain the significance of a word if it is portrayed through
drama or using some form of bodily movement. Similarly, logical or mathematically oriented thinkers might be engaged in replacing or adding words to a poem in order to learn how to use new words. In these scenarios, the students do not simply memorize definitions, they engage actively with the language and use it to produce their own work.

Walter (2006) studied the impact of arts education on the academic achievement of ELs. Participants were divided into three groups: those who received no art instruction, those who received art instruction from a specialist, and those who attended classes in which art was integrated into the core curriculum. The ELs who received art instruction as part of an integrated curriculum achieved higher performance scores on standardized assessments than those in the other two groups.

In Spina’s (2006) study, two groups of fifth grade ELs took part in a study focusing on the impact of an arts based curriculum. Participants were divided into two groups: those who were taught using an arts based curriculum and those who were taught using traditional English as a Second Language (ESL) methods. Students were assessed using pre- and post-test measures to track their reading skills in Spanish and English. The findings suggested that the use of an arts based curriculum may be pivotal in developing the cognitive, linguistic, and cultural skills of ELs.

In a study led by Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Seidel, Tishman, Winner, Hetland, & Palmer, 2009), researchers interviewed arts practitioners and visited exemplary programs in the arts in order to evaluate what constitutes quality in arts education. An important finding that emerged from this effort was the observation that the fact of students’ experiencing the arts firsthand was a more important indicator of success than the quality of the artworks produced.
quality of the artworks produced. Overall, this study and the weight of the research reviewed above point to the importance of providing educators with professional development opportunities in which they explore ways to use the arts in the classroom. The action research study reported below is an example of a guided pedagogical exploration of this kind.

**Method**

To study the impact of incorporating aesthetic education into the instruction of core subject areas for ELs, a group of graduate students in the Department of Education at the Queens, NY campus of St. John’s University—a private, coeducational Roman Catholic university—participated in a workshop led by a teaching artist from The Lincoln Center Institute (LCI), who had experience conducting programs in partnership with educators from pre-K through twelfth grade. LCI bases its aesthetic education principles on the teachings of Maxine Greene, the noted educational philosopher and Professor Emeritus at Teachers College, Columbia University (LCI, 2005). Greene maintains that the complete range of human experience can be incorporated into the classroom through literature and the arts. She encourages educators to imagine alternative ways of being and to teach students to embrace ambiguity and to view works of art as storehouses of possible meanings, some of which may be yet to be discovered (see also Greene, 2007 and other materials available through the website of the Maxine Greene Center, http://www.maxinegreene.org; Shaw & Rozycki, 2000).

The framework for the workshop—which also structures this paper’s discussion of the participants’ feedback regarding their learning experience and their students’ responses to learning content area material and improving their English proficiency through the arts—was derived from Torbert (2006) and from Heron and Reason (2006). The four-stage knowledge acquisition schemas provided in these two sources are summarized in Table 1. Next, I will
explain the composite version of these schemas that was used in the workshop conducted for the present study.

Table 1: The Four-stage Knowledge Acquisition Schemas of Torbert (2006) and of Heron and Reason (2006)

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Experiential Knowing:</em> Achieved through face to face encounters using empathy, significance and character as relevant markers.</td>
<td><em>Visioning:</em> Attention to the inquiry, purpose and mission throughout the aesthetic experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Propositional Knowing:</em> Learning about something by way of ideas—expressed through explanatory declarations.</td>
<td><em>Strategizing:</em> An area where dreams and passion predominate and the guiding question is <em>What if?</em></td>
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<td>3</td>
<td><em>Presentational Knowing:</em> Attained through the use of expressive forms of aesthetics, such as drama, movement, story and dance.</td>
<td><em>Performance:</em> Combining the aesthetic, sensual and practical aspects into a visual re-enactment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Practical Knowing:</em> Understanding how to accomplish something and make it meaningful through an ability or skill.</td>
<td><em>Assessment:</em> The measurement of the performance and its effects and relation to the outside world.</td>
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Participants and Procedures

The 23 workshop participants were all public school teachers who were seeking English as a Second Language (ESL) certification. All were teachers of ELs and were female; sixteen had masters’ degrees, two were international students, and seven were registered in the school’s master’s degree program. In preparation for the workshop, which the teaching artist conducted in the author’s classroom at St. John’s University, participants were assigned to read Wolf’s (1987) article, “The Art of Questioning.” The article addresses the process involved in viewing a work of art and looks at the importance of questioning what one is observing before making a judgment. It was chosen by the author-researcher as a discourse that would provide participants with an appropriate introduction to LCI’s approach to aesthetic education and as one that would
assist them in guiding ELs through the process of examining works of art reflectively and responding to them with authentic feelings.

The following paintings were used, in reproduced form, as material for visual study and reflection in the workshop: Claude Monet’s *The Water Lily Pond*; Edward Hopper’s *Table for Ladies*; John Martin’s *The Plains of Heaven*; and Charles Christian Nahl’s *Sunday Morning in the Mines*. The workshop unfolded in the four stages described below, which can be mapped against the schemas of Torbert (2006) and of Heron and Reason (2006) summarized earlier in Table 1:

**Stage 1.** The workshop began with an exercise in visioning/experiential knowing. In this phase, the teaching artist placed the reproduced paintings around the room and asked the participants to consider how each work

- invites or provokes debate
- is controversial
- invokes memory
- suggests ambiguity
- promotes conversation.

The purpose of this activity was to stimulate discussion of these aspects or elements of the selected works, in preparation for the stages to follow.

**Stage 2.** During the next phase, strategizing or propositional knowing, the participants were divided into four groups. Each group was assigned one of the paintings and the group members were asked to describe everything that they noticed about it, with the caution that they were to refrain from interpreting what they saw. Next, they were to free associate using the
image provided and to create a web to show these associations. They were encouraged to think of different curricular areas, personal memories, books read, and songs heard, and then to expand as far as possible on these suggestions. Each participant then chose one of the associations on her web as the topic for a brief narrative, which she then shared with the other members of her group.

**Stage 3.** In this phase, *performance and presentational knowing*, each group chose one member’s narrative and together presented it to the whole class in the form of a song, dance, or theatrical performance. In doing this, the teacher participants were able to transform what was written on paper into a performance based work that remained centered on an idea generated from the painting. This phase corresponded to the performance component of the framework, whereby all aspects of the aesthetics, sensual and practical associations were combined together in a novel creation.

**Stage 4.** To facilitate the participants’ learning and to make it relevant to their teaching practices, we then completed the *assessment/practical knowing* phase, in which we reviewed the article that had been read in preparation for the workshop and reflected on one part of the reading that each group selected as particularly meaningful. We related the reading selection to the painting that each group had studied or to the performance enacted, making connections to our practice of instructing EL students. For example, some teachers pointed out connections between the article’s focus on looking more deeply into everyday experiences and their units of study on writing small moments. Other teachers examined the reading selection’s theme of hearing more of what is normally not audible and planned to use this concept as a starting point for an essay on what is noticeable when listening to silence. We also discussed how a protocol similar to the
workshop itself could be followed in order to enrich the ESL curriculum and to contribute to the students’ development of cognitive proficiency and academic English skills.

As a culminating activity, the groups planned aesthetic-themed units for content instruction in science, mathematics, social studies, and language arts, selecting one of the workshop paintings to represent each subject area. Since ELs enter the school system with different abilities and backgrounds, the units also had to be differentiated and/or flexible to meet the needs of sub-groups within this diverse student population. Working together, the teachers developed their differentiated and/or flexible lesson plans in ways that they felt would provide ELs with focused opportunities to reflect on the artwork, make connections to the subject area, and improve their English language and critical thinking abilities. In this regard, they developed the following set of questions designed to stimulate discussion:

- What is the first thing you see or notice when you view this painting?
- What is the first emotion that you feel when observing this piece?
- What do you think is the story behind the piece?
- What different colors do you see?
- Where are the colors located?
- How do the colors relate to each other?
- Where are the figures located in the painting?
- If we were put inside of the painting, where do you think we would be placed?
- What things do you see in the painting that you believe can also be seen outside of the frame?
- How are the subjects in the piece positioned? Why?
Data Collection

In order to understand the participants’ experiences in the workshop and the impact of their workshop-inspired lessons on their EL students, data were collected by means of a two-stage interview process. The first round of interviews was conducted within five days of the workshop and took place in the university setting; the second round was conducted approximately one month later, after the student teachers had implemented their workshop-inspired lessons in their classrooms, and took place in the student teachers’ respective schools. Both interviews were recorded using audio tape and subsequently transcribed for coding. The interviews consisted of a set of predetermined questions along with ad hoc or follow up questions as needed to clarify or deepen the conversation. Discussion with each participant lasted for 20 to 30 minutes during each interview.

The following questions were asked in the first round of interviews:

1) How has your understanding of aesthetic education changed as a result of the workshop experience?

2) How can your EL students benefit from exposure to aesthetic education?

3) How do you anticipate your students’ learning of content areas will be impacted by exposure to aesthetic art experiences?

In the follow-up interviews, which focused on student responses to the incorporation of aesthetic education into classroom instruction, the following questions were asked:

1) What subject areas did you focus on when incorporating aspects of aesthetic education?

2) How relevant was this project in relation to the instruction in your classroom?
3) What was the reaction of students to the integration of art within the content area?

**Data Analysis**

The recorded interviews were transcribed by two student workers who were not familiar with the purpose of the study. The researcher read the transcripts and listened to the tapes multiple times in order to analyze the data. Coding labels were assigned to each recurrent theme emerging from the data. The major themes that emerged from this process are as follows:

1) *EL students were able to enrich their understanding of the content area while involved in interactive study of and reflection on works of art*

2) *EL students were able to use aesthetic education units to facilitate their acquisition of content area vocabulary*

3) *EL students used art-based lessons to crystallize meaning, thus enabling them to express their understanding of content areas using their own voices, through a variety of media.*

In addition to these emergent themes, a common thread was that all of the teachers who participated in this action research project, regardless of previously held opinions, emerged from the workshop and classroom implementation process with a self-reported strong sense of the value of art works and aesthetic education as effective springboards for teaching ESL through various content areas. The present article, however, is concerned primarily with the impact of the lessons delivered in connection with this action research project on the students, not on their teachers. As the researcher did not have direct access to these students, results in this regard are presented, in the following section, as reported by the teachers in the second round of interviews, i.e., post-implementation. The results are presented as initially organized by the researcher for analysis—i.e., by curricular content area—and teacher participants who provided a given
observation are identified only by this affiliation. Thereafter, the Discussion and Conclusion sections relate these results, the themes identified above, and the implementation approach advocated by the researcher back to the literature on aesthetic education and on the impact of arts-based instruction on ELs.

Results

The students in science classes studied Monet’s *The Water Lily Pond*.

*Figure 1: Claude Monet’s The Water Lily Pond*

In one participant’s class, the activity “began with students brainstorming and producing a web to help them decide what area of science they should explore and what vocabulary and concepts they might learn” as a result. Through reflective observations of the painting, the students became “inspired to learn about tropical rain forests,” and this inquiry led them to the realization that they “must take action in order to prevent the destruction of this environment.” The students supplemented their initial ideas by reading an article taken from one of the science magazines available in the class library and writing to science associations dedicated to the preservation of wildlife and endangered environments. Student feedback suggested that by
“viewing this painting and extending their learning to this science topic, they increased their understanding of the importance of preserving” our earth’s resources.

Another science teacher used the same painting to guide and inspire an “inquiry into ponds and wetlands throughout the tropical zone.” Her students learned mapping skills as they “explored the tropic zone and identified the regions and countries” in question. They also “practiced their ability to speak and write clearly” about the observations that they made.

A third science teacher’s class worked in pairs to “derive information from an article on tropical rain forests” and to “examine and describe rain forest images” that were circulated to them. The ELs in this class were beginners, and they expanded their vocabularies by “constructing a word wall of new science words” that they were able to learn through the use of these visuals. They expressed enthusiasm over “learning new vocabulary in a novel way, through science and art.”

Still another science teacher reported that her students each wrote down “two or three questions to which they believed they could learn answers by reading an article” associated with the theme of the painting. The students shared their questions with each other as a pre-reading activity, which enabled these advanced ELs to “sharpen their skills in previewing.”

In general, the participating science teachers remarked that *The Water Lily Pond* could be used to teach other concepts in science, such as evaporation and weather conditions; they also noted that, as a result of the aesthetic education units, students were able to “make connections between their home environments and those in This process helped these beginning ELs to understand math as a science of patterns and [to] internalize the concepts of the various three dimensional geometric figures” that provide the basic forms that make up our world.
other lands” that might be facing environmental challenges. Many of the students reportedly expressed interest in researching their home countries to see if areas within them “faced similar issues.”

The teachers of mathematics used Hopper’s painting *Table for Ladies* in their classrooms to teach concepts from geometry through study of the “shape and figure components within the image.”

*Figure 2: Edward Hopper’s Table for Ladies*

After teaching her students about the “difference between two dimensional and three dimensional figures,” one teacher asked his beginning ELs to “reflect on the painting and identify which three dimensional shapes were represented.” The students listed the three dimensional shapes that they identified (cubes, rectangular prisms, cylinders, triangular prisms, cones, spheres, etc.) and the item(s) in the painting that contained such a shape. Lastly, students were directed to “create their own drawings containing as many as possible of the three dimensional shapes discussed,” and to label each shape. This process helped these beginning ELs
to “understand math as a science of patterns and [to] internalize the concepts of the various three
dimensional geometric figures” that provide the basic forms that make up our world; they also
“increased their academic mathematical vocabularies, inspired through close observation” of a
painting.

A mathematics teacher of advanced ELs used the same painting to introduce geometric
proofs. She started by asking students to “list only the things that they could observe in the
painting,” while refraining from analyzing what they were viewing. After itemizing the
painting’s “components and elements,” the students were told to consider these parts as a whole
and to “suggest conclusions about the message that the artist was trying to send.” Students were
then asked to identify as many occurrences of triangular shapes in the painting as they could and
to “consider what role these figures might play in the aesthetics and meaning of the
composition.” Next, the students were asked to consider these triangles “in terms of plane
geometry”—for example, by “identifying perpendicular lines and recalling that such lines form
right angles, and that all right angles are congruent, coming to a conclusion about triangle
congruency through analysis.” Finally, they were told to identify and prove two triangles to be
congruent using the SAS (side/angle/side) and SSS (side/side/side) comparison method. This was
accomplished “using rulers and protractors,” and the exercise “validated the students’ initial
impressions and helped them to see how mathematics can be used to understand” a wide variety
of phenomena.

One of the language arts teachers expressed the view that Martin’s painting The Plains of
Heaven “served as an excellent catalyst” for teaching her subject.

When asked to describe what they saw in the work, her students said that they “perceived
the painting as describing a celestial, serene, and beautiful scene” and that it “inspired in them
emotions of peace and tranquility.” When asked what the story behind the painting might be, one student reportedly said that the painting might represent “someone’s idea of paradise.” Building upon this theme, the teacher asked the students to imagine the “opposite” of this scene. For additional inspiration, she turned off the lights, asked the students to shut their eyes and put their heads on their desks, turned on a recording of wind blowing fiercely and read an account of a dangerous experience in the Arctic.

*Figure 3: John Martin’s The Plains of Heaven*

Students were then directed to imagine two scenes: “one serene and peaceful and one hostile and frigid,” and to write a paragraph describing each setting. In this way the students “developed their capacity to use the sense of sight”—in expressing their impressions based on the painting—as well as their capacity to “use hearing and the imagination and to express the results in descriptive writing.” The teacher reported that his students were “excited to learn” in this way and that it helped to “motivate them to use colorful language in their writing.”
The social studies teachers used Nahl’s *Sunday Morning in the Mines*, which depicts an imaginary scene from the nineteenth century California gold rush.

*Figure 4: Charles Christian Nahl’s Sunday Morning in the Mines*

One fourth grade teacher reported that the task of connecting the images in the painting to historical fact “motivated students who were new to this country to read additional sources on the time period,” thus “enhancing their background” knowledge. Among other activities, students studied period maps of the United States and North America in order to identify the paths taken by people hurrying to California to get rich quickly. The teacher reported that her students discussed their work “eagerly,” suggesting that the art-based activity motivated them to engage with the process of “mining information” from visual and written sources and to “further their academic and conversational English proficiency by communicating and comparing their results.”

Using the same painting, another social studies teacher reported that she asked students to “compare the settlers’ reasons for traveling to California with their families’ reasons for coming to the United States.” Through discussing this theme in pairs and then writing individual reflective responses, these sixth graders reportedly “made connections to various books that they
had read [as well as] to their own experiences.” The exercise thus helped to “strengthen [the students’] sense of the connection” of the curriculum to their own lives while allowing students to learn “from academic sources and from each other about countries and cultures” throughout the world—all while “exercising” their academic and conversational English skills.

A third social studies teacher conducted a “picture walk” through the same painting. Discovering the names for objects and people found in the painting provided “a visually motivated and reinforced framework” for her intermediate EL students to augment their vocabularies. Further reinforcement was provided in the form of a follow-up exercise in which students “incorporated words [from] and details viewed in the painting” into their own writing. Finally, students role-played scenes involving fictional characters from the painting, which they created with the help of their teacher. The teacher reported that students engaged in this activity enthusiastically and that it clearly “helped to motivate them to increase their understanding of this period” in history and to develop their capacity to “learn and use new vocabulary.”

All in all, the social studies teachers observed that their beginning to intermediate ELs “increased their social language abilities” through the activity of describing what they noticed in the painting and through using new vocabulary in speaking and writing activities connected with their arts-based lessons. In addition, these exercises helped to develop the students’ inferencing skills, as they began to “conjecture what the people represented in the picture might say or think.”

Advanced ELs in all of the subject areas, moreover, used their paintings to corroborate information that they had read or proceeded to identify in textbooks and other written sources. One teacher reported that advanced students’ narrative writing was “stimulated” when they
viewed the artwork as “representing a moment in time,” and that their motivation to learn about the subject matter was “stimulated by [the task of] connecting it to the artistic representation.”

*Figure 5: Sample of Students’ Art Work*

![Sample of Students’ Art Work](image)

This motivation, in turn, stimulated students to “discuss their impressions and findings,” which several of the teachers reported that they did to a greater extent than was “typical” of lessons that involved information presented orally or through written material alone.

**Discussion**

As noted, the workshop exercise and its implementation (or extension) in the student teachers’ classrooms was structured and guided by the four-step protocols of Torbert (2006) and of Heron and Reason (2006). The following points summarize the application of these guidelines and address how the stages suggested in the literature were utilized and explored in this action research project.
1. **Visioning/Experiential Knowing** was explored as the teachers brainstormed their perceptions about the paintings and their relation to the content area under study. Later, in their classrooms, students generated action verbs and other vocabulary based on the paintings and reflected on the ideas that the words and images brought to mind.

2. **Strategizing/Propositional Knowing** was observed as the students explored areas of the globe previously unknown to them based on what they observed in the paintings. In this regard, they were encouraged to explore ambiguous elements rather than to limit themselves to what was obvious or clear.

3. **Performance/Presentational Knowing** was enacted as the students wrote narratives based on ideas or questions that came to mind when viewing the paintings. In one class, a student drew while listening to another student’s reflections, creating shapes and figures based on words that were read aloud. In another class, the students acted out the words that they had produced after studying their painting, bringing to life words generated from the image. In all of these experiences, there was a strong element of engagement for the students involved.

4. **Assessment/Practical Knowing** unfolded as the students used art to enlighten their understanding of the various content areas. Students’ engagement with a work of art assisted them in making connections to curricular content. For example, the study of a painting’s foreground and background enriched their understanding of the concepts of volume and area, which are essential components in meeting higher level math performance objectives.

The participating student teachers developed their aesthetic education units in ways that were targeted to the needs of ELs and aligned with their curricular areas and objectives. Table 2 on the following page shows a sample design for two such aesthetic education units. In
developing these sample units, the researcher followed the guidelines for unit design provided in Domain 1e, “Designing Coherent Instruction,” in Danielson’s (2007) Framework for Teaching. These guidelines emphasize the use of a clear unit structure, which starts with choosing suitable materials and producing a grid such as that shown in Table 2.

Table 2
*Sample Aesthetic Education Units for English Learners*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work of Art</th>
<th>Curricular Content Area</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Contextual Information</th>
<th>Language Focus</th>
<th>Activity Ideas</th>
<th>Vocabulary Study For the unit</th>
<th>Performance Objective and Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mona Lisa (Language Arts)</td>
<td>Languag e Arts</td>
<td>What questions occur to you about this work of art? Who does the picture remind you of?</td>
<td>What surrounds this work socially, historically, or culturally? Relate picture to students’ childhood and/or birth country memories</td>
<td>Descriptive adjectives</td>
<td>Have students share memories from early childhood Have students write or (for beginning ELs) draw pictures about a person of whom the painting may remind them</td>
<td>frame composition photograph contrast shadow depth</td>
<td>Students are able to write correct, well-formed sentences or (for advanced ELs) paragraphs and to use new vocabulary in speech and writing One on one conference To assess progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Grand Canal near the Rialto Bridge (Venice)</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>What are you curious about as you view this work of art? What associations are you making between this painting and something you have</td>
<td>Review information about Venice, Italy, and Europe and compare some of their features to the United States and to U.S. cities Discuss feelings that the painting evokes Make connections</td>
<td>Contraction s</td>
<td>Words evoking emotion</td>
<td>Students can write about Italy’s history as compared to those of the United States and/or their heritage countries Have students research the construction of one or more famous canals Have students view a film set in Venice</td>
<td>triangular crusade hostility Cubism envision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
already learned about? to other canals (Erie, Panama) and explain the impact that a canal can have on economic growth

The pedagogical value of units such as these is amply supported in the literature on educating ELs. Reading and writing based on the arts serves to build content, improve visual thinking, and increase access to prior schema, all of which are essential for ELs to make meaning (Andrzejczak et al., 2005; Grauer, 2005) and to improve overall academic performance (Arnheim, 1990; Eubanks, 2002; Platt, 1977; Sleichter & Reid, 2004). The research carried out by Latta and Chan (2011), moreover, suggests numerous advantages for ELs participating in lessons in which art is created first, followed by a language arts activity, as opposed to the customary practice of using art after a reading or writing experience. In this action research study, the protocol followed in the workshop and subsequently reproduced in the teachers’ own classrooms followed this organizational principle as well as the overall goal of maintaining an aesthetic focus throughout the exercise (Heron & Reason, 2006; Latta & Chan, 2011; Torbert, 2006). However, it was the students’ firsthand exposure to an arts experience that enabled the participating teachers to excite, inspire, and challenge their EL students to become enthused about their own learning (Seidel et al., 2009).

Conclusion
In this action research study, 23 graduate education students at St. John’s University participated in a workshop conducted by a teaching artist associated with the Lincoln Center Institute. The workshop was based on the educational principles of Maxine Greene and was structured around the four-stage knowledge acquisition schemas of Torbert (2006) and of Heron and Reason (2006) (see Table 1). Inspired by the workshop and guided by these schemas and by the models provided by the researcher (see Table 2), the participants prepared and implemented aesthetic education units in their classrooms that were intended to focus on the needs of EL students in learning curricular content (including developing their understanding of key concepts in the curricular area) and to promote their overall development of English language and cognitive academic abilities. The results of the second round of interviews, in which teachers reported on their classroom experiences and on the feedback that they received from their students, showed that these objectives were met in a variety of ways. As noted in the Method section, the researcher’s analysis suggested that these results can be summarized in terms of the following themes:

1) **EL students were able to enrich their understanding of the content area while involved in interactive study of and reflection on works of art.**

2) **EL students were able to use aesthetic education units to facilitate their acquisition of content area vocabulary**

3) **EL students used art-based lessons to crystallize meaning, thus enabling them to express their understanding of content areas using their own voices, through a variety of media.**

Further analysis could generate sub-themes that might also be of value in guiding teachers in their efforts to overcome the “culture gap” by using arts-based curricular content
lessons in their classrooms that include ELs. The bottom line, however, is that the overall positive thrust of the students’ responses in this action research project, as observed and reported by their teachers, together with the fact that the number of ELs in U.S. schools is at an all-time high and is likely to continue to increase (Goldenberg, 2008; NCELA, 2011), suggests that it is crucial for educators, administrators, and curriculum planners to recognize the benefits of aesthetic education in meeting the learning needs of this population. Indeed, the literature reviewed for the present study strongly supports the finding that ELs can learn effectively through integrated arts units because comprehension is supported by the context and is not dependent solely on linguistic clues. Integrated arts instruction, moreover, levels the playing field for ELs by encouraging all students to utilize a variety of modes of expression in analyzing and responding to complex and engaging phenomena. As a result, arts education is an excellent vehicle for developing not only an appreciation of aesthetics, but cognitive abilities as well, even as ELs begin to learn and deploy academic vocabulary in their second language.

The next step, clearly, is to integrate more aesthetic education into daily instruction for ELs. Naturally, this requires that teachers be trained and prepared to plan and deliver arts based lessons and to make these lessons relevant both to the curriculum and to their students’ heritage cultures and everyday lives. Although this requires much work on the part of our teacher training programs and a commitment on the part of administrators and educators, evidence suggests that this target will not be difficult to achieve. As a result of their experience in the action research detailed in this paper, for example, the teacher participants reported that they felt that they had acquired a much better grasp of how to integrate arts and aesthetics into their curricular units.
acquired a much better grasp of how to integrate arts and aesthetics into their curricular units. Moreover, they also found this approach to be an effective way in which to engage ELs in positive educational experiences while continuing to address their linguistic needs and ensure language progress.

The students who participated in the aesthetic education units developed in connection with this action research, in turn, appeared to respond enthusiastically to this approach to classroom education, and they showed evidence of improving their understanding of content area vocabulary and concepts as well as their overall cognitive and verbal skills. Ultimately, over and above teaching given concepts and skills, it is the responsibility of teachers and curriculum planners to motivate young people to learn about the world. Through aesthetic education units, teachers can use works of art to provoke inquiry and wonder, encouraging ELs and native speakers alike to make meaning out of a wide variety of phenomena. In fact, as this action research study suggests, the arts can provide students with powerful stimulus to form new interpretations and to express ideas in their own voices as they continue their learning quest and enrich their English acquisition skills.

References


theoretical framework (pp. 3-49). CA: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University, Los Angeles, CA.


**About the Author**

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