The Role of Arts in Teaching English to Young Learners

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Abstract

Teaching English as a foreign language to young learners varies in many ways from teaching adults. One of the major differences arises from the course design and the kind of tasks and activities covered in the books. More varieties of activities are needed to be used in the classroom in order to teach young learners and make the lesson an attractive process as well as making learning effective by making use of various intelligences and engaging different competences in the process of learning. This article intends to investigate the use of arts in current English teaching course books for young learners in Iran. It intends to analyze what forms of art are used in each book to help teaching and learning English as a foreign language, and to find out how much teachers stick to the tasks and designed activities in order to achieve the intentions of course designers. For this purpose ELT books including “Happy series”, “Hip Hip Hooray”, and “English Adventures” which are currently taught in different language institutes in Iran, are analyzed from the angle of vision of arts use in language teaching. The data is collected through book analyses, observation of English classes for young learners and discussions with groups of teachers to know about their beliefs. The result is hoped to be helpful for language teachers, course designers, and language institutes and to facilitate English learning for young learners.

Key terms: Language teaching, Multiple Intelligences, Art, Language institutes, Young learners

1. Introduction

To make a learning environment beneficial for every participant, teachers need to be aware of the nature of different intelligences and personalities, and present the course in such a way that every student with special intelligence in the class takes advantage of it as Gardner (1983) argues that people are not born with all the intelligences that can be learned and improved. Everyone is intelligent in various ways and can develop each aspect to increase competency. Different learners differ in learning depending on various intelligences they utilize. Some may be more dependent on their hearing ability to learn while others on their visual or kinesthetic abilities. Gardner (1999) asserts that the surrounding people and environment influence the development of intelligences in individuals. So it is an essential point to keep in mind for teachers to create a suitable atmosphere in classrooms, in order to develop all various intelligences exhibiting in learners and help them take maximum advantage of the learning process.

Considering that learners’ affective factors influence the learning process; teachers should make the teaching and learning process attractive, favorable and consequently beneficial for all
learners attending the class. That is why, the majority of English for young learners’ course books are designed in a way that present the lessons included in various ways, songs for musical learners, pictures for visual, games and role-play for kinesthetic ones and those who are more sensitive regarding their tactile learning. Because all intelligences can be possessed by learners collectively, it is appropriate to address as much intelligence as possible in lesson planning for classroom instruction (Borek, 2003). This point is not only appropriate for lesson presentation in the classroom by the teacher, but also it is of great importance for course designers and material providers; because, they base the work for teachers.

The material is learned by each learner through the prominent intelligence(s), and less prominent intelligences can be boosted if the course is provided in a way that integrates different intelligences as channels of learning; as a result the learners would be supplied gradually with more and more routes of acquiring.

The present study is an attempt to better understand the effecting aspects of art in ELT for young learners, how they influence the teaching and learning process and to understand to what extent teachers undertake to manage the teaching process based on the arts efficiency. In order to achieve this goal, three current course book series in ELT for young learners (Happy series, Hip Hip Hooray, and English Adventures) have been analyzed regarding their use of arts. Further some classes teaching these books have been observed and teachers interviewed to gather the information needed from the actual teaching environment. In the following, first there would be a compact description of each aspect of art in ELT and then the analyses of the way they have been utilized in the mentioned courses.

2. Teaching techniques

As mentioned previously, techniques utilized for teaching a language through arts can be supported by Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. At this point some of the most common techniques (role play, drawing and pictures, music and singing) in ELT through the channel of art, practiced by teachers in the actual teaching environment in the classroom, whether covered in the course or not, will be briefly defined and their advantages described.

2.1. Role play

One of the main purposes in language teaching is to prepare learners for real life interactions. A very helpful task for this aim is “Role Playing”, creating the appropriate opportunity for learners to practice what they have learned theoretically; more importantly Role Play activities create a nonthreatening environment, in which the learners act with more confidence and less mental pressure.

Jeremy Harmer (1989) is quoted at Ardriyati (2009: 220) as advocating the use of role-play for the following reasons:

1. It's fun and motivating
2. Quieter students get the chance to express themselves in a more forthright way
3. The world of the classroom is broadened to include the outside world - thus offering a much wider range of language opportunities

Observing others making mistakes in a group work while having fun and seeing no strict consequences, can add to learners’ confidence, on the other hand mistakes are viewed as a part of learning in role playing tasks and most often they are not corrected by teachers during the activity. These types of tasks are efficient means of personalizing the lesson, also known as
simulation tasks (Tompkins 1998). Scarcella and Crookall (1990) cited in (Tompkins 1998: 2) theorize that learning a language is facilitated when learners: 1) are exposed to large quantities of comprehensible input, 2) are actively involved and 3) have positive affect toward their learning. Considering “Role Play” critically, all these three conditions can be clearly observed. Role play can be considered inherent in children; they usually take on roles in their games either in groups or individually, when playing games.

Role plays may be brought to the class as a task included in the course based on the content covered, or the teacher may bring in pieces of stories or dialogues according the course.

2.2. Music

Musical intelligence can be activated in teaching a language through differing tasks and activities. The simplest common form in almost all existing English courses, especially for young learners, is to start each unit or lesson with a piece of music as the title tone. It is advantageous because of attracting the learners’ attention at the very beginning of the process. Vocabulary and structure, for young learners would be better introduced as simple and easy to memorize and recall songs. These tasks are often accompanied by performing the content, which in turn activates the tactile intelligence. At higher levels, popular songs among the age group can be used. The advantage of memorizing songs is that songs are most often composed of limited language repeating for times that provide valuable input and are easy to rehearse; besides that listening to the foreign language’s songs motivates the learners and takes away the boredom of learning.

Going back to how alphabet was taught to most of us in our childhood, in a rhythmic form even without companying music, and how long-lasting the rhythm is in our memory, this point becomes more obvious that music helps our memorization ability. The idea can be supported by the common saying “out of ear, out of mind”. Therefore it would be a great help for both teachers and learners to go through the memorization parts of teaching and learning musically in a way that time and energy would be saved.

Increasing exposure to everyday and idiomatic language will be enhanced listening to songs as an entertaining activity even out of the classroom. It will be more beneficial if teachers browse available songs and introduce those that are more suitable for learners at different levels, or even make a music library in the classrooms. Surfing the net a large number of supporting weblogs can be found helping teachers to provide musical materials besides those of the courses.

To enhance learning personalization teachers may ask learners to make their own version or style of the song provided in the course; either changing the melody or lyrics. This activity will increase learners’ creativity and stabilize what they have learned in their minds.

It is worth mentioning that akin to many activities in young learners’ ELT classes, music and singing or chanting is greatly different from that used in teaching adults. Teachers need to be aware of children’s interests and learning status, where they are more interested in active tasks such as performing a song and singing along loudly, and their learning would be optimized in comparison with activities where for example they are asked to listen to part of a song and fill in the blanks for the missing words.

2.3. Drawings

Halpern (2001), views people as collections of passions. Knowing that children are so much influenced by their passions, teachers should be firstly, careful about keeping children in proper
learning conditions and secondly try to affect their passions positively during the class time in order to help them overcome their shyness or fear of speaking. A very common problem teachers usually face is that, some children may resist expressing themselves or letting others know what is going up in their minds, feelings and thoughts, for many different reasons. Another problem in young learners ELT classes is attracting their concentrations. Children are highly prone to get distracted, everything around them can soon get their attention away. One considerable solution for this problem seems to be using posters, flashcards and simple drawings and paintings children can create, themselves, as concrete subjects.

Although using readymade posters and flashcards makes teachers’ job easier and is more time saving, we suggest teachers to use these realia in presentation and introduction phases and also for playing games; the classes would be more fruitful if teachers devote enough time on learners’ drawing, as it would provide the learners with reflection time on the topic, and make them more interested in talking.

Conducting a research on memory and vocabulary memorization, Thornbury (2004) suggested a number of techniques among which one sounds to be supportive to our idea of the usefulness of spending time on tasks demanding learners to “draw”. He suggests to visualize a picture for a new word or to link an abstract word with some mental image. “Images drawn by students themselves have the best outcomes” (Thornbury 2004: 24).

Most young learners soon get engaged in what is presented to them, provided that they are spending enjoyable time and can trust others. That is when learners can reach their optimal competence. As a result teachers are advised to make the best of their efforts to create the proper and supportive teaching-learning atmosphere, materials, and interactions in order to gain the best results.

3. What the Books Cover

At this point, a brief analysis of the three courses under investigation (Happy series, Hip Hip Hooray, and English Adventures) is provided to have a demonstration of their method regarding the use of arts in teaching English to young learners. These courses are all among the most common and up-to-date courses in ELT for young learners in Iran. The data at this section has been collected through reviewing the books, observing young learners ELT classes and having group discussions with the teachers.

3.1. Happy Series

In “Happy Series”, the main aspects of arts used generally in the whole course can be summarized as drawing and coloring, singing and chanting, role playing and making handicrafts. Not all these forms are utilized as fixed and stable tasks in all levels. The number of times they are performed during the class and the amount of time devoted to them varies among different levels.

In this course, posters are provided as visual aids for lesson introduction and representing the new vocabulary. What seems deficient about the posters is that for a whole book there is only one poster. It is kind of a summary of all the units included. Using posters is optional. Few teachers actually work with them. Those who ignore, reason that the same picture as that of the poster is included at the beginning of the book, so that if needed they can use it, adding that the picture of the book is more visible for each individual; on the other hand the teachers who work on the poster assert that posters are helpful, because they can be viewed as the common point of
focus during the teaching process and avoid children from getting distracted to a large extent; this way teachers have greater control over the learners and are able to manage the class more successfully.

Other visual realia in the course, are the flashcards designed by the course designers. One of the greatest benefits of using posters and flashcards, as teachers say, is their use for playing games, further they are helpful during role plays and singing.

Drawing and coloring as a favorite activity for young learners is one the main tasks for practicing and personalizing what they are taught, but these are restricted to beginning levels. The same is true for role plays and singing songs and chants. Role plays and drawing tasks vanish totally after almost passing half of the course, but chants and at times songs are used for the introduction of the material. These activities are mainly replaced with another form of art which is rarely used at lower levels. Although, at some parts of the beginning levels, learners are required to make things related to the unit, but the handicrafts at more advanced levels, not only are not optional, but also they are taken so seriously and need to be done more skillfully.

### 3.2. English Adventures

Having a general view on English Adventures, it seems partly similar to the beforehand mentioned course Happy Series. But at the first glance, what catches the eye especially at earlier levels, is the pictures used and their great difference from other courses. Almost all the pictures used are adopted from well-known cartoons that most children are familiar with and like from their early ages.

In general, Posters, coloring in books’ pictures, drawing, using modeling clay (not performed actually in the classroom), role-playing, singing and chanting can be named as art forms that are used to teach through the books. At starter levels, role playing is not included but there is a greater amount of poster presentation, singing and chanting, and coloring.

Art is better manifested in this series at lower levels, but limited to singing songs and role play as learners reach higher levels. Of course taking advantage of arts relies to a great extent on teachers’ creativity and interest in changing the teaching atmosphere to be inspired with arts and fun. At times teachers can bring into the class or ask learners to take with them the requirements for making simple models of new words while singing or as part of the game time, such as making simple models of toys, or puppets for teaching parts of body. Modifying the book and making time will be possible and helpful if the teacher wishes to cover art as part of his/her job.

### 3.3. Hip Hip Hooray

Reviewing this course, role play can be defined as the dominant aspect of art except for the starter level. This course has a limited rag of arts in its methodology and lesson presentation. To count art forms in this course, we can mention the flashcards, pictures in books, songs and role plays. There are no activities requiring learners to draw, color, or do handiworks neither during the class nor at home as their homework.

By the way, in some classes teachers were observed to make some time for making very simple objects, or drawing pictures related to alphabet. Acknowledging the importance and effectiveness of role playing on first graders, some teachers held their starter classes having an integrated role-play related to the short introductory stories in the book.
To sum up, it can be said that all three courses, more or less include arts as part of their material for teaching, and are partly similar in this regard, and probable differences arise mostly from the teachers’ practice.

Observing the classes we found that some teachers neglect the artistic presentation or practice part of the course on the belief that these tasks and activities are optional or even redundant and time consuming. Some preferred to teach and practice explicitly rather than clothing the lesson in artistic and more implicit activities.

As an example what was observed at a single institute teaching the same course will be described here. In one class the teacher preferred to have learners simply make sentences with the new vocabulary instead of asking them to draw a picture of the word and then tell their classmates about what was their favorite food, although it was a task of the book. On the contrary it was so interesting to see another teacher on the same day, teaching the same lesson as the previous class in a totally different way. In addition to performing all the tasks included in the book, she made time at the end of the session as a game time, incredibly favorable for the learners, and having them to make a piece of music as groups for the structure and vocabulary of that day and previous session. That session’s structure was questioning with “Do you like…?” and a few names of foods and drinks built on the previous sessions introduction of “I like…” and more basic foods. In the first class the lesson was practiced simply calling students and asking them to ask others what they like; but in the second class, students in groups of four sang the same structure using more vocabulary categories from previous units(food, sport, animals, and toys); that was so exciting and fun both for learners and the teacher. I could imagine the children singing all day long what they composed during the class. You see how far this type of class would be from boring the learners.

Another example from a book for the starter level, in which there are no role plays, is a class where the teacher herself, planned a role play game with a short dialogue from the book, and asked volunteer learners to perform the roles in front of the class.

4. Conclusion

In the present work we tried to demonstrate that art can be utilized in ELT classrooms as a means for presenting the lesson and a supporting means of teaching through different tasks and activities. It is useful both for teachers to introduce and for the learners to practice and internalize what they have been taught.

Teachers need to be aware of the fundamental theories of learning and especially multiple intelligences theory in which learners’ varying competences are critical in their learning. They need to recognize different learners’ personal differences in learning and expressing themselves to lead the classroom in such a way that all individuals can benefit from the learning environment.

Acknowledging the fact that art can affect teaching and learning process, is fundamental for teachers, holding that, belief is the basis of practice; teachers need to believe in the usefulness of arts in order to include it as an indispensable, integrated part of their teaching. Although we believe that designing tasks including arts in courses is essential, but we do not think that it is sufficient. What is practically performed, is teachers’ teaching and it is the teacher who practices and modifies the course and the material.

Including art-based tasks is considerably important to improve learners’ creativity and to create a learning atmosphere far from pressure and strictness, but as much important is to provide
teachers, with the knowledge of the critical role art plays in learning a language. It seems highly necessary to integrate giving awareness to teachers about taking serious artistic tasks in the teaching process. This information can be transmitted to ELT teachers for young learners as part of the teacher training courses while hiring novice teachers, and as workshops later during their professional carrier and for teachers already holding the job.

References
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